

Special Topics: African American Theater
21:014:401:01

Class Meeting Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:00 a.m. to 11:20 a.m.
Class Location: Bradley Hall, Room 313

Instructor: Shana A. Russell
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Course Title: Black Theater and Performance Since WWII

Course Description

This course surveys the development of African American theater from World War II to the present. It is organized thematically rather than chronologically but also considers the dramatic arts alongside historical social movements such as black power and black feminism, as well as discourses on gender, sexuality, and the black family. The class will look at the ways in which African American artists used theatre to engage in movements for black liberation and in some ways felt like the arts were central to activism. Key themes include: intra-racial class struggle, representing the black family, race conscious casting, the black arts movement, sexuality, black feminism/womanism, masculinity, whiteness, and definitions of black authenticity.

Course Policies

Attendance and Punctuality: Students are expected to come to class every week on time. This course is discussion driven and participation counts for a significant portion of your grade. If you must be absent from class please let me know in advance if possible. Only students with documented excused absences will be permitted to submit assignments after their designated due date.

Academic Integrity: Plagiarism will not be tolerated under any circumstances. This includes using another's ideas in a written assignment without proper citation or cheating on an exam. The University takes plagiarism very seriously. All students are required to sign and submit the University's Academic Integrity Agreement, which will be available via blackboard. For more information see the Academic Integrity Policy at: <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu>.

Classroom Courtesy: Please be respectful of the classroom space by minimizing the number of disruptions. This means showing up on time, not having side conversations, not bringing food into the classroom, and silencing all electronic devices. You are permitted to use electronic devices for the purposes of taking notes and accessing the readings if necessary. Anyone who is

caught using a computer or tablet for anything other than class work or similarly using your cell phone to text or talk will be asked to leave and your participation grade will be lowered.

This class covers a significant number of controversial ideas and you are all encouraged to disagree with the assigned texts or with each other. This is both healthy and productive. However, you must remain respectful at all times. Failure to do so will result in removal from the classroom and possibly a lower grade.

Students with Disabilities: If you are impacted by a documented disability and require special accommodations please contact me as soon as possible.

Course Requirements

Response Papers: This course is divided into three thematic sections: The Black Family Drama, Black Power Performance, and Black Feminism and Sexuality. Each student is required to write one response paper per section (for a total of three). Papers are due at the beginning of class on the day we are to discuss the particular text you have chosen to write about. Response papers must be two pages, double spaced, 12 point font. For each paper choose one play that speaks to you and imagine that you are the director. Your central question is this: how would you stage this play for a contemporary audience? What would your set look like? Who would you cast? (This can be specific actors or casting call descriptions.) What kinds of technical specs would you require, i.e. lighting or sound effects? Lastly, what changes, major or minor, would you make to the play for its revival in 2013 and why? In other words, imagine that you must submit a treatment to me for this play and you have to convince me why its production matters and why it would be appealing to a contemporary audience. (Note: We will be watching two films of stage productions this semester, *A Huey P. Newton Story* and *Passing Strange*. Neither is eligible for this assignment. Otherwise you may do any three plays you chose.)

Group Presentation: You will each be placed in groups of two or three and each group will be assigned a play. The group is required to perform what they consider the most pivotal scene from that play. Be prepared to justify your selection to the class. Each group must use visual aids to set the stage for your audience. Thus, you must find some way to visually represent what your set looks like as well as costumes. You may dress up if you are feeling ambitious. If not, pictures will suffice. While I am not grading anyone on acting ability, you will be graded on preparedness, enthusiasm, your visual aids, and your ability to clearly articulate the reasons why you chose your scene.

Grading: Grading will be as follows: Participation - 20%, Response papers - 30%, Group Assignment - 10%, Midterm - 20%, Final - 20%.

Note on the reading: I will make all scholarly articles and both films available via Blackboard. The majority of the plays we will discuss are available on the Black Drama database, which you

have access to through the Dana Library website. Otherwise texts will be made available at NJ Books for purchase or you may purchase them independently.

Required Texts:

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park*

August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Douglas Turner Ward, *Day of Absence*

Amiri Baraka, *The Baptism*

Ed Bullins, *Clara's Ole Man*

Roger Guenveur Smith, *A Huey P. Newton Story*

Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*

Suzan-Lori Parks, *Red Letter Plays*

Stew, *Passing Strange*

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Jan 23: Introduction to the Course

Jan 28: What is black theater?

Section One: The Black Family Drama

Jan 30: Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Feb 4: Kristin L. Matthews, "The Politics of Home in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*"

Feb 6: Discussion of Matthews and Hansberry

Feb 11: Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park*

Feb 13: Beryl Satter, "The House on Clybourne Street"; Comparative discussion of Hansberry and Norris

Feb 18: August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Feb 20: Melinda D. Wilson, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone: An Experiment in 'Race Conscious' Casting"

Feb 25: Group performances from section one

Section Two: Black Power Performances

Feb 27: Douglas Turner Ward, *Day of Absence*

--Douglas Turner Ward, "American Theater: For Whites Only?"

--Howard Taubman, New York Times review of Day of Absence

Mar 4: Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement" and Amiri Baraka, *The Baptism*

Mar 6: Ed Bullins, *Clara's Ole Man*

Mar 11: Midterm Review

Mar 13: **MIDTERM**

Spring Break: March 18-22

Mar 25: Group performances section 2

Mar 27: Black Power postscript, Roger Guenvuer Smith's *A Huey P. Newton Story*

Section Three: Black Feminist/Queer Performance

Apr 1: Introduction to black feminism

Apr 3: Lynn Nottage, *Intimate Apparel*

Apr 8: Sandra G. Shannon, "An Intimate Look at the Plays of Lynn Nottage"

Apr 10: Suzan-Lori Parks, *Red Letter Plays*

Apr 15: *Red Letter Plays* con.

Apr 17: Group performances from section 3

Apr 22: Stew, *Passing Strange*

Apr 24: E. Patrick Johnson-- "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community"

Apr 29: Reflections on the definition of black theater

May 1: Final exam review

Final Exam: May 13