

**Playwriting II:
Playing & Writing**

Course # T D 325
Fall 2009

Unique # 25925

Time & Place: TTH 12:30PM- 2:00PM WIN 1.148

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"Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win the contest." Plato Laws vii, 803

Overview:

We use the word "play" quite often in the theatre. We're usually referencing a text or a performance. But everyone is well aware that the word "play" also represents an activity that humans and other animals engage in for entertainment. This entertainment is usually viewed in opposition to work and unnecessary for immediate survival. However that doesn't make play any less essential to our vitality or our culture.

This course will explore the connection between playing and writing. We'll study the rites, rituals, and cultures of play in an effort to create new avenues for the development of dramatic text. We'll be continually expanding the brief definition above (play as an activity of entertainment) to include:

- how play begins and ends in both time and space?
- who participates in play?
- what is at stake when one plays?
- what does it mean to cheat?
- how do children learn through play?
- how do jokes and wordplay function?

We'll then apply these lessons to the creation of dramatic text. Through discussion and in-class writing exercises we'll link our study of the nature of play to dramatic terminology such as: plot, narrative, character, stakes, conflict, dramatic irony, and resolution.

Course Packet: We will read quite a bit in this class. All of the readings and plays will be included in your packet (with the exception of the play *Our Little Sunbeam*, which we will watch in class). The readings will be the basis for in-class writing exercises and discussions. The readings will also provide a basis for your self-analysis and inform my grading of your work. If you have any doubts about your ability to keep up with the reading, please speak with me immediately.

Primary Readings:

Huizinga, Johan **Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture**. Beacon, 1950.

Sutton-Smith, Brian **The Ambiguity of Play**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Sutton-Smith, Brian **The Folkstories of Children**. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

Aldis, Owen **Play Fighting**. New York: Academic Press, 1975.

Holt, Jim **Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes**. New York: Norton, 2008.

Zeegers, Machiel "The Swindler as Player" **Motivations in Play, Games and Sport**. Ed. Slovenko, Ralph. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, 1967. 219-231.

Schechner, Richard **The Future of Ritual**. London: Routledge, 1993.

Erasmus, Desiderius **The Praise of Folly**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

Plays:

Chekhov, Anton **Ivanov**

Fornes, Maria Irene **Fefu and Her Friends**

Mee, Charles L. **bobrauschenbergamerica**

Kane, Sarah **Cleansed**

33 Fainting Spells **Our Little Sunbeam**

What You'll Do:

1. You will participate in class. You will show up on time having read the material carefully and completely and/or having brought all required materials. You will speak in class, complete in-class writing assignments, and comment on one another's work during workshops. There will be occasional quizzes on the reading material. I've included suggestions about how to prepare for each class in the schedule. You will not be graded on your fidelity to these suggestions. But you will be graded on your overall participation. So following the suggestions will help you meet the minimum requirements for participation. If you have any questions, speak up; it will count as participation!
2. You'll complete a one-act play over the course of the semester. This play will be a minimum of 30 pages. This play will be written on your own time outside of class. We have 8 classes set aside to workshop material from this play, but given the size of the class we'll probably only be able to workshop about 10 pages per student twice. This will be somewhere between 1/3rd or 2/3rd of your entire play. I encourage you to come to my office hours and to use myself and our TA as a resource to read and respond to drafts throughout the semester.
3. Many of our classes will include short writing exercises meant to creatively explore the topic. You will not have to turn any of these exercises in. They will not be graded for their content. Only your participation will be graded. This is meant to encourage exploration. But I encourage you to try to relate the writing exercises to your one-act play. When possible use the in-class writing assignments to learn about your one-act's characters, its plot, its language and its structure.

Extra Credit: Going to a performance and writing a brief one-page analysis of the play-elements used by the creators will earn you 1 point on your final grade. You can do this five times for a total of 5 points toward your final grade. But here is the catch: you must receive approval from me and you can't turn in more than one a week. Pre-approved performances include The Psyche Project in September, Trojan Women Oct. 30th- Nov. 8th (both of these shows are at UT), bobrauschenbergamerica Sept. 17th - 27th at St. Edward's University, I've Never Been So Happy, Sept. 10th - 20th at The Off Center.

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259.

Grading:

Attendance and Class Participation: 40 % of your grade.

We will work together in this class to form a community of scholars who are investigating the culture of play and its relation to playwriting. Class discussions are a vital part of this investigation. Be aware that I take attendance, promptness and participation VERY seriously and that this can have a major impact on your grade.

For each unexcused absence from class, five points will be deducted from your final grade.¹

Lateness is a sign of disrespect to your teachers and your peers. Any lateness more than 5 minutes after the start of class will be treated an absence.

Reading Quizzes: 10% of your grade.

Over the course of the semester I will give you eleven short quizzes, usually no more than 1 or 2 easy questions to find out if you read the material and to frame the day's discussion. The lowest score will be thrown out and each of the remaining ten quizzes will be worth one point of your final grade.

Writing 50 % of your grade.

I value your writing. I expect you to as well. Hard work will be rewarded. So will the application of our investigations. Each ten-page segment of your play, which you will turn in on 22nd of September and the 27th of October, will be worth 10% of your final grade. The remaining 30% will be based the final project, a complete one-act play which will be due on December 1st.

Below are some model criteria on which I will grade your plays. These criteria are based on the guidelines for evaluation of scripts used by the TCG, NEA, and O'Neill Playwright's conference:

- Clarity and Scope of Vision and Intent
- Depth and development of character
- Consistency and effectiveness of structure
- Clarity of theme
- Effective language (Verbal, Visual, Kinesthetic)
- Significance and originality

¹ The only excused absences for this class are clearly defined by University policy as illness as documented by medical verification from a Doctor or the Health Center and observance of religious holidays.

Class Schedule:

Thursday August 27th: – Introduction.

Syllabus distributed. Course overview and preliminary discussion. As a class will we calibrate our collective understanding of playwriting and playing.

Tuesday September 1st – The Basics of Play.

READ Pages 1-27 Homo Ludens

In class discussion on the basic features of play.

- Prepare for class by reading the material and by thinking about how the definition of play put forward by Huizinga can be adapted to suit dramatic writing. Which parts of his definition are applicable and which parts are not?

Thursday September 3rd – The Basics of Play.

READ Pages 1-17 The Ambiguity of Play

In class discussion based on Sutton-Smith's Seven Rhetorics of Play and your own writing.

- Prepare for class by reading the material and bring in one page of your own dramatic writing which embodies one or more of the rhetorics. We will share this work aloud in class.

Tuesday September 8th – Ivanov.

READ Ivanov

In class discussion followed by brief in-class writing exercise based on Ivanov.

- Prepare for this class by reading Ivanov. Think about how the text relates to definition of play put forward by Huizinga. Identify as many of the seven rhetorics of play as you can within the script. To enhance your class participation do a little basic background research on Chekhov and Ivanov. Who is Chekhov? When did he write? How successful was this play? Pay special attention to how the play begins and ends as a whole, as well as how Chekhov begins and ends each Act and each scene. Pay special attention to the differences and the similarities between the characters. We will complete an in-class writing assignment based on your own characters.

Thursday September 10th – Playing with Time and Space.

In class writing exercises in which we adapt the boundaries of play to your own work. How does your play begin and end? How does the audience enter into the space? How do the characters enter into the space? How does the audience tell the difference between characters and other audience members? How does the audience tell the difference between characters and other characters?

- Prepare for class by showing up ready to write, rewrite and/or edit your dramatic writing. Bring any utensils or materials you normally use to write.

Tuesday September 15th – Fefu and Her Friends.

READ Fefu and Her Friends

In class discussion followed by brief in-class writing exercise based on Fefu and her Friends.

- Prepare for this class by reading Fefu and Her Friends. Think about everything you thought about after reading Ivanov (relation to Huizinga, 7 rhetorics, beginnings & endings, characters) plus be able to articulate what is at stake for the characters in this play. Do a little basic background research on Fornes and Fefu. This play was produced at UT recently, ask around and find out about that performance. We will complete an in-class writing assignment based on transitions between scenes in your own plays.

Thursday September 17th – Playing for Stakes.

In class writing exercises in which we adapt the stakes and consequences of game-play to your own work. What is at stake in your play for your characters? What does that even mean? What is at stake for you as a writer? How does the audience tell if your characters are getting closer to or farther from success or failure? How do they tell if you, as a writer, are getting closer to or farther from success or failure within this play?

- Prepare for class by showing up ready to write, rewrite and/or edit your dramatic writing. Bring any utensils or materials you normally use to write.

Tuesday September 22nd – WORKSHOP.

Over the next four class periods we will read ten minutes of material from each student and discuss the way in which the work conforms or diverges from our definition of play adapted from Huizinga, which of the 7 rhetorics of play are invoked by the work, and how clear the stakes are and whether the audience is able to track progress toward and/or away from those stakes.

- Prepare for these classes by bringing enough copies of ten pages of work for everyone in the class, including me and the TA, and bring these pages on the 22nd whether you are scheduled to read on this day or not. If you do not have your pages on the 22nd it will be graded as if you did not turn them in!

Thursday September 24th – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Tuesday September 29th – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Thursday October 1st – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Tuesday October 6th – “Childish” Play.

READ The Folkstories of Children, Introduction, pages 1-38, and Ingbert, Four Years, Story #3

In-class discussion and writing exercise based on the reading.

- Prepare for this class by reading the material thoroughly. Be able to discuss Ingbert’s Story #3 in terms of Major Narrative Elements in Children’s Folktales and Botvin’s Seven Steps of Narrative Complexity. Ask your own children or children you know to tell you a story. Listen to them and be prepared to report what you heard. We will complete an in-class writing assignment based on “childish” moments in your own play.

Thursday October 8th – bobrauschenbergamerica

READ bobrauschenbergamerica

In class discussion and writing exercise based on bobrauschenbergamerica.

- Prepare for this class by reading bobrauschenbergamerica. Think about everything you thought about after reading Ivanov & Fefu (relation to Huizinga, 7 rhetorics, beginnings & endings, characters, stakes) plus be able to articulate the ways in which the narrative elements in children’s folktales are used in this text. What level of Botvin’s Narrative Complexity would you say this story is? Do a little basic background research on Mee and Bob Rauschenberg and bobrauschenbergamerica. This play was produced at St. Edwards Sept. 17th-27th. Ask around and find out what people thought about the production. If you went to see this production, be prepared to talk about it. We will complete an in-class writing assignment based on the narrative complexity of your own plays.

Tuesday October 13th – Play Fighting.

READ pages 1-5 & 157-175 Play Fighting

In class discussion and writing exercise based on Play Fighting.

- Prepare for this class by reading Play Fighting. Be able to name the benefits of play listed in the first five pages. And be able to describe the possible function of play-fighting in animals as noted in the later pages. Theorize how this relates to creation of dramatic text. Be ready to share your opinion about the relationship between scripted conflicts between human performers and play-fighting between other animals. We will complete an in-class writing assignment around the animalistic conflicts within your own plays.

Thursday October 15th – Play Fighting.

READ pages 261-281 Play Fighting

In class discussion and writing exercise based on Play Fighting.

- Prepare for this class by further reading from Play Fighting. Form an opinion about why humans play-fight and how our play-fighting compares to other animals. What sorts of play-fights are present in the plays we have discussed to date? How is play-fighting present in your own work? How can you use the basic principles of play-fighting to create and/or sharpen the conflict in your own plays? We will complete an in-class writing assignment around the human conflicts within your own plays.

Tuesday October 20th – Jokes & Word Play.

READ Pages 3-55 History & Philosophy of Jokes

In class discussion and writing exercise based on History and Philosophy of Jokes.

- Prepare for this class by reading History and Philosophy of Jokes (we'll be discussing the History today). Come to class ready to tell your favorite joke except for the punch-line. We'll compare these jokes to the history of jokes. We'll classify them. And we'll each speculate about the punch-lines.

Thursday October 22nd – Jokes & Word Play.

READ Pages 59-126 History & Philosophy of Jokes

In class discussion and writing exercise based on History and Philosophy of Jokes.

- Prepare for this class by reading History and Philosophy of Jokes (we'll be discussing Philosophy today). Come to class ready to share the punch-lines to your jokes. We'll discuss how the jokes fit the proposed philosophy of jokes put forward. And we do a writing exercise with joking and word-play based on your own plays.

Tuesday October 27th – WORKSHOP.

Over the next four class periods we will read a new ten minutes of material from each student and discuss examples of "childish play" (inventiveness), play-fighting (conflict), jokes and word-play (language) within your plays.

- Prepare for these classes by bringing enough copies of ten pages of work for everyone in the class, including me and the TA, and bring these pages on the 27th whether you are scheduled to read on this day or not. If you do not have your pages on the 27th it will be graded as if you did not turn them in!

Thursday October 29th – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Tuesday November 3rd – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Thursday November 5th – WORKSHOP. Ibid.

Tuesday November 10th – Cheating.

READ The Swindler as a Player pages 219-231

In class discussion and writing exercise based on The Swindler as Player.

- Prepare for this class by reading The Swindler as Player. Think about what it means to “cheat” at playwriting. Think about when “cheating” as an artist is acceptable. Be prepared to cheat your way through a writing assignment. (If you were ever going to skip a class and try to get by with a fake doctor’s note, this is the one.)

Thursday November 12th – Dark Play.

READ Schechner, “Playing” pages 24 – 44

In class discussion and writing exercise based on Schechner’s “Playing.”

- Prepare for this class by reading the assigned material. Pay close attention to the end of the essay. How does he define “Dark Play?” What are the 5 aspects he lists? Do some basic research on Richard Schechner. He may be speaking on campus a couple of times this semester. Find out what he is speaking about and what your colleagues think of him. Be prepared to complete an in-class writing exercise intended to explore the possibilities of dark play within your scripts.

Tuesday November 17th – Cleansed.

READ Cleansed by Sarah Kane.

In-class discussion and writing exercise based on Cleansed.

- Prepare for this class by reading Cleansed. Think about everything you thought about after reading Ivanov & Fefu & bobrauschenbergamerica (relation to Huizinga, 7 rhetorics, beginnings & endings, characters, stakes, narrative elements of children’s folktales, & Botvin’s Narrative Complexity) as well as thinking about the ways that cheating and dark play are used. Do a little basic background research on Kane and Cleansed. Her play Blasted was recently revived in NYC at SOHO Rep to great acclaim. Read some reviews of this show. Look at images on-line from past productions of her work. We will complete an in-class writing assignment based on impossible feats within your own plays.

Thursday November 19th – Review

READ The Praise of Folly 9-44

Class will be used for an open discussion of any topics which remain unclear or troubling. We’ll answer one another’s questions and offer ideas for further inquiry. We will use The Praise of Folly to frame the discussion.

Tuesday November 24th – Our Little Sunbeam.

In class viewing of a DVD followed by discussion.

- There really is no preparing for this class. But, if you have any questions about what your one act play or final five minute presentation should look like, ask it now, before Thanksgiving! And I don't care if you are traveling to Siberia to see your long lost Uncle, the class before Thanksgiving is like every other class in that it can't be missed!

Thursday November 26th – Thanksgiving!

NO CLASS

Tuesday December 1st – Five Minute Presentations and One-Acts Due.

Over the final two class periods each student will have five minutes to present their work over the course of the semester to the full class. You may read a short scene, you may talk about your process throughout the semester, you may present a mini-essay or lecture on your understanding of the relationship between play and playwriting. (If you present a short scene, please make it something new to the class, either something we have not read in one of our workshop classes, or something significantly revised.) There will be a brief bit of time for the class to ask questions or otherwise respond to the Five Minute Presentations, so strict time limits will be enforced. ALSO YOUR ONE-ACT PLAYS ARE DUE!

- Prepare for these classes by bringing two copies of your One-Act Play. You MUST bring your One-Act on the 1st whether you are scheduled to present on this day or not. If you do not have your one-act on the 1st it will be graded as if you did not turn it in!

Thursday December 3rd – Five Minute Presentations (cont'd).

End of Semester.