

OBERLIN COLLEGE
DANENBERG OBERLIN-IN-LONDON PROGRAM
AND DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS

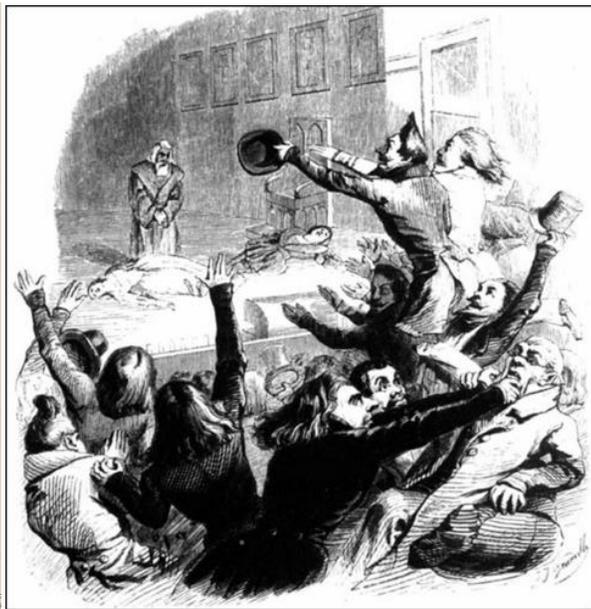
LONDON PROGRAM 910 & POLITICS 910:
STAGING POLITICS (COVID-19 EDITION)

Professors Marc Blecher and Donna Vinter
Spring 2020

Politics: 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine the relations of power in a given space.' — Stefan Collini

I've always had the feeling that the coming together of the audience and the performer is one of the few opportunities in our society for a debate in live terms. . . . You don't get that in any other media. It is that quality of the theatre which, as well as being partly for enjoyment, is part a church and part a political meeting that fascinates me. — Sir Peter Hall

Political purpose — using the word 'political' in its widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude. — George Orwell



What can theatre contribute to the ways people understand and perhaps even deploy power? What makes a play political? What makes a good political play? In what different ways may political ideas be embedded within compelling stories? How can plays written many years ago be staged to speak forcefully to present-day dynamics of power?

This team-taught course – led by one specialist in theatre and one in politics – will study political drama that has, in normal times, been produced on the contemporary London stage, much of which we would have seen in the pre-COVID-19 world. 😞 Their commonality will be that they are plays in which disparities of power are likely to be at stake and contested. London theatres regularly treat matters of political concern in contemporary Britain, but also in the wider world.

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SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND READINGS

WEEK SEVEN

The People and Their Enemies

Tuesday, 31 March:

An Enemy of the People (1882)

READ:

Henrik Ibsen, [An Enemy of the People](#) (on Blackboard)

Rachel Shteir, [“Ibsen Wrote ‘An Enemy of the People’ in 1882. Trump Has Made It Popular Again”](#)

Benjamin Ramm, [“The 130-year-old play that makes sense of our times”](#)

Michael Billington, [“An Enemy of the People”](#)

LEADERS (see below): Olivia and Ben

Thursday, 2 April:

Coriolanus (c. 1608)

WATCH: [Coriolanus](#)

LEADERS: Bri and MJ

WEEK EIGHT

Theatre of Violence: The Political Implications

Tuesday, 7 April

Saved (1965) and *Cyprus Avenue* (2016)

READ:

Edward Bond, *Saved* (on Blackboard)

Donna Vinter, “Introduction to *Saved*” (on Blackboard)

WATCH: [Cyprus Avenue](#) (and stay until the very end) and [Edward Bond interview](#)

LEADERS: Caleb and Xander

Thursday, 9 April

Far Away (2000) and *Medea* (431 BCE)**READ:**Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (on Blackboard)Kate Wyver, "[Jessica Hynes: 'Love isn't wishy-washy - it's strength and power'](#)"Aleks Sierz, "[Brief Notes Towards a Definition of a Leftfield Theatre](#)"**WATCH:** [Medea](#) and [Far Away](#)**LEADERS:** Paris and Fox**WEEK NINE**Politics in the Aftermath of War

Tuesday, 14 April

WATCH: [Antigone](#) (442 BCE)**LEADERS:** Sid and Jinfan

Thursday, 16 April

WATCH: [Les Blancs](#) (1970)**LEADERS:** Olivia and Ben**WEEK TEN**Theatre About Race, Segregation and Gentrification

Tuesday, 21 April

A Raisin in the Sun (1959)**READ:**Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (on Blackboard)**WATCH:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6wNj65cXww>; and[A Raisin in the Sun](#)**LEADERS:** Bri and MJ

Thursday, 23 April

Clybourne Park (2010)**READ:**Bruce Norris, *Clybourne Park* (2010; on Blackboard)<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/08/gentrification-race-boundary-philadelphia/493313/>**WATCH:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b50FrwfvNzE>**LEADERS:** Caleb and Xander**WEEK ELEVEN**Shakespeare on Autocratic and Patriarchal Power Then and Now

Tuesday, 28 April

WATCH: [Julius Caesar \(1599\) \(Bridge Theatre\)](#) and [Julius Caesar \(Donmar\)](#)**LEADERS:** Sid and Jinfan

Thursday, 30 April

WATCH: [Hamlet](#) (c. 1600)**LEADERS:** Paris and Fox**WEEK TWELVE**Conclusion: Student Presentations. Please make a ten-minute presentation on your favourite play: why you chose it, and what its politics and its portrayal of politics had to do with your choice.

COURSE FORMAT

For the remainder of the course, we will use a new format. For each class, we ask two of you to act as “leaders” — *i.e.*, to work together to prepare and circulate discussion questions two days in advance of class, and then to lead the discussion of them. See the weekly schedule below (which covers both 9I0 and 9I1). The idea is to produce investigative questions that encourage everyone to think analytically about the action of the plays, or the substance of other material we are reading, and to reflect on its political significance. Please send them to everyone in the class by the appointed times on the schedule. Then we ask everyone else to produce a short blog on those questions. Finally, on class day, we ask the leaders to say the first word, but of course not the last, on the play, its politics, and any contextual material we’ve assigned, taking notice of what classmates have written on the blog. We would like the class to move quickly to discussion; so we are thinking of leaders’ roles as catalytic, not performative.

While the leaders’ role is not a formal presentation in the manner of our first half, here are some potential ideas you might (or might not) try to use.

- Encapsulate the play’s central, core action. See if you can get that down to a sentence. (Or perhaps you might want to propose a couple of alternative sentences to describe the central action.) Say something about why you’ve reached this conclusion, or why you think the play’s action could be understood in more than one way.
- Offer your thoughts about the significance of that central action. What changes between the beginning and the end of the play? Is it something in the outer situation, or something within a character or characters (a recognition? a reorientation, etc)? Or is it, as may well be the case, in both? ‘Simply defined, action is human change...Studying the composition of drama means studying the architecture of change’ (Sam Smiley, *Playwriting*).
- We have chosen plays which tell personal stories that have political contexts and political ramifications. Consider how the personal relates to the political in your play. What political ideas or debates do you find embodied in this play, directly or indirectly?
- What of importance or relevance does this play ask us, or say to us?
- See also ‘Thinking about plays in the theatre’, below, for further questions you might pose to spark ideas.

Classes will happen over Zoom, so if you have been living on a different planet — lucky you! — and have not yet gotten and familiarized yourself with Zoom, please do so. I’ll set up a “meeting” for each class and invite you to join it.

GRADING

- Preparation for class; class participation; discussion, presentations, and blogs: (65%)
- First essays: 20%
- Final presentation: 15%

THINKING ABOUT PLAYS IN THE THEATRE

Each play creates a world, in its own terms. However naturalistic it may seem, it is always a metaphoric version of the world we think we know. A play is never simply documentary, or realistic: it's always a consciously shaped version of 'the real'. Everything in both play and production is someone's imaginative vision about what story to tell, and how to tell it.

- When thinking about the story and the characters, it can be useful to ask yourself: where is the **POWER** – and does it shift? And maybe, do any of the characters have any power? And where is the **LOVE**? Even in political plays, love can be important. (See Michael Lerner, *Revolutionary Love*, 2019).
- **AXIS**: what, or where, is the tension in this world? Between what and what? What is the explicit or implicit debate about, or between?
- **CURRENCY**: what is this play 'trading in'? That is, what is its specific language-territory? What are its most significant material objects?
- **IDEAS**: in plays that aim to 'stage politics', it's interesting to think not merely about key ideas in the play, but also how they get there. For example, do characters discuss or debate ideas? That is, does the drama lie in the more or less explicit clash of political ideologies? Or are ideas present more indirectly, by implication? Do characters in effect embody ideas, through the social worlds they come from, or the choices they make? Or, being characters, are they perhaps not easily categorized? Do they embody contradictions?
- **DRIVE**: does it impel its characters, and us, towards a sense of something being completed? Or is the action more open-ended? Does it end (however tentatively) with a sense of hope and possibility; or with a sense of things closing in, or having reached an impasse?
- **DIALOGUE**: what do characters do with their words? What are they trying to get or to make happen? What do they want? How open and honest are they about their desires – to others, and/or to themselves? How much are they 'performing' and for whom are they performing?
- Theatre is often in one way or another about theatre – e.g., about characters not being what they seem; or about characters who use 'acting' to get through tricky situations (maybe even unconsciously).
- **STAGE SPACE**: what field of action has been chosen (interior – domestic, or institutional? Fluid and shifting between locations? Familiar or strange?) What is the relation of onstage space to offstage space? What is the importance of offstage locations; or offstage characters, if there are any? Is the space used in a way that is self-consciously theatrical, or meta-theatrical? This latter term refers to self-reflexive devices and effects that seem to frame the stage space as artificial and illusory, not merely a mirror

of so-called reality. They may call attention to the complex mixture of, or shifting boundaries between, illusion and reality on stage – and by implication also in our real world experience.

- **STAGE SET AND OTHER DESIGN ELEMENTS:** how does the visual design of the stage and of the material things seen within its space (including furniture, props, and costumes) embody or imply the particular imaginative – and political – field of this play? In contemporary theatre practice, designers contribute in a major way to the theatrical vision: the set can feel almost like another character in the play, actively contributing to its meaning. In the same way, other elements such as lighting, sound and movement design may be significant signifiers.
- **PERFORMANCE:** think about the powerful ways in which live, bold, real-time performances are contributing to your intellectual and emotional response to a play. Tom Stoppard: 'Theatre is an event, not a text'.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
910	BY 2 PM CDT/3 PM EDT/8 PM BST: Leaders prepare questions for Tuesday, Marc posts	BY 5 PM CDT/6 PM EDT/11 PM BST: Everyone blogs	10 AM CDT/11 AM EDT/4 PM BST: <u>Class</u> <u>meets</u> ... BY 3 PM CDT/4 PM EDT/9 PM BST: Leaders prepare questions for Thursday, Marc posts	BY 5 PM CDT/6 PM EDT/11 PM BST: Everyone blogs	10 AM CDT/11 AM EDT/4 PM BST: <u>Class</u> <u>meets</u> ...		
911	BY 5 PM CDT/6 PM EDT/11 PM BST: Everyone blogs	10 AM CDT/11 AM EDT/4 PM BST: <u>Class</u> <u>meets</u> ... IF WE ARE MEETING ON THE WEDNES- DAY: BY 3 PM CDT/4 PM EDT/9 PM BST: leaders prepare questions for Wed- nesday, Marc posts	IF WE ARE MEETING ON THE WEDNES- DAY: BY 5 PM CDT/6 PM EDT/11 PM BST: Everyone blogs	IF WE ARE MEETING ON THE WEDNES- DAY: 10 AM CDT/11 AM EDT/4 PM BST: <u>Class</u> <u>meets</u>			BY 5 PM CDT/6 PM EDT/11 PM BST: leaders prepare questions for Monday, Marc posts