

DRAMA IN PERFORMANCE: THEATER & THE CITY

New York University
Department of English
DRLIT-UE 300

Tuesdays & Thursdays, 12:30-1:45 PM, 194 Mercer Street, Room 209
Thursday Evening Performances (locations/times will vary)

Instructor: Dr. Brandon Woolf
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Office Hours: Thursdays (2-5 p.m.); and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

How does performance (re)frame the environment in which it takes place? How does the city (re)frame the performances that take place within it? And how does theater as a specifically urban form intersect with the broader theatricality of urban life?

— Stanton B. Garner Jr.

This course focuses on the dynamic relationships between theater, performance, and the city of New York. We will enhance our understanding of theater and performance by exploring critical approaches to thinking about both in relation to the city. Moreover, we will consider what we can learn about the city by studying its varied performances – addressing how the city itself is constituted through different kinds of performances (even our own), and how performance serves as a mode of understanding urban processes. Our conversations in this course will center on weekly visits to a wide array of performances, as well as theoretical, historical, and contextual readings that accompany each visit. The course is divided into four units. Unit #1, “Cultural Materialism as Method,” will help us to understand how the material conditions of performance – spaces, architectures, institutional structures, economics, working conditions, etc. – bear upon the theater’s social and political effects (or lack thereof) within an urban landscape. Unit #2, “City and Performativity: Performing Identity,” concentrates on how the identities of the city’s many inhabitants are constituted and refashioned by the ways we engage, move through, participate in life, perform in the city in various ways. In Unit #3, “Developing New Work,” we will take a break from our “regularly scheduled programming” and make use of our weekly performance visits as inspiration to develop our own original performance pieces devised in groups. Finally, in Unit #4, “Performing Community (or Not?) in the Boroughs,” we head into the “outer” borough of Brooklyn to witness and participate in performances that question the relationship between theater and community. By focusing on both the material conditions of performance as well as the performative practices of living, working, studying in New York, this course will help us to better understand the complex and exciting imbrications of art and society, of theater and civic life.

READINGS:

All readings are available as PDFs for download from the course page on the NYU Classes website. *Please* come to class with *hardcopies* of the day's readings on hand.

PERFORMANCES:

As a group, we will attend a rich variety of performances on Thursday evenings. Attendance at all performances is mandatory; you *must* be free Thursdays in order to participate in this course. If you miss a performance, *it is your responsibility to make up that performance*. You will be responsible for reserving your seat and paying (again) for your ticket. We will meet 15-20 minutes prior to each performance – *please be on time!* If you are late, you may not be allowed into the performance. I encourage you to bring a journal to the performances and take notes before, during intermission, and right after the show. In my experience, a lot of fruitful observations come up in the moment that can be useful later.

REQUIREMENTS:**Class Participation**

An essential part of a vibrant society (and city) is an informed, thoughtful citizenry, empowered to ask questions about their social world. I encourage you to practice that mode of critical engagement in the classroom. To do so, you *must* come prepared – having read and considered the assigned readings *and* the writing of your colleagues – to grapple with the performances and critical frameworks in this course. I urge you to do so with respect and empathy for all of your interlocutors (both on the page, stage, and in the seminar room). Each student is permitted one unexcused absence; all other absences must be cleared with the instructor. Please refrain from using your cell phone in class. Laptop usage is permitted to take notes only, and again, please come to class with *hardcopy printouts* of the day's readings, marked-up and worked-through.

Two Close-Reading Scratchpads: In class on **September 14 AND September 21**, you will hand in a marked-up photocopy of 5 pages of the day's assigned reading *PLUS* 2 pages of notes and thoughts on the material. This is a critical close-reading exercise meant to explore the productivity and possibility of getting st(r)uck and causing trouble. While I will collect and read over these, they will not be graded.

Two Critical Reflections [3 pages each] (due on 2 Sundays over the semester)

You are responsible for two (3-page) critical reflection essays over the course of the semester. These short writing assignments will be posted in the "Forum" section of our NYU Classes page by 10PM on Sunday evenings and will form the basis of our discussion in class on Tuesday. You will be *expected* to read your colleagues' work and bring thoughts and questions into class. The goal for these reflections is to bring the previous week's critical readings into conversation with the performance we saw on Thursday, and to begin to think about how the two might inform one another. These should be polished pieces of argumentative writing. They should engage critically and in detail with both the theoretical reading and the performance. Try to make (at least the beginnings of) an argument. The hope is that one of the critical reflections you write over the semester could be a springboard from which you begin to think about your final research paper. Sign-ups will be on the second day of class.

Group Devised Performance [10 minutes] (due on November 16)

In groups, you will collaboratively develop and perform an original work devised around a particular theme (to be determined). In *Devising Theater*, Alison Oddey explains: “Any definition of devised theater must include process (finding the ways and means to share an artistic journey together), collaboration (working with others), multi-vision (integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences, and attitudes to changing world events), and the creation of an artistic product.” Instead of beginning with a script, your group will collaboratively create material for an original performance over a multi-week process. Our class work during this unit will focus on devising bits of performance alone and collaboratively that can be included in the final performance. The culmination of the unit will be a performance piece that includes text, movement, images, music, and multi-media. More concrete information regarding our in-class sessions will follow, but each group will be responsible for scheduling ample rehearsal/devising time (a few hours each week) outside of class to apply the ideas that we explore in class. The assigned reading during this unit will be significantly less.

Final Essay [10 to 12 pages] (due on Monday, December 18)

Your final essay will be based on original research. The essay should advance an original argument based on an issue of your choice pertaining to one of the topics raised in our course. It should address questions that are both theoretical and aesthetic. Your analyses may be based on readings, “watchings,” primary and secondary sources, and additional research. Ideally, this essay should spring from one of the critical reflections you write during the semester. Your analysis must consult at least three secondary sources. I suggest that you come and talk to me in office hours by the beginning of November to discuss your ideas.

EVALUATION:

You will be evaluated on your thoughtful participation and the level of your contribution to the discourse of the class, as well as the timely completion and responsible composition of your written and performance work throughout the semester. There will be no extensions on any of your assignments. Course evaluation will be based on the requirements as follows:

Participation **25%**

Close-Reading Scratchpads **5%**

2 Critical Reflections **15%**

Group Devised Performance **25%**

Final Essay **30%**

COURSE SCHEDULE (*subject to change and revision*)

Tuesday, September 5

Introductions

Unit #1: Cultural Materialism as Method

Thursday, September 7

Read: E. Fuchs, “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play”

Read: H. Ibsen, *A Doll’s House* [<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2542/2542-h/2542-h.htm>]

- The online version is the same as the Dover Thrift Edition (1992)

Performance #1: *A Doll's House, Part 2* by Lucas Knath

Location: Golden Theater – 252 West 45th Street (bet. 7th & 8th Avenues)

Time: 7 p.m. (meet outside the theater at 6:40 p.m.)

Tuesday, September 12

Read: J. Harvie, *Theater & the City*, 1-45.

Discuss: *A Doll's House, Part 2*

Thursday, September 14

Read: R. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theater*, 9-23 & 62-101.

Performance #2: *Groundhog Day*

Location: August Wilson Theater – 245 W. 52nd Street (bet. 7th & 8th Avenues)

Time: 7 p.m. (meet outside the theater at 6:40 p.m.)

Tuesday, September 19

Read: B. Brantley, 2 Reviews of *Groundhog Day* for the New York Times

Discuss: *Groundhog Day*

After Class: Download Geoff Sobelle's *Hear There Their Here* for free from your chosen app store.

Link: <http://stannwarehouse.org/show/here-their-there-here>

Unit #2: City and Performativity: Performing Identity

Thursday, September 21

Read: J. Harvie, *Theater & the City*, 48-78.

Read: S. B. Garner, "Urban Landscapes, Theatrical Encounters: Staging the City," 94-118.

Performance #3a/3b:

Janet Cardiff's *Her Long Black Hair* (2005) (*don't forget to: print map and photos*)

AND

Geoff Sobelle's *Hear There Their Here* (2017)

Location/Time: Complete *both* performances before class on September 26

Tuesday, September 26

Discuss: *Her Long Black Hair* & *Hear There Their Here*

Thursday, September 28

Read: D. Heddon, selections from *Autobiography and Performance*

Performance #4: *Sam's Tea Shack* by Ben Gassman & Sam Soghor

Location: The Tank – 312 West 36th Street (bet. 8th and 9th Avenues)

Time: 9:30 p.m. (meet in the lobby the theater at 9:15 p.m.)

Tuesday, October 3

Discuss: *Sam's Tea Shack*

Thursday, October 5

Read: J. E. Munoz, *Disidentifications*, 1-34

Performance #5: *BLACKOUTS* by Dickie Beau

Location: Abrons Arts Center – 466 Grand Street (at Pitt Street)

Time: 8 p.m. (meet in the lobby of the theater at 7:45 p.m.)

Tuesday, October 10

Discuss: *BLACKOUTS*

Thursday, October 12

Watch: *Arna's Children* – a film by Juliano Mer-Khamis

Read: A. Boal, selections from *Theatre of the Oppressed*

Watch: Nabil Al-Raei Interview #1

Read: Nabil Al-Raei Interview #1

Read: The Siege Story Breakdown

Performance #6: *The Siege* by The Freedom Theater

Location: The Skirball Center at NYU

Time: 7:30 p.m. (meet in the lobby of the theater at 7:15 p.m.)

Tuesday, October 17

Discuss: *The Siege*

Unit #3: Developing/Devising New Work

(Detailed prompts for assignments will be distributed.)

Thursday, October 19 (Class at 194 Mercer)

Read: A. Oddey, *Devising Theatre*, 1-41

Read: H.-T. Lehmann, selections from *Postdramatic Theatre*

Performance #7: *The Treasurer* by Max Posner

Location: Playwrights Horizons – 416 West 42nd Street (bet. 9th & 10th Avenues)

Time: 8 p.m. (meet in the lobby of the theater at 7:45 p.m.)

Tuesday, October 24 (Class in **Studio 5** on 2nd floor of 721 Broadway)

Bring: 1-Minute Solo Silent Performance

In-Class Visit: Katrin Beushausen, Theater maker & Dramaturge from Berlin, Germany

Thursday, October 26 (Class at 194 Mercer)

Bring: Archive of Three Stimuli & Written Meditation

Performance #8: *NO PERFORMANCE* (use time to meet with groups re: *Installations for Tuesday*)

Tuesday, October 31 (Class in **Studio 5** on 2nd floor of 721 Broadway)

Bring: Environmental Diorama Installations

Thursday, November 2 (Class at 194 Mercer)

Bring: 1 page of newly-written/devised text (this can be monologue, scenic dialogue, collage, etc.)

Performance #9: *Miracle* by Sophia Cleary + Neal Medlyn

Location: The Chocolate Factory – 5-49 49th Avenue, Long Island City, *Queens*

Time: 8 p.m. (meet outside the theater at 7:45 p.m.)

Subway: 7 train to Vernon/Jackson (one stop from Grand Central)

Tuesday, November 7 (Class in **Studio 5** on 2nd floor of 721 Broadway)

Bring: New/Revised Writing & Gestural/Movement Sequences

Thursday, November 9 (Class at 194 Mercer if I can't get us a studio space)

Bring: Segment of Revised/Combined Writing Integrated with Gestures & Music & Media

Performance #10: *Measure for Measure* created by Elevator Repair Service

Dates/Times: Variable (check **your** calendars)

Location: The Public Theater – 425 Lafayette Street

Tuesday, November 14 (Class at 244 Greene Street, Event Space)

In Class: Work in Groups Preparing Your Performances

Thursday, November 16 (Class at 244 Greene Street, Event Space)

In Class: Work in Groups Preparing Your Performances

Performance #11: *Group Devised Performances*

Location: 244 Greene Street, Event Space

Time: *To Be Determined*

Tuesday, November 21

Discuss: Group Devised Performances

Thursday, November 23 – **Thanksgiving (NO CLASS)**

Unit #4: Performing Community (or Not) in the Boroughs

Tuesday, November 28

Read: K. Jannarone, “The Political Fallacy of Vanguard Performance”

Read: R. Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde”

Thursday, November 30

Read: L. Tomlin, “Academy and the Marketplace: Avant-Garde Performance in Neoliberal Times”

Read: J. Freedland, “The New Age of Ayn Rand: How She Won Over Trump and Silicon Valley”

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/10/new-age-ayn-rand-conquered-trump-white-house-silicon-valley>]

Performance #12: *The Fountainhead* directed by Ivo van Hove

Location: BAM's Peter Jay Sharp Building – 30 Lafayette Avenue, *Brooklyn*

Time: 7 p.m. (meet in the lobby of the theater at 6:45 p.m.)

Tuesday, December 5

Discuss: *The Fountainhead*

Thursday, December 7

Read: G. White, "Introduction," in *Audience Participation in Theatre*

Performance #13: *Home* by Geoff Sobelle

Location: BAM's Harvey Theater – 651 Fulton Street, *Brooklyn*

Time: 7:30 p.m. (meet in the lobby of the theater at 7:15 p.m.)

Tuesday, December 12 – **Legislative Day (NO CLASS)**

Thursday, December 14

Read: J. Mahmoud, "Brooklyn's Experimental Frontiers: A Performance Geography"

Performance #14: *Race Card* by Karma Mayet

Location: JACK – 505 ½ Waverly Avenue, *Brooklyn* (bet. Fulton St. & Atlantic Ave.)

Time: 7:30 p.m. (meet outside the theater at 7:15 p.m.)

Subway: C train to the Clinton-Washington OR G train to Clinton-Washington

EMAIL FAQ:

I look forward to getting to know you over the course of the semester and am excited to hear from you if you would like to set up a time to speak in office hours. However, do keep in mind that I check my email only once each weekday afternoon. In most cases, please expect to wait 24 hours to hear back from me. Please be sure if you are emailing about a time sensitive issue that you leave an appropriate amount of time for a response from me.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

All students are responsible for understanding and complying with the NYU College of Arts and Science Statement on Academic Integrity. Please familiarize yourself with that statement, which is available at: <http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity>. Under **NO** circumstances will academic dishonesty or plagiarism be tolerated in this course.

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS AND HEALTH:

This class welcomes students with visible and invisible disabilities and will meet all and any academic accommodations to which a student is entitled. Accommodations may be made for students registered through the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities. For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact the Moses Center [719 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980)]. Your health and safety are a priority at NYU. If you experience any health or mental health issues during this course, we encourage you to utilize the support services of the 24/7 NYU Wellness Exchange (212-443-9999).

MORE ON WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

- Please submit all assignments as PDF documents.

- Assignments for this course should be written in twelve-point, standard font (Garmond or Times New Roman), with 1-inch margins, double-spaced.
- The stipulated length of an assignment indicates the number of full pages I expect it will take to satisfy the terms of the assignment. A first page with a large header section, or a page with big block quotes, is not quite a full page, and you should be aware of this so that you can make sure to take the full amount of time and space the assignment requires.
- Always include a “Works Cited” page with full bibliographic information for each text you cite (even if you’re only citing one). Throughout the paper, make sure to give a page number for each citation of the text. If you have questions about formatting either your in-text citations/footnotes or your Works Cited page, please consult the Chicago Manual of Style.
- Assignments turned in after the deadline will be marked down. Very late assignments will not receive credit.
- If you’re having trouble with an assignment, or you anticipate a problem with a specific deadline, I encourage you to talk to me about it as soon as possible. Please don’t wait until the last minute.

GRADING CRITERIA:

A = Excellent (A+: 100-97; A: 96-94; A-: 93-90)

This work demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of course material and presents thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights and well-reasoned analysis. “A” work includes skillful use of source materials and illuminating examples and illustrations. “A” work is fluent, thorough and shows some creative flair.

B = Good (B+: 89-87; B: 86-84; B-: 83-80)

This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course material, presenting a reasonable degree of insight and broad level of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source material, along with examples and illustrations, are used appropriately. “B” work is reasonable, clear, appropriate and complete.

C = Adequate/Fair (C+: 79-77; C: 76-74; C-: 73-70)

This work demonstrates a basic understanding of course material but remains incomplete, superficial or expresses some important errors or weaknesses. Source material may be used inadequately or somewhat inappropriately. The work may lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations and may be hard to follow or vague.

D = Unsatisfactory (D+: 69-67; D: 66-64; D-: 63-60)

This work demonstrates a serious lack of understanding and fails to demonstrate the most rudimentary elements of the course assignment. Sources may be used inappropriately or not at all. The work may be inarticulate or extremely difficult to read.

F = Failed (Below 60)

Work was not submitted or completed according to parameters (page length, topical focus, types of sources), or completely failed to express the most basic and elementary aspects of the course.

Plus (+) or minus (-) grades indicate your range within the aforementioned grades.