

**Duke University Department of Theater Studies (01-11-17)**

**Special Topics in Dramatic Writing: Playmaking Seminar: 380S\***

**Instructors: Neal Bell and Jeff Storer Email: [bear@duke.edu](mailto:bear@duke.edu) (Jeff) and [jim3chance@aol.com](mailto:jim3chance@aol.com) (Neal)**

**\*Please Note: This class will count for the Writing Requirement for a Department of Theater Studies Major or Minor.**

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M 3:05-5:35. Bryan Center 127**

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Dramatic writing – for stage, screen or film – is not meant to be read, like a novel or a poem – it's meant to be performed. Playmaking will give students a clear idea of how writing "works" in the theater, to build a collective experience that is completed by the imagination of the audience that's watching.

In this class, students will explore the 'liveness' of dramatic writing by performing: not just as writers, but also as actors and directors, working with material that's generated in class and getting it up on its feet. What works on the page does not necessarily work on stage and the acting-and-directing component of Playmaking will teach writers how to discriminate between literate but un-dramatic text, and writing that lives and breathes on stage.

Starting with writing exercises that aim at the core concept of 'dramatic action', students will progress to self-generated works. During the semester each student will get to experiment with writing, directing, and acting. The semester will end with a public presentation of the work that's been written and brought to life on stage by the class.

Students will write scenes (up to 10 minutes in length) examining the various challenges of performed writing, from the creation of character to the building of suspense in the real-time of performance. In the second part of the semester, writers will additionally practice the crucial playwriting skill of rewriting in rehearsal, as their scenes (either expansions of the exercises they've written, or work they've generated on their own) are staged in class by fellow students (who will be taking turns as actors and directors.)

Work the students create will be considered finished after this three-part process: first draft, draft-in-progress during rehearsal, and final revised draft incorporating changes made during (and because of insights gained in) rehearsals.

**Note: Your final for Playmaking will be a public performance scheduled on Thursday May 3, 2-5 p.m. We will be using this final period for your final projects. Plan accordingly.**

## **REQUIREMENTS**

**Each unit will consist of several assignments. Assignments for each unit will consist of research, reading, writing (up to 10 minutes in length, no more than 2 actors), analysis, rewriting, directorial and acting assignments.**

**Unit #1: DRAMATIC ACTION**

**Unit #2: DIALOGUE AND MONOLOGUE**

**Unit #3: TRUE NEWS STORY**

**Unit #4: STUDENT CHOICE**

**-Participation.** Attendance, collegiality and the willingness to engage in class activities will be key to your participation grade. Note that there are no approved absences without prior consent of the instructors. If the instructor and student agree upon an approved absence (this includes all religious holidays, dean's and athletic excuses) all work must still be completed and shown in class. Failure to meet fellow students for scheduled outside of class rehearsals will also affect this grade. Because we are only meeting once a week attendance is absolutely necessary. Two unexcused absences will lower a student's grade by a full letter. Two late class arrivals equal one absence. When in doubt, ask.

### **-Grade Breakdown:**

Grade based on seriousness of approach, ability, effort, growth, the quality of participation, curiosity and passion. A grade will be given for each exercise and written assignment. All in class work will be followed by a instructor/peer feedback session. If students are interested in the grades they are receiving for performance exercises and written work, they should make an appointment to discuss grades with one of the instructors. As suggested by the University, "A's" will be reserved for "Exceptional" work:

Unit #1	20 points
Unit #2	20 points
Unit #3	20 points
Unit #4	20 points
Participation (including Final Presentation)	20 points

## **Class Calendar**

### **WEEK ONE**

**Wednesday, January 11:**

**Introduction. View DOUBLE INDEMNITY SCENES.**

**In-class writing exercise.**

**Discuss Inspiration: TRUE NEWS STORIES.**

**Assignment for January 23:**

**Read RED CROSS, article on Sam Shepard, and Richard Greenberg's THE AUTHORS VOICE.**

**First writing assignment on Dramatic Action:**

**Write a seduction scene. (Up to 10 minutes in length, no more than 2 actors)**

**When turning in writing assignments, always bring in 15 copies.**

**(Note: In this as in all writing assignments, the two actors can play more than one role, if you want them to.)**

**NOTE: No class on January 16, in observance of Martin Luther King Day.**

### **WEEK TWO**

**Monday, January 23 Discuss Dramatic Action (articles and plays).**

**UNIT ONE Writing Assignment Due.**

**Read and discuss 'Assignment One' exercises in class.**

**[Drop/Add Ends Wednesday January 25]**

**Advance assignment:**

**By February 6, you need to have read  
TBA play, which we'll discuss on that date.**

### **WEEK THREE**

**Monday, January 30. Read and discuss in class the remaining writing assignments from Exercise 1.**

**Introduction to DIRECTING.**

### **WEEK FOUR**

**Monday, February 6**

**Discuss TBA play.**

**Professor Storer chooses 3 scenes – from the student work so far - as examples of acting/directing in a staged reading in class.**

**Writing Assignment for February 13:  
Write a scene set at a family event where something goes awry; leading to one character expressing themselves in a monologue. (Up to 10 minutes in length, no more than 2 actors.)**

### **WEEK FIVE**

**Monday, February 13**

**UNIT TWO: Watch JAWS scene in class.**

**Assignment Due. Read “family event” writing assignments in class.**

### **WEEK SIX**

**Monday, February 20. Read the remaining “family event” writing assignments in class.**

**Assignment for February 27:**

**Read John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation"**

**(and discuss the use of historical and news events in playwriting.)**

**WEEK SEVEN**

**Monday February 27:**

**UNIT THREE**

**Discuss "Six Degrees of Separation", and upcoming news event assignment.**

**View excerpt from DOG DAY AFTERNOON, also based on a true story.**

**Students volunteer to stage three additional "family event" pieces in front of class.**

**Assignment for February 27**

**Write a scene based on a True Story.**

**WEEK EIGHT**

**Monday March 6**

**Read news event assignments.**

**SPRING BREAK Friday March 10 - Monday March 20**

**WEEK NINE**

**Monday March 20**

**Read remaining news event assignments in class.**

**Assignment for March 27:**

**Read "Death Tax" by Lucas Hnath**

## **WEEK TEN**

**Monday, March 27**

**UNIT FOUR Assignment : Student choice play.**

**Discuss “Death Tax.”**

**Listen in class to an excerpt of Orson Welles’ radio-broadcast, WAR OF THE WORLDS.**

**Break into groups, and begin a discussion of your final group presentation. For the final presentation in this class (during exam week), each student will pick one of the scenes they’ve written, to be acted and directed by members of the group.**

**Assignment for Monday April 3**

**Write a 10-minute play, on anything you choose to write about, and in any style.**

## **WEEK ELEVEN**

**Monday, April 3**

**Read Exercise #4: student-choice plays.**

**NOTE: For the final presentation in this class, each student will pick one of the scenes they’ve written, to be performed.**

**If time permits, we’ll break into groups, which will begin a discussion of which scenes your group might want to present – although writers won’t be able to lock in a choice until we’ve read the final student-choice plays on April 10.**

**Assignment for April 10:**

**Do rewrites on the individual scenes you’ve chosen for presentation (except for those scenes that remain to be read on April 10.)**

## **WEEK TWELVE**

**Monday, April 10**

**Read remaining student-choice plays.**

**Break into groups: each writer will pick the piece he or she wants to be performed for the final presentation.**

**Begin rehearsing your Group Final.**

## **WEEK THIRTEEN**

**Monday, April 17**

**Continue working – in your groups – on rehearsing and staging the pieces you've selected as your Group Final.**

**Acting/Staging Prep for Final**

## **WEEK FOURTEEN**

**Monday, April 24**

**We will be using this final class as a Runthrough for your final, public presentation. Plan accordingly.**

**April 26 – Undergraduate classes end**

## **FINAL PERIOD PLAYMAKING**

**Your final for Playmaking will be a public performance scheduled for Wednesday May 3, 2:00 to 5:00 PM.**

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## **UNIT BREAKDOWN ASSIGNMENTS AND SOURCE MATERIAL**

### **UNIT ONE: DRAMATIC ACTION**

#### **SOURCE MATERIAL:**

- 1) Watch first three scenes from DOUBLE INDEMNITY
- 2) READ RED CROSS by Sam SHEPARD
- 3) READ PARIS REVIEW article on SAM SHEPARD: The Art of Theater #12
- 4) READ Richard Greenberg's THE AUTHOR'S VOICE.

#### **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:**

Write a seduction scene. 5-10 pages, no more than ten minutes. No more than 5 characters.

### **UNIT TWO: DIALOGUE AND MONOLOGUE**

#### **SOURCE MATERIAL:**

- 1) READ TBA play.)
- 2) Show excerpt from JAWS.

#### **WRITING ASSIGNMENT:**

Write a scene at a family gathering where something goes awry; leading to one character expressing themselves in a monologue. 5-10 pages, no more than ten minutes. No more than 5 characters.

### **UNIT THREE: TRUE NEWS STORY.**

#### **SOURCE MATERIAL:**

- 1) Read John Guare's SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION.
- 2) Watch scene(s) from DOG DAY AFTERNOON>

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Write a scene based on a True Story. 5-10 pages, no more than ten minutes. No more than 5 characters.

### **UNIT FOUR: STUDENT-CHOICE PLAY.**

#### **SOURCE MATERIAL:**

- 1) Read Lucas Hnath's DEATH TAX
- 2) Listen to Orson Welles' WAR OF THE WORLDS

**WRITING ASSIGNMENT:** Write a ten-minute play on a subject, and in a style, of your choice.

