

Department of English & Writing Studies

Theatre of the Absurd
English 3778G (001)
Winter 2018



Instructor: Dr. Jo Devereux
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Arts & Humanities Building 2G28J
Office Hours: Monday 10:30-12:30; or by
appointment

Course Location: AHB 2R21

Course Date/Time: Tuesday 2:30 pm-4:30 pm,
Thursday 3:30 pm-4:30 pm

Prerequisites: At least 60% in 1.0 of English 1020E or 1022E or 1024E or 1035E or 1036E or 1042E or 1042E or both of English 1027F/G and 1028F/G, or permission of the Department.

Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you may be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. This decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

Course Description

In the twentieth century, art and drama reacted to the cataclysmic events of two world wars and the profound changes in society and culture that followed. This course explores the theory and practice of absurdist theatre, from Dadaism through the work of such authors as Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter.

Course Materials

Required Texts:

1. Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Penguin, paperback. ISBN 978-0-451-15871-0
2. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*. Faber, paperback. ISBN 9780571243730
3. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. Faber, paperback. ISBN 9780571244591
4. Jean Genet, *The Maids*. Faber, paperback. ISBN 9780571331550
5. Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros, The Chairs, The Lesson*. Penguin, paperback. ISBN 13: 9780141184296
6. Harold Pinter, *Harold Pinter Plays 3*. Faber, paperback. ISBN 9780571193837

Methods of Evaluation

Essay 1, due Mar. 1, 2018: 15%

Essay 2, due Apr. 10, 2018: 25%

Two group scenes, each worth 10%, for a total of 20%, see below for dates

Attendance: 5%

Final Exam, Apr. 2018 (date TBA): 35%

NOTE: A student must receive a passing grade for both term work and the final examination in order to receive a passing grade for the course. This applies to all courses in all programs offered by the department. Students whose term and final exam grades average 50% or above, even though one of the two is a failure, shall receive a default grade of 48%. **Please note:** The department of English & Writing Studies does not release final grades. All undergraduate grade reports will be available online from the Office of the Registrar.

Students are fully responsible for looking at and being familiar with the information posted on the department website at <http://www.uwo.ca/english/undergraduate/Student%20Information.html>.

Academic Accommodation

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness and further information regarding this policy can be found at http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf.

Downloadable Student Medical Certificate (SMC):

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf Support Services

Registrarial Services <http://www.registrar.uwo.ca>

Student Support Services <https://student.uwo.ca/psp/heprdweb/?cmd=login>

Services provided by the USC <http://westernusc.ca/services/>

Student Development Centre <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/>

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to MentalHealth@Western: <http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/> for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Course Information

Attendance

Regular attendance is expected for all classes. Absenteeism may result in debarment from the final exam and, thus, failure of the course.

Essay Due dates, Late policy, Extensions, Plagiarism

All overdue essays will receive a penalty of 1% per day late.

Late essays may be dropped in the English Department Essay Drop-Off Box.

Do NOT slide essays under office doors.

No essay will be accepted 14 days after the due date.

Essays must be typed, double-spaced, and stapled in the upper left-hand corner. No binders or protective covers of any kind are necessary. Essays must follow current MLA format and must include a list of Works Cited at the end (see *MLA Handbook* for details).

Essays must be on works studied in **this** section of the course.

IT IS ADVISABLE TO RETAIN AT LEAST ONE HARD COPY OF THE ESSAY IN THE EVENT OF LOSS OR DAMAGE TO THE ORIGINAL.

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations.

Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).

Plagiarism Checking: Western University uses software for plagiarism checking. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking.

Email Policy

Email is meant for brief inquiries only. Please allow a day or two for a response. Email received over the weekend will be answered the following week.

Participation/Performance Work (20%)

Each Thursday, beginning January 25th, we will forgo the formalities of a traditional university lecture and get down to the business of performance. I will be dividing the class into four groups, and each week you, the students, will run our final hour.

Our performance hour will begin with a scene study presentation by the group designated, for that week, as THE COMPANY.

- It will be the Company's job to stage a scene based on one from that week's play, and to take up roles such as actors, director, dramaturge, and designers. The scenes you perform will be "poor" theatre in the best sense of the word: not a formal, heavily rehearsed performance, although you are free to bring props and costumes as you choose. Your primary task will be to work together to select a specific approach to the scene/play, and then be prepared to defend and explore your choices in class. This "thought work" is *the most important* component of your presentation!
- Those who aren't acting or directing in any given week must contribute behind the scenes, by helping to imagine potential visions for the scene, by imagining a design (be prepared to explain and discuss it!), or by applying dramaturgical (that is, critical, close-reading) skills to the text and then offering options to the actors and/or director.

- I would like each of you to try different roles over the course of the term: if you are shy, challenge yourself to try acting once; if you're a raging extrovert, challenge yourself to pull back a bit and let the quieter members of your group shine.
- The Company will need to read ahead, and agree on a scene (or scenes) to perform in advance of their scheduled Thursdays. You need not clear your scene selection with me in advance, but please choose something that will take approximately 10 minutes to perform.
- Be prepared to meet outside of class for an hour or two, at least a couple of times, before each performance, and establish an informal email discussion list among yourselves in order to hammer out your basic choices and ensure everyone knows their jobs.
- Coordinating your schedules will *not* be easy. In fact, it's part of the challenge. But your groups are large because performance cannot happen with just a couple of people: theatre is made in the messy coordination between different personalities with different schedules and different needs. Do your best to accommodate everyone, to get to know one another, and to support one another; by the end of the term, you'll be glad these people are your colleagues; they may even be your friends!
- After each performance, and a short break, the Company will be asked to get back on stage and participate in a question-and-answer period. Each member of the Company should try to contribute something during the Q&A, especially those whose work has been primarily behind the scenes. This is the time for you to explore in depth, with your colleagues, the terrific thought work that has gone into your presentation!
- The final part of the class will involve a post-performance "talk-back" or discussion.
- When the week's performance is over, the Company will take their break while the rest of us get into our designated groups. You will be given 10-15 minutes in your group to discuss the performance you've just seen, and to prepare two or three good challenging questions about the Company's performance choices.
- In order to ensure that your group's discussion runs smoothly, each of you will need to take some notes during the Company's performance, bring those notes with you to your group's "huddle," and be prepared to talk about them.
- NOTE that the questions you develop must delve below the surface of what the Company is doing. Colleague-critics are reviewers with a difference: your task is to explore what worked and what didn't, to probe the critical effects of the Company's choices, to offer alternative readings, and to examine how others in the class received the performance (it's a good idea to address some questions to your fellow audience members as well!). One important proviso: colleague criticism is designed to be helpful and respectful, not hurtful and derogatory.
- We hope to get a lively discussion going, and will bounce from group to group until either our time or your notes are exhausted. Support a strong, engaged class discussion!

Assessment:

- Your group work is the core component of your participation grade; you will be judged on the amount of effort you put into the work—NOT on your acting skills—and on your willingness to push yourself in new directions, beyond your comfort zone. Note that you need not play a major role in each presentation: balance your commitments to the group work as needed, but ensure that you are contributing helpfully in some way each time your group is The Company, and that you challenge yourself to contribute during your group's discussions.
- Attendance. One of the keys to doing well at this assignment is attending regularly; the other key is being engaged when you attend. Attendance will be taken. Even if your group is not performing, your attendance is still required and appreciated.

Essay 1: Choose ONE play and write an argumentative essay that focuses on one of the following topics listed below. Be sure to narrow and refine your topic so that it is very specific and clear. Do early research on the topic so that you can develop your essay gradually, rather than writing it at the last minute.

Length: 1500 words

Format: MLA for undergraduate research essays

Worth: 15%

Due: Mar. 1, 2018

Possible Topics:

1. communication
2. violence of style or language
3. relationships
4. acting styles
5. stillness versus movement
6. disorientation or dislocation
7. speech versus silence
8. work
9. father or mother figures
10. control versus submission

Essay 2: Choose TWO different plays from the one you examined in Essay 1. As with the first essay, choose ONE of the broad topics listed above (which you must narrow down very specifically to construct a clear argument).

Again: do some preliminary research on this topic with reference to the play you are exploring. You may write more than once on the same topic (for example, Gender), but **make sure you cover TWO different plays from the one you examined in Essay 1.**

Length: 2500 words

Format: MLA for undergraduate research essays

Worth: 25%

Due: Apr. 10, 2018

Winter Term Schedule 2018

Jan.9-11	Introduction
Jan.16-18	Theatre of the Absurd
Jan.23-25	Genet, <i>The Maids</i> Group 1
Jan.30-Feb.1	Ionesco, <i>The Lesson</i> Group 2
Feb.6-8	Ionesco, <i>The Chairs</i> Group 3
Feb.13-15	Ionesco, <i>Rhinoceros</i> Group 4
Feb.20-22	READING WEEK
Feb.27-Mar.1	Beckett; Essay 1 Due Mar. 1
Mar.6-8	Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> Group 1
Mar.13-15	Beckett, <i>Endgame</i> Group 2
Mar.20-22	Albee, <i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> Group 3
Mar.27-29	Pinter, <i>The Homecoming</i> Group 4
Apr.3-5	Pinter, <i>Landscape</i>
Apr. 10	Review; Essay 2 Due Apr. 10