

**FYSEM-UA 476: Political Theater  
Fall 2021, New York University  
Wednesdays 11am-1:30pm**

**Prof. Eric Dickson**

**Email:** [eric.dickson@nyu.edu](mailto:eric.dickson@nyu.edu)

**Phone:** don't call, email instead

**Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:30am-11:30am & 3pm-4pm, and by appointment.**

*Office Hours will usually be accessible both virtually and in-person –  
always via Zoom, and usually in-person.*

**Office Hours via Zoom:**

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/4927748931?pwd=aXdxRmkwbDVKeXRRYmVNLytjOWd4dz09>

**Office Hours in-person:**

See [ericdickson.net/officehours](http://ericdickson.net/officehours) for physical locations, updated once a week on Monday

**Course Description:** This course offers a survey of political theater, and of the use of theatrical elements in practical politics, from the ancient Greeks to the present. How have dramatic depictions of politics changed over time? In what ways have political plays been used to advance political agendas, both by the powerful and by dissidents and protest movements? To what extent can we understand political speeches and political campaigns as essentially theatrical productions? This course offers an interdisciplinary perspective on these questions. In a typical week, students will read one or more full-length plays accompanied by appropriate readings from political science, political philosophy, or social psychology. Through these readings, writing assignments, and class discussion, students will learn about the development of different dramatic techniques and forms through the history of theater, about the co-evolving relationship between politically-themed spectacles and changing ideas about citizenship and political legitimacy, and about the political psychology of speeches and campaign techniques.

**Course Prerequisites:** There are no prerequisites for this course.

**Covid-19 Policies:** Per NYU rules for Fall 2021, appropriately worn facial coverings are required at all class meetings, and eating is not permitted in class. (Occasional sips of water are okay.) Students who are not in compliance with these requirements (or other NYU rules that may be promulgated) will be asked to leave the classroom; this will be counted as an unexcused absence for the class session, regardless of how much of the day's class meeting has already taken place.

**Teaching Modality:** The course is offered in-person, and the plan is to stick with this as much as possible. We also have access to Zoom technology if this becomes necessary (e.g., the professor is sick, a significant fraction of the class is sick at the same time, university policies on in-person teaching change as the pandemic progresses, etc.). The

Thanksgiving week class (24 November 2021) will take place on Zoom rather than in-person.

**Attendance Requirement:** Course attendance is mandatory. Three or more *unexcused* absences will normally result in a grade of “F” in the course. Students who feel it impossible to attend a given class session for health, family, personal, or other reasons should email the professor with as much advanced notice as possible before class to request an *excused* absence. In particular, given the Covid-19 pandemic, students who are feeling ill the morning of class should *not* come to campus, and should email the professor before class to receive an excused absence and to make alternative arrangements.

**Course Requirements:** Apart from the above attendance requirement, your course grade will be determined by a combination of the following factors: (1) three short writing assignments, (each of these comprising 15% of the overall grade); (2) a final writing assignment (40%); (3) and class participation (15%).

There will be three short writing assignments (3 or 4 pages each) over the course of the semester. Prompts will be distributed at the appropriate times. See the end of this syllabus for the projected due dates for these short writing assignments.

The final writing assignment will be a more substantial piece of work. Subject to approval from the instructor, the final writing assignment may take the form of an essay, a proposal for a political science research study, or an original politically-themed short play written by the student. Historically, most students have chosen to write a short play. Students are required to submit a one-page memo describing their proposed project, and the proposed format, for approval by the instructor no later than 15 November 2021. The appropriate length of the final writing assignment will vary depending on the form of the work submitted; guidance and feedback will be given on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, class participation is essential to the learning process in small, discussion-based seminars. Your insights help other students learn; failure to participate in discussions is a failure to contribute to an important common good. Students are expected to keep up with each week’s assigned readings, to consider them carefully, and to be prepared to contribute thoughtfully to class conversations. Students who seldom participate in class discussions will be assumed not to be keeping up with the reading, and cannot expect to get a strong grade in the class.

**Course Books & Readings:** The course involves a significant number of required texts, most of which will be available from the NYU Bookstore.

- Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, ISBN-13: 9780140444254, Publication date: 2/28/1984
- Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*, Bloomsbury USA, ISBN-13: 9780413695406, Publication date: July 2003
- William Shakespeare, *Henry V: The Oxford Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, ISBN-13: 9780199536511, Publication date: 8/1/2008
- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Cambridge University Press, ISBN-13:

- 9780521349932, Publication date: October 1988
- Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts and Other Plays*, Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, ISBN-13: 9780140441352, Publication date: 6/28/1964.
  - Maxwell Anderson, *Both Your Houses*, Samuel French, ISBN-13 9780573606229
  - Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays*, Grove/Atlantic Inc. ISBN-13: 9780802132208. Publication date: 1/28/1994
  - Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Bloomsbury USA, ISBN-13: 9780413492708, Publication Date: November 2007
  - Vaclav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, Grove/Atlantic Inc., ISBN-13: 9780802133076, Publication date: 1/28/1994
  - Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*, Theatre Communications Group, ISBN-13: 9781559360999, Publication date: 4/1/1995
  - Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Revised and Complete Edition*. Theatre Communications Group, ISBN-13: 9781559363846, Publication date: 2/12/2013.
  - David Hare, *Via Dolorosa*, Samuel French, ISBN-13: 9780573627330.
  - Rich Orloff, *Chatting With the Tea Party*. To be distributed in class.
  - Suzan-Lori Parks, *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3*, Samuel French, ISBN-13: 9780573704109, Publication date: 4/15/2016.
  - Robert Schenkkan, *Building the Wall*, Dramatists' Play Service Incorporated, ISBN-13: 9780822237143, Publication date 4/1/2017.
  - Lynn Nottage, *Sweat*, Theatre Communications Group, ISBN-13: 9781559365321, Publication date: 6/13/2017.
  - Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, University of Chicago Press, ISBN-13: 9780226349114, Publication date 3/25/2016.

In addition, a number of supplementary readings will be available on the internet, through [library.nyu.edu](http://library.nyu.edu) - instructions for accessing these readings will be provided in class. These supplementary readings may occasionally contain technical material (such as statistical analysis) that goes over your head – that is absolutely fine, and to be expected. The point of these readings is to glean the main ideas and get a window into how political scientists and psychologists study aspects of the social world. Just read these materials and get what you can from them, and you will be fine (and the instructor will talk you through anything that needs to be talked through in class.)

*A note on the readings:* Some of the books listed above contain multiple plays. You are responsible only for the specific plays listed on the syllabus below. In addition, many of these books contain introduction or analysis sections, some of them lengthy. You are not responsible for these either (though you may find some of them interesting), unless otherwise indicated in advance by the instructor.

## Course Outline

### **Week 1 (8 September 2021): Introduction**

#### **Week 2 (15 September 2021): Ancient Tragedy / Political Legitimacy**

Sophocles, *Antigone* (441 BCE) [74 pp]

Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (1944) [61 pp]

Tyler, Tom R. 2006. "Psychological Perspectives on Legitimacy and Legitimation." *Annual Review of Psychology* 57:375-400.

#### **Week 3 (22 September 2021): Elizabethan Drama / The Exercise of Power**

William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (1599) [192 pp]

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1532): Selected portions (Dedicatory Letter, and Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23)

#### **Week 4 (29 September 2021): Social Realism / Self-Serving Perception**

Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts* (1881) [84 pp]

Henrik Ibsen, *A Public Enemy* (1882) [117 pp]

Washburn, Anthony N. and Linda J. Skitka. 2018. "Science Denial Across the Political Divide: Liberals and Conservatives Are Similarly Motivated to Deny Attitude-Inconsistent Science." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9(8): 972-980. [9 pp]

#### **Week 5 (6 October 2021): Realist Drama / Dirty Hands & Agenda Control**

Maxwell Anderson, *Both Your Houses* (1933) [180pp]

Walzer, Michael. 1973. "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2(2): 160-180.

#### **Week 6 (13 October 2021): Agitprop / Political Mobilization**

Clifford Odets, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) [31 pp]

Clifford Odets, *Golden Boy* (1937) [88 pp]

Gerber, Alan S., Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer. 2008. "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment." *American Political Science Review* 102(1): 33-48.

#### **Week 7 (20 October 2021): Epic Theater / Malfeasance in War**

Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1938) [88 pp]

Online Politics Reading TBA

#### **Week 8 (27 October 2021): Theater of the Absurd / Political Psychology of Oppression**

Vaclav Havel, *The Garden Party* (1963) [51 pp]

Vaclav Havel, *The Memorandum* (1965) [78 pp]

Online Politics Reading TBA

**Week 9 (3 November 2021): The Interventionist Strain / Postcolonialism and Feminism**

Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine* (1979) [87 pp]

Online Politics Reading TBA

**Week 10 (10 November 2021): Magical Realism / Identities and Prejudices**

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (1991) [111 pp]

Haider-Markel, Donald P. and Mark R. Joslyn. 2008. "Beliefs about the Origins of Homosexuality and Support for Gay Rights: An Empirical Test of Attribution Theory." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72(2): 291-310.

**Week 11 (17 November 2021): Documentary Theater / Politics and the Media**

David Hare, *Via Dolorosa* (1998) [43 pp]

Rich Orloff, *Chatting with the Tea Party* (2016) – to be distributed in class

Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. 2015. "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59(3): 690-707.

\*\*Week 12 will be taught via Zoom rather than in person\*\*

**Week 12 (24 November 2021): Contemporary Theater 1 / The Effects of History on the Present**

Suzan-Lori Parks, *Father Comes Home From the Wars, Parts 1, 2 & 3* (2014) [159 pp]

Nunn, Nathan, and Leonard Wantchekon. 2011. "The Slave Trade and the Origins of Mistrust in Africa." *American Economic Review* 101: 3221–3252.

**Week 13 (1 December 2021): Contemporary Theater 2 / Conformity & Obedience**

Robert Schenkkan, *Building The Wall* (2017) [44 pp]

Haney, C., Banks, W. C., and Zimbardo, P. G. 1973. "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison." *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*. 1: 69–97.

**Week 14 (8 December 2021): Contemporary Theater 3 / Working-Class America**

Lynn Nottage, *Sweat* (2016) [112 pp]

Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (2016), Chapters 3 & 4. [66 pp]

*All Assignments to be submitted via the NYU Classes online system by 5pm on the relevant dates*

Short Writing Assignment 1: due Tuesday, 5 October

Short Writing Assignment 2: due Thursday, 28 October

1 Page Memo on your final paper idea: due Monday, 15 November

Short Writing Assignment 3: due Thursday, 18 November

Final Paper: due Tuesday, 14 December