Dramatic Theory in Practice

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Dr Chloe Preedy

Overview:

The theoretical discussion of drama and theatre practice has a long and illustrious history, reaching back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This history of thinking and writing about drama has centrally shaped our contemporary understanding of performance, theatre and the cultural significance of dramatic practice. Concentrating predominately on the relationship between theoretical writings about the theatre and the practical realisation of such concepts by dramatists and directors, this seminar series will explore some of the most significant developments in the history of dramatic theory. By submitting this relationship between theory and practice to critical scrutiny, we will assess the implications of historical developments in theory for our modern scholarly practice as students of drama.

The six seminars are ordered chronologically, and chart the some of the most significant developments in the history of dramatic theory from ancient Greece to the present day. Theoretical works studied range from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double*, discussed in relation to contemporary plays from Aristophanes’s *Frogs* to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. There will be some opportunity to consider the writings of Stanislavski, Brecht and Brook from a practical performative angle if desired, but actual performance will not be a compulsory part of the course.

The required and suggested reading for each class is outlined below. The primary texts listed are in each instance required reading, and copies of these should be brought to seminars where possible. For the theoretical prose works, extracts will be circulated in advance of each class as indicated in brackets. Copies of the play-texts should be available through your college libraries, and will also be placed on reserve in the English Faculty Library wherever possible; although the translations will of course vary, any edition is acceptable for the purposes of our discussions. In the list of secondary and background reading, any item marked * is also required reading; selected readings from the other works listed in this section will complement the required reading for each seminar.

Aristotle and Greek Theatre: The Birth of Dramatic Theory?

This class will examine the philosophical foundations of dramatic theory and criticism. It will focus on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, generally regarded as the founding text of literary criticism, and regularly cited by subsequent scholars despite its much-debated connection to the dramatic practice of ancient Greece. The *Poetics* will be studied alongside two major works of ancient Greek comedy and tragedy, Aristophanes’s *Frogs* and Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*; reference will also be made to Plato’s *Republic* and Nietzsche’s much later theorisation of Greek drama in his *Birth of Tragedy*.

Primary Texts:

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, from the *Oresteia*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Secondary and Background Reading:

* Friedrich Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1974) [extracts to be provided]

A.M. Bowie, Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy (1993)
Paul Cartledge, Aristophanes and his Theatre of the Absurd (1990)
Albert Henrichs, ‘Nietzsche on Greek tragedy and the tragic’ in A Companion to Greek Tragedy, ed. J. Gregory (2005), pp. 444-458
John Jones, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (1962)
Melanie Klein, ‘Some Reflections on the The Oresteia’ (1963), repr. in Envy, Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963 (1975)
Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, tr R.J.Hollingdale (1973)
Leo Strauss, Leo Strauss on Plato’s Symposium, ed. Seth Benardete (2001)
Charles Segal, Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text (1986)
A.H. Sommerstein, Aeschylean Tragedy (1996)

Beyond Shakespeare: Theorising Early English Theatre

In Shakespeare’s England, the status of drama was a matter of much debate. Authors such as Sir Philip Sidney compared the native tradition unfavourably with the classical theories outlined in Aristotle’s Poetics, while contemporary dramatists defended the qualities of their art. This class will consider how classical philosophical theories about the theatre and dramatic practice came to be challenged and reshaped during perhaps the single most influential period in the history of English dramatic writing; given the prominence Shakespeare has subsequently enjoyed as a touchstone for nineteenth- and twentieth-century schools of critical thought, the theories of drama expressed by his contemporaries remain deeply significant for our own scholarly practice.

Primary Texts:

Sir Philip Sidney, Apology for Poetry [extracts to be provided]
John Dryden, An Essay of Dramatic Poesy (1668) [extracts to be provided]
John Dryden, All for Love (1678)
Thomas Heywood, An Apology for Actors (1612) [extracts to be provided]
Thomas Heywood, A Woman Killed With Kindness

Secondary and Background Reading:

Joel B. Altman, The Tudor play of mind: rhetorical inquiry and the development of Elizabethan drama (1978)
Robert D. Hume, Dryden’s criticism (1970)
Pauline Kiernan, Shakespeare’s theory of drama (1996)
Michele Marrapodi, ed., Shakespeare and Renaissance literary theories: Anglo-Italian transactions (2011)
Kathleen E. McCluskie, Dekker and Heywood: professional dramatists (1994)
Edward Pechter, Dryden’s classical theory of literature (1975)
Margaret Pollock Sherwood, Dryden’s dramatic theory and practice (1966)
Stanislavski and Nineteenth-Century Naturalism

In this class we will discuss one of the most influential figures in the history of modern drama: Konstantin Stanislavski. Although Stanislavski was an actor and theatre director rather than a literary theorist, his work with the Moscow Art Theatre and the advice outlined in his published books had a profound impact on the subsequent performance history of modern drama: in particular, the influential American school of method acting developed out of a limited application of his ideas by former students. This class will consider the context in which Stanislavski himself developed and applied ideas about performance and acting technique by exploring his writings alongside the plays of the Moscow Art Theatre’s most famous writer, Anton Chekhov: works which Stanislavski acted in and directed.

Primary Texts:

Anton Chekhov, The Cherry Orchard
Anton Chekhov, The Seagull
Konstantin Stanislavski, An Actor Prepares [extracts to be provided]
Konstantin Stanislavski, My Life in Art [extracts to be provided]
Emilie Zola, Naturalism (1881) [extract to be provided]

Secondary and Background Reading:

Jean Benedetti, Stanislavski and the actor (1998)
Robert Leach, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold (2003)
George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy (1961)
Konstantin Stanislavski, An Actor’s Work on a Role
Oliver Taplin, ‘Greek Tragedy, Chekhov and Being Remembered’, Arion, 13.3 (2006), pp. 51-65
Peta Tait, Performing emotions: gender, bodies, spaces, in Chekhov’s drama and Stanislavski’s theatre (2002)

Brecht’s Manifesto: A Political Theatre

A reaction against the naturalism of the nineteenth century arrived in the twentieth century with the German director and playwright Bertolt Brecht. Like Stanislavski, Brecht has long been an influential figure in the history of modern drama, and his ideas continue to resonate strongly for many contemporary writers. In this class we will be considering Brecht’s emphasis on the theatre as a political medium, an idea shaped by his lifelong commitment to Marxism, and the techniques he introduced to establish the political efficacy of performed drama. In particular, we will be considering the relationship between Brecht’s theories and the works he wrote and produced, and the significance of his enduring influence for modern critical practice.

Primary Texts:

Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage and Her Children
Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*
Bertolt Brecht, *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948) [extracts to be provided]
Bertolt Brecht, ‘The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre: Notes to the Opera *Rise and Fall of the Town of Mahagonny*’ [extract to be provided]

**Secondary and Background Reading:**

Augusto Boal, *Theater of the oppressed*
Laura Bradley, *Brecht and political theatre: The mother on stage* (2006)
*Culture and Agitation: Theatre Documents* (1972)
C. D. Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s political theatre; the development of modern German drama* (1972)
Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1973)

**Theatrical Rites and Religion: Artaud, Grotowski, and Peter Brook**

In the mid-twentieth century playwrights, directors and theorists began to call for a newly expressive theatre. Drawing on the idea that theatrical performance could be traced back to the religious rites of ancient Greece, these writers began to argue for a ritualised theatrical experience. This class explores from a theoretical and critical perspective the process whereby such ideas led to the development of physical theatre, studying the writings of the influential theatre director Antonin Artaud alongside the work of physical theatre practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. In particular, we will consider the relationship between techniques of performance and the concept of a sacred, purgative theatrical experience which emerges in these writings.

**Primary Texts:**

Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* [extracts to be provided]
Antonin Artaud, *Jet of Blood* (1925) [extract to be provided]
Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (1968) [extracts to be provided]
Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* [extracts to be provided]

**Secondary and Background Reading:**

*Jacques Derrida, ‘La Parole Souffle’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1978) [extract to be provided]*
*Lee Jamieson, *Antonin Artaud: From Theory to Practice* (2007) [extracts to be provided]*

Eric Bentley, ed., *The theory of the modern stage: from Artaud to Zola, an introduction to modern theatre and drama* (2008)
Edward Braun, *The director and the stage: from naturalism to Grotowski* (1982)
Dominique D. Fisher, *Staging of language and language(s) of the stage: Mallarmé’s poème critique and Artaud’s poetry-minus-text* (1994)
Ronald Hayman, *Artaud and after* (1977)
Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, *Peter Brook* (1995)
James Roose-Evans, *Experimental theatre: from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook* (1989)

**The Semiotics of Modern Drama: Reading Beckett with Derrida**

Jacques Derrida famously professed his inability to deconstruct the works of Samuel Beckett, those writings that ‘make the limits of our language tremble’. Yet critics have often subsequently argued that Derrida’s theoretical writings owe a strong debt to Beckett’s prose and dramatic work. This class will explore the ways in which Beckett experimented with language and signs in his plays, and consider the relationship between Beckett’s dramatic practice and Derrida’s philosophical theories.

**Primary Texts:**

- Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*
- Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
- Samuel Beckett, *Not I*
- Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [extracts to be provided]
- Jacques Derrida, ‘“This Strange Institution Called Literature”: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (1992) [extract to be provided]

**Secondary and Background Reading:**