

Theatre Arts 274  
**DRAMATURGY**  
Professor Mazer  
Fall 2020

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Office Hours via Zoom: by appointment

**THERE IS NO SYLLABUS, PER SE, FOR THIS COURSE;** the course is not organized on a tight schedule of weekly readings and occasional writing assignments. Rather, there will be regular in-class discussions of ongoing topics through the semester, with some of them cued to specific readings; and there will be regular assignments of succinct oral presentations (since much of the dramaturg's work in the theatre involves making succinct and persuasive oral presentations). Some of the presentations will be individual; other assignments may be group presentations (since virtually all of the dramaturg's work in the theatre involves collaboration as a team member). At the end of the semester, there is a final project, which may be team or may be individual.

### **I. Discussion Topics and Readings.**

Topics include: What is a dramaturg? What is the dramaturg's function? What is the dramaturg's function in relation to certain institutional structures, special tasks, ways of organizing rehearsals, etc.?

Readings will be drawn, for the most part, from *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, ed. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu. Essays (downloadable on Canvas) to be read include:

- Anne Cataneo, "Dramaturgy: An Overview."
- Joel Schechter, "In the Beginning There Was Lessing ... Then Brecht, Müller and Other Dramaturgs."
- Martin Esslin, "Towards an American Dramaturgy: Adapting the function of dramaturgy to U.S. conditions."
- Geoffrey S. Proehl, "The Images Before Us: Metaphors for the Role of the Dramaturg in American Theater."

and possibly other essays to be announced. There may be additional readings, for other sources, depending on our other work during the semester.

### **II. Historical/Social/Contextual Research.**

On several occasions, each person (or perhaps teams) will be asked to research a particular aspect of a particular period, country, social class and/or activity. BEFORE THE CLASS when the assignment is due, each person or team will post information, visual aids, etc. on the Canvas

site, along with bibliographical references (reference book, web site, etc.) for the sources of the information; in class, each person or team will make a brief presentation.

One assignment might be aided by an in-class visit from research librarian Mayelin Perez.

### **III. Dramaturging the Season.**

Over the course of the semester, we will both select a season of five plays and begin dramaturgical work on at least one of these plays. The theme for the season will be chosen from a list of options, which *might* include:

- Electoral politics (actual or metaphorical).
- Pandemics, or pandemic -like situations.
- Quarantine, social distancing, social isolation.
- Surviving catastrophe.
- Some other theme that we arrive at by consensus.

IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT WE CHOOSE A SEASON OF PLAYS SPECIFICALLY DESIGNED TO SERVE AS AN ESCAPE, DISTRACTION OR EMOTIONAL ANTIDOTE TO THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR COUNTRY AND THE WORLD.

The season's theme may be "overt"—something we wish to advertise—or it might be "covert"—something the season's plays reference indirectly, without the audience necessarily realizing it (e.g. *Wicked* being about the vilification of the Other, *Into the Woods* being about AIDS, etc.). Our collective task is to decide on the scale and mission of our hypothetical theatre company; to define what we mean by our season's theme; and to select a full season of plays, representing a balance of genre, tone, and company size, etc., appropriate to the theatre company's audience and community.

The company's Artistic Director has already decided that ONE OF THE PLAYS WILL BE BY SHAKESPEARE or one of his contemporaries. During the first part of the semester, we will devise a system for reading, discussing, and selecting the five plays of the season, to be drawn from a list of appropriate plays we collectively research and compile. It is likely that the process will initially involve individuals or pairs of individuals giving initial reports, with a recommendation about whether another individual, or the entire class, should read the play. (I only ask that, in the initial stages, individuals report on plays THAT THEY HAVE NOT READ BEFORE; if you know a script that you think the group and the class should consider, that play should initially be reported on by someone ELSE.)

As we select the plays, we will schedule individual and group dramaturgical projects for some or all of the plays in the season. These might include:

- Researching period contexts, historical and political details, etc.
- Preparing visual materials for the director, designers, and cast.
- For the Shakespeare play:

- recommending period settings (historical, Elizabethan, contemporary, some other period, eclectic),
- preparing doubling schemes,
- cutting the text, etc. (We will be assisted by readings from Andrew James Hartley, *The Shakespearean Dramaturg*).
- If we choose to cast the season from a resident company of actors, devising cross-casting between the five plays of the season.

#### **IV. New Play Dramaturgy.**

Special guest (date to be announced): Edward Sobel, former Director of New Play Development, Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, and dramaturg for the original productions of every play by Tracy Letts starting with his second play, including the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *August: Osage County* through *Buena Vista* (Steppenwolf and Off-Broadway last fall) and *The Minutes* (Steppenwolf and—in previews before theatres shut down last spring—Broadway); formerly Associate Professor of Theatre at Temple University, now Associate Professor of Theatre at Villanova University. For several years he was Associate Artistic Director of the Arden Theatre, where he directed *Superior Donuts*, *Clybourne Park*, and *Endgame*, and created The Writers' Room. (Sobel is a Penn alumnus and Theatre Arts minor, class of 1987.)

#### **V. Required Theatre-viewing:**

You may be required to watch videos of live performances, accessible through the Penn library.

#### **VI. The final writing assignment.**

At the end of the semester (at a date to be announced) we will, individually or collectively, prepare a set of written and visual materials for THE ENTIRE SEASON, including some or all of the following:

- a program note about the playwrights;
- a program note about the plays and the (hypothetical) productions;
- a packet of materials for a program insert or a subscriber bulletin;
- a packet of materials to be sent to the press;
- a packet of materials to be sent to school groups;
- visual displays for the theatre lobby;
- on-line blogs, articles, visual materials, etc.

Our particular challenge will be to support the theme of the season, even if we don't necessarily want the audience to notice that the season has that particular theme.

Materials should be posted on the website for comment, and presented in the final class.

Attendance and participation are mandatory; and though every effort will be made to accommodate students with special health needs or who will be participating from other countries and time zones, MOST OF THE CLASS SESSION WILL BE CONDUCTED

SYNCHRONOUSLY. Persistent unexcused absences, beyond what can be accommodated asynchronously, will be reflected in your semester grade. especially absences on days of individual or team presentation, or if the absences or unpreparedness jeopardize another student's work.