

University of Glasgow
Theatre Studies - Honours

Activism and Performance in Post-War British Theatre – Course Document

Introduction

This course examines companies and practitioners who have explicitly mobilised performance to affect political change since 1945. Based in a close study of the relationship between performance conventions, working methodologies and ideology, the programme will also consider the staging of contemporary activism (notably anti-war and anti-poverty events) and the impact of new, interactive technologies on the creation of performance.

Each session will usually revolve around specific company, one or more primary play texts and the varying relationship between their stated ideologies and working methods on the route from initial concept to performance. The course will use both classroom and workshop settings to explore the success – or otherwise – of particular approaches, considering how specific techniques may result in radically different theatrical outcomes.

Particular effort will be made to situate theatrical activism within political and social contexts, notably the closure of the Lord Chamberlain's office (the end of British stage censorship), the liberalisation of law relating to sex (abortion and homosexuality) as well as economic and political change (the 1984 miner's strike, transitions from pre-Thatcher to post-Blair).

Class information

Date	Thursdays from week beginning 21 st January, 2 – 5pm
Room	217a
Credits	20
Tutor	Dr Stephen Greer
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Aims

The module aims to –

- explore the development of politically-motivated performance in the UK from 1945 to the contemporary period
- develop students' understanding of the relationship between performance conventions and political ideology
- develop students' understanding of radical and activist performance within the context of theatre history through the second half of the C20th

Learning outcomes

On the successful completion of this module students will be able to –

- discuss the evolution during the period of politically-motivated performance strategies, and their relationship to wider trends in British theatre

- explain how developments in performative activism relate to wider cultural, social and political debates and events
- critically debate and evaluate the impact of performance methodologies intended to achieve specific political outcomes
- demonstrate a knowledge of the leading companies and practitioners in political theatre in the UK, and their contribution to contemporary practice

Course Requirements

The following minimum requirements must be met:

- Satisfactory attendance at class – at least seven out of eight classes.
- Satisfactory completion of formative assessments, preparation for classes and full involvement in group discussions.

Assessment

This option is assessed by one 3500 word critical essay (weighted at 75%) drawing on the companies we have discussed during the semester, and one class work component (weighted at 25%) based on the presentation of a detailed performance proposal for a piece of political theatre.

Seminar Schedule

Week 1: **Theatre Workshop** - *Oh What a Lovely War*

Week 2: **Red Ladder** and **The People Show**

Week 3: **7:84** – *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

Week 4: **Joint Stock** - *Fanshen* and *Cloud Nine*

Week 5: Queer and identity politics; **Gay Sweatshop**

Week 6: Feminist activism: **Monstrous Regiment**, Gay Sweatshop, the Guerilla Girls

Week 7: Public celebration, public protest – **Welfare State**, protest marches, Pride, union activism

Week 8: **Contemporary activism and new media** – flash mobs, ARGs, web-dramas and more

Core Texts

Oh What A Lovely War / Theatre Workshop

Taking Our Time / Red Ladder

The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil / 7:84

A good night out / John McGrath

Cloud Nine / Caryl Churchill

The Asian plays: Fanshen, Saigon, A map of the world / David Hare

Gay Sweatshop: four plays and a company / edited by Philip Osment

Engineers of the Imagination: The Welfare State Handbook / Baz Kershaw

Taking Stock / Max Stafford-Clark

Multiple copies of all of the above can be found in the library; copies of more hard-to-find plays or texts will be made available in the resources room. Two extremely useful general texts for the course as whole are:

Kershaw, Baz. *Politics of Performance: radical theatre as cultural intervention*, London: Routledge, 1992.

Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Useful Background Reading List

- Austin, J.L., *How to do things with words*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Artaud, Antonin, *The Theatre and its Double*, New York: Grove Press, 1958
- Boal, Augusto, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, London: Routledge, 1992.
- Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett, London: Methuen, 1964
- Butler, Judith, *Excitable Speech*, London: Routledge, 1995.
- Demastes, W.A. (ed), *British Playwrights 1956-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, London: Greenwood Press, 1996
- Edgar, David (ed), *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, London: Faber, 1999
- Fortier, Mark, *Theory/Theatre*, London: Routledge, 1997
- Goodman, Lizbeth, *Feminist Stages: Interviews With Women In Contemporary British Theatre*, London: Routledge, 1996
- Hinton, William, *Fanshen: a documentary of revolution in a Chinese village*, London: Monthly Review Press, 1966 (also available as an e-book via the library catalogue)
- Innes, Christopher D., *Modern British Drama: the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002
- Rabey, David Ian, *English Drama Since 1940*, London: Longman, 2003
- Reinelt, Janelle G., *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1992
- Sierz, Aleks, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London: Faber, 2001
- Stafford-Clark, Max, *Taking Stock*, Nick Hern Books, 2007.
- Wandor, Michelene, *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, London: Methuen, 1987

Further detailed reading lists will be made available for each seminar session.