

Fall 2021 Plays That Change the World
Preliminary Syllabus (without plays)
English 290S/PubPol 290S

Professor Faulkner Fox, she/her/hers

“You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can’t, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world...The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you can change it.”

--*James Baldwin*

“The purpose of theatre is to bring into public that which is kept offstage. If people get upset, it’s because the play is working.”

--*Paula Vogel*

Course Description

The goal of this creative writing course is for aspiring playwrights to think deeply about what—exactly—they are trying to do, and avoid, in their writing. What causes a play to be heavy-handed and propagandistic, as opposed to impassioned? How can students who believe deeply in a particular issue write artful drama about that issue? In what ways is theater similar—and dissimilar—to social protest in the streets? Students will be encouraged to experiment, question, and revise, at every turn.

This course will closely examine a diversity of plays that have had a marked impact on their cultures—an impact beyond an excellent and meaningful theater-going experience. Over the course of the semester, students will read—and watch—excellent political plays as well as write their own. They will write and develop their own full-length script, in addition to doing weekly creative responses to produced plays. Class discussion will be divided between focus on student work-in-progress, produced plays, and playwriting craft. Students will also work in small groups, meet with alumni readers, consultants at the Writing Studio, and individually with me.

Grading will be as follows: 50% development, drafting, and revision of the student’s own play; 25% written comments on plays; and 25% participation in other aspects of the class such as one-on-one discussions and small group run-throughs of scenes-in-progress.

Books

Playwriting: The Structure of Action by Sam Smiley

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=3419959>

selections from *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lajos Egri

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=5658397>

selections from *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=6180360>

Course Components

Reading & Watching:

You will read scripts, watch plays, and read articles and chapters about playwriting. You will also read and watch scenes-in-progress by your classmates. It's fine if you want to skim the how-to reading. Just make sure you understand the main points. With play scripts, you need to read and watch closely, looking for nuance and the specific way that techniques work.

Acting:

You will read in each other's scenes-in-progress as a way of providing feedback for the playwright. No worries if you've never acted before! These are read-throughs—no prior experience necessary.

Writing:

-journal

You should be writing regularly—collecting notes, fragments, ideas, overheard conversations, lines from stories, poems, essays, textbooks, songs, plays—in a journal. Because we've all been online so much recently, I recommend that you use an old-school journal made of paper, bu it's your call. Journals will not be handed in; they are the playwright's private tool.

-drafting and revision of your play

Much of our work this semester will be the writing and rewriting of your own full-length play. We'll use several different feedback methods to help with this process: acting out scenes-in-progress, the workshop, peer conferencing, conferences with consultants at the Writers' Studio, working with alumni readers from the Reader Project, and working one-on-one with me. Over the semester, you'll hand in rough, revised, and final drafts of your play. Getting a play finished may well take more than three drafts. All drafts should be put in the appropriate folder in your Sakai dropbox as you finish them.

-in-class writing

Most days we'll write together in class. Please keep these drafts and upload them to your Sakai dropbox.

-brief comments and questions for discussion

Each week, you'll write a comment and question about that week's play. This is an exercise in learning to read—and watch—like a playwright. See the description in Sakai Resources about how to do this. Comments and questions should be posted in the Sakai forum **by 5 p.m. the day before class—all as one post**. Also put a copy in your Sakai dropbox. Dropbox copies should be Word documents, double-spaced and formatted according to “Formatting Guidelines” in Sakai Resources.

-reply to a classmate's question

Each week after reading your classmates' posted comments and questions, you'll open a new thread and reply to one question by one of your classmates. Replies should be posted **by 10 a.m. the day of class**. You'll also put a copy in your Sakai dropbox, formatted according to the guidelines in Sakai Resources.

-feedback on classmates' scripts

When we begin to read full drafts of student scripts, you'll write brief feedback letters to each of your peers. We'll talk more about how to do this later in the semester.

Discussion:

- discussion facilitators

Once during the semester, you'll start off the discussion of that day's published play. You'll review the posted class comments, questions and replies prior to class in order to come up with a good set of starting insights and questions for the next day's discussion. Begin by asking the class: what did people like about this play? What is the heart of the play? What big life questions did it ask? Then move on to ask any other questions you like. Your goal is to stimulate a good discussion, in which many people talk.

-building context

You will “build context” for one play we read and watch—briefly give details about the play's production, reception, and impact on the culture. Please post the citations for your information in the forum on Sakai **by 5PM the day before class**.

-workshop

After the first few weeks of class, we'll begin “workshopping” drafts of student plays. On the week when your script is to be discussed, you'll post it in the correct forum on Sakai **by noon on Sunday, prior to the class when it will be discussed**.

-individual conferences

Individual conferences with me will sometimes be scheduled. I will also have some open office hours. You will also go to at least one conference at the Writing Studio.

-Reader Project

You can sign up to have skilled alumni discuss your script with you. (This is optional.)
<https://twp.duke.edu/dukereaderproject>

Final Portfolio in Your Sakai Dropbox

This is a compilation of all the writing you do in class this semester, and it should be organized in your Sakai dropbox in the following folders. Folders can be in alphabetical order—(that is the default):

- 1) in-class writing (dropbox folder labeled “In Class Writing”)
- 2) your scenes/playwriting exercises (dropbox folder labeled “Exercises”)
- 3) your notes and citations when you build context for a play (dropbox folder labeled “Building Context”)
- 4) comments & questions (dropbox folder labeled “Comments & Questions”)
- 5) replies to your classmates’ comments & questions (dropbox folder labeled “Replies”)
- 6) feedback letters about classmates’ scripts (dropbox folder labeled “Feedback”)
- 7) a brief narrative description of the drafting and revisions you did for your play: How did you get your initial idea? What changes did this original idea go through before becoming your final script? What changes did you try and end up abandoning? (dropbox folder labeled “Description of Writing My Play”)
- 8) brief paragraph on how the reading of your play (with friends, classmates, or relatives) went. What did you learn when listening that you hadn’t noticed while just reading over your script? (dropbox folder labeled “My Read-Through”)
- 9) rough draft of your play (dropbox folder labeled “Rough Draft”)
- 10) revisions of your play (dropbox folder labeled “Revisions”)
- 11) final version of your play (dropbox folder labeled “Final Script”)

Please do not throw out, write over, or forget to dropbox anything you write this semester. In order to grade you fully and fairly, it’s important that I see how your writing process worked, especially all of the scenes and drafts of your play.

Syllabus (without plays added)

August 24 Introduction

Class introductions, Syllabus, Play Selection, Trigger Warnings

August 31 Getting Started; The Playwright's Vision

to read:

- this syllabus, pp. 1-5
- pp. 3-69 and 285-307 in *The Structure of Action* (Smiley)
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=3419959>
- “Shitty” “Drafting and Redrafting; Cutting,” “Playwriting Exercises” “Pass Over” (just the introduction—pp. 3-5), “Formatting Guidelines,” “How to Do Comments, Questions, and Replies” on Sakai Resources
- “Write a Sentence as Clean as a Bone”:
<https://lithub.com/write-a-sentence-as-clean-as-a-bone-and-other-advice-from-james-baldwin/>
- Saunders pp. 110-117
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=6180360>
- classmate comments, questions and replies on Sakai Forums

to watch:

- Reading and Conversation with Ocean Vuong
<https://youtu.be/KSoRF61n0ZQ> (start watching at 7 minutes in)

to write:

- journal writing
- rough draft of one scene (approximately 3-4 pages). Use a playwriting exercise from Sakai, if you like. Follow “Formatting Guidelines” in Sakai Resources.
- a list of social & political issues you care about
- a comment, question, and reply on this week’s play. Follow “Formatting Guidelines” and “How to Do Comments, Questions, and Replies” in Sakai Resources.

September 7 Art and Politics; Feedback; Scenes-in-Progress

to read:

- <https://onbeing.org/programs/jericho-brown-small-truths-and-other-surprises/>
- <https://www.benningtonreview.org/jericho-brown-interview>
- <https://www.thetheatricalboard.com/editorials/constructivecritique>
- Saunders pp. 3-8
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=6180360>
- classmate comments, questions and replies on Sakai Forums

to write:

- journal writing

- rough draft of two scenes (approximately 3-4 pages for each scene) Use a playwriting exercise from the exercises or readings on Sakai, if you like.
- a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

September 14 Character; Scenes-in-Progress; the Scenario

to read:

- review pp. 35-40 in Smiley
- read 123-150 in Smiley
- pp. 62-89 in *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (Egri)
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=5658397>
- “Character,” “Writing into the Dark” in Sakai, Resources

to write:

- journal writing
- rough drafts of two scenes **or** a scenario (see pp. 35-40 in Smiley) and one
- a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

September 21 Plot; Scenes-in-Progress

to read:

- pp. 73-100 in Smiley
- pp. 230-241 in Egri
- “Action & Plot,” on Sakai, Resources
- comments, questions, and replies; building context on Sakai Forums
- Saunders pp. 11-62, 343-348

to write:

- rough drafts of two scenes
- a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

September 28 Story; Scenes-in-Progress

to read:

- Smiley pp. 101-122
- comments, questions and replies; building context on Sakai Forums

to write:

- a comment, question, and reply on this week's play
- rough drafts of two scenes

October 5 FALL BREAK, NO CLASS

October 12 Dialogue; Scenes-in-Progress; Workshop

to read:

- pp. 183-225 in Smiley
- “Dialogue” on Sakai, Resources

-comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

to write:

-rough draft of your full play

-a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

October 19 Thought; Workshop

to read:

-pp. 151-182 in Smiley

-comments, questions, and replies; building context; workshop piece on Sakai Forums

to write:

journal writing

-new scenes, revised scenes for your play

-a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

October 26 Image and Symbol; Workshop

to read:

“Image and Symbol” on Sakai Resources

-comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

to write:

-a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

-new scenes, revised scenes for your play

November 2 Style; Workshop

to read:

-“Style” on Sakai Resources

- comments, question and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

to write:

journal writing

-revised draft of your play

-a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

November 9 Place and Situation; Stage Directions; Workshop

to read:

-“Place and Setting; Stage Directions,” “*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* notes for the designer” in Sakai, Resources

-comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

to write:

journal writing

-a comment, question, and reply on this week's play

-new scenes, revised scenes for your play

November 16 Spectacle; Workshop

to read:

- pp. 252-284 in Smiley
- comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

to write:

- a comment, question, and reply on this week's play
- new scenes, revised scenes for your play

November 23 Melody; Workshop

to read:

- pp. 226-251 in Smiley
- comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

¶ to write:

- ¶ -a comment, question, and reply on this week's play
- ¶ -new scenes, revised scenes for your play

November 30 Conclusions; Workshop

to read:

- comments, questions and replies; building context; workshop pieces on Sakai Forums

¶ to write:

- ¶ -a comment, question, and reply on this week's play
- ¶ -new scenes, revised scenes for your play

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- ¶ Monday December 6 5PM **Final portfolio due in Sakai Dropbox** (description of what should be in dropbox is on pg. 4 of this syllabus).