

'Our Scene is London': LONDON AND EARLY MODERN THEATER

DRAFT OUTLINE

OVERVIEW

This course will introduce students to the variety of ways in which London is central to a sophisticated understanding of early modern theater and drama. Sessions will mediate between literary, cultural, and topographic viewpoints. Areas of exploration will include the synergy between topography and repertory of a theater, the impact of architecture of a playhouse on the shape of a play, the economic make-up of the early modern theater industry, the socio-political currency of specific places depicted in the plays, and the performance and research of early modern drama today. Students will also be invited to suggest seminars and excursions which either build upon what they have learnt or take us down new routes of enquiry. The course uses analytical, historical and practical exploration in equal measure. Therefore, at the end of the course, students will have a feeling for theatrical London that few American undergraduates will share: not only will they understand the history of early modern theater, and some of its topographic and staging complexities, but they will have walked through the ancient sites and areas which aid the understanding of sixteenth and seventeenth century plays, researched in libraries that house original material, and witnessed the current trends in early modern performance today.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course students will be expected to:

- Have gained knowledge of the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries.
- Have developed an understanding of different types of theaters in early modern London and the way their architecture and clientele shaped the writing of plays.
- Have acquired a taster of the interconnectedness of the social and political make-up of early modern London on the one hand and the plays on the other.
- Have gained knowledge of the current trends in the performance of early modern drama in London and have learnt about useful research libraries for studying production histories of these plays.
- Have acquired transferable skills such as review writing, archival research, and essay writing.

ORGANISATION

Teaching is by 1x3 hour seminar/excursion per week. Seminars and excursions are tightly knitted and will be mutually enhancing.

SEMINARS/EXCURSIONS/TEXTS

Variety of Theaters in Early Modern London (2 seminars)

Excursion: Production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the newly reconstructed Sam Wanamaker (Jacobean Indoor) Playhouse

Text: *The Duchess of Malfi*

Students will explore how architecture of an early modern theater influenced the writing of a play. They will first try out short scenes in rehearsal and then witness a performance at the indoor playhouse at first-hand. This will allow them to appreciate how plays performed at different venues change in performance and how plays written for one theater might differ significantly from those written for another.

The Business of Theater in Early Modern London (2 seminars)

Excursion: Archaeological site of the Rose theater

Text: *Henslowe's Diary*

Students will accompany me to the archaeological site of the Rose theater and discover the differences in its architecture and management. They will also learn about significant historical personalities involved in this prominent theater. We will study examples of transactions in Henslowe's diary to gain an appreciation of early modern theater as a business. From an analysis of the diary, students will also learn how different plays were written, how the production was prepared for the stage, and how much it all cost.

City Comedy and Early Modern London (2 seminars)

Excursion: Tyburn gallows/Newgate prisons/Guildhall

Text: *Eastward Ho*

City comedies such as *Eastward Ho* were set entirely in London and the geography, the social history, and the politics of these places is crucial to an understanding of these plays. Students will be taken to a tiny part of Newgate prison which survives beneath a pub or to the site of the reconstructed Tyburn gallows. The prison is depicted in the play and the site of the gallows (west of the city) is important to understand some of the jokes within the comedy. Moreover, two of the playwrights who wrote this play ended up suffering for their art in prison. I will use an excursion to these sites to open a debate on censorship and politics of the period. Students will also get an idea of how public executions too were one of the forms of 'theatrical' offerings in early modern London and they will be encouraged to draw links between these many forms of spectatorship and audience engagement. If possible, I might take the students to the guildhall (Goldsmith's company) and explain the apprentice system on which relationships in the play are based. Students will also be encouraged to think about the newly wealthy London clientele and invited to see the symbiosis between the genre of the play being offered and audience profile of early modern London.

London and Performance Research (2 seminars)

Excursion 1: The archives of Victoria and Albert Museum/Shakespeare's Globe/National Theater

Excursion 2: A performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at The Barbican

Text: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Students will not only attend an unusual performance take on the play but also visit one or two of the performance archives. They will learn about the significance of London as a centre of early modern performance research today and will gain an insight into the nature of performance and archival research generally. They will advance their knowledge of early modern drama by learning how various actors, directors, and designers have interpreted the play which I am choosing as a case-study.

Any Topic (2 seminars)

These seminars are unplanned in order to allow for flexibility. These will be used to explore further topics of interest to the students. These can also be used to discuss/give feedback on assessments.

ASSESSMENTS

Students will be examined through various kinds of assessments which will be submitted at different points in the course. They will be given clear instructions before each assignment:

- A performance review (2 pages – 15%)
- A production history (5 pages – 30%)
- Analysis of a record from Henslowe's diary (3 pages – 15%)
- An extended assignment (students will have the option of choosing to submit **either** a reviews portfolio which will include 4-5 performance reviews, **or** a production history portfolio which will include 2-3 production histories, **or** a London portfolio which will include a description of 2-3 sites in London which facilitate the understanding of early modern drama, **or** a detailed essay on a pre-agreed topic). This assignment will be 10 pages and each of the students will be required to submit an assignment plan beforehand so that appropriate guidance can be provided (40%).