

Playwriting

Elaine Avila/Spring 2017, block 2

Time 9am-Noon

Location: Room 203

Course Description

“Answering the question begins to shape the play...every answer creates another question. And each answer makes the play grow.”—Maria Irene Fornes

Plays explore all kinds of questions—from mathematics to family heritage, from gender to the environment. In this course, you will write a draft of a medium length dramatic work (for example, a one act play, 45- minute film, or series of short plays or you tube series), with the option of having it directly engage your question. You will polish a 5-minute segment to be performed for the Quest Community, with an innovative use of the campus as site. We explore play form, structure, dialogue, character, re-writing, scenes and monologues.

Plays can be live, virtual, international, and/or local. They can be performed in a theatre, a forest, a living room, or on a mountain. In support of your writing process, we will read/screen a small selection of plays and theatre documentaries exploring diverse aesthetics, central questions and audience relationships including *Get Yourself Home Sklar James* by Jordan Tannahill, a selection of plays from *After Orlando* (a current, international theatre action in response to the shooting in the Pulse Nightclub in Florida), *Proof* by David Auburn, “Theatre of War” (featuring Meryl Streep in *Mother Courage* by Bertolt Brecht, adapted by Tony Kushner at New York’s Public Theatre), and *The Unplugging* by Yvette Nolan.

Course Components

The main focus is on your development as a creative writer/theatre maker. You will write two projects: 1. a draft of a medium length dramatic work (45 pages), and 2. polishing a 5-minute segment from your medium length dramatic work, to be performed at the end of the course. All activities are in support of these two projects. If you choose, your dramatic work can directly engage the question you have developed for your thesis to guide your concentration plan at Quest.

We will utilize course time in a number of ways:

In phase one, *Introduction/Beginnings/Tools*, I will introduce you to play format, and a variety of ways of approaching theatre itself. This will include developing a play concept, a monologue, a short scene and an outline, which we will workshop in class. We will also read and discuss five contemporary plays with a rich relationship to questions. We will listen to a short play project online, and screen 1-2 documentaries. We will discuss these tools: play structure, character, dialogue, and theatrical action. In phase two, *Creation*, we will move into writing the plays, and workshop your scenes in class. At this point,

you will be implementing the tools introduced in phase one. At the end of this period, you will submit draft one of your play. In week three, *Re-writing/Presentation* we discuss re-writing, you will select a 5-minute segment of your play to workshop. We will consider audience relationship/staging/engagement. In class, you will present your 5-minute segments and receive feedback. Outside of class, you will re-write and rehearse. You will then present these segments to the Quest Community. We will determine the time of the presentation as a class.

Course Outcomes

You will develop the ability to write a play, a sense of the breadth and possibility of contemporary theatre practice, an understanding of the power of live theatre to create and interact with community. You will be familiar with character, plot, theatrical action and how to write effective dialogue. You will have a sense of the difference between a “creation” phase and an “editing” phase, and strategies to do both. Theatre has an ability to engage communities deeply and in real time. You will have the confidence to engage with theatrical and other communities, as you have staged work and written a draft of a play. You will be ready to implement theatre exercises and concepts in a wide variety of fields. You will have tools to respond to and critique each other’s work.

Learning Assessment

There are two key phases in writing: 1. Creation without self- censorship and 2. Editing/polishing/craft. In this course, you will develop skills in both of these aspects of writing. I will assess these two types of writing differently.

Assessment, Project #1

For project #1, writing a first draft of a medium length dramatic work, the emphasis is on engagement in the process, experimentation, bravery, boldness, and getting the number of pages completed (45 minimum). These first drafts of your plays will be evaluated on your willingness to engage with the process, make the work, and to experiment. Work for project #1 will be graded approximately every three days (please see the schedule, due to Family Day, some days fall over a weekend). Project #1 is about developing a regular writing process, and allowing the time for thought, dreaming, and the kind of synchronicity which possible through regular application. There is no problem with exceeding the 45 page count, with writing drafts of your project early in the block. However, you must have pages in by the deadlines or you will not receive credit for the assignment. We will discuss issues writers experience in developing a writing process and how you can strategize around them.

Assessment, In Class Writing

In class writing assignments will also be evaluated on willingness to engage in the material and to experiment. For play readings, and in class discussions, you are expected to read the play, encouraged to do some basic research if you have questions related to the play, to do a “Cultural Document” worksheet. You will be expected to participate and have considered the reading. Similarly, you will be expected to attend 1-2 film screening(s), and to listen to an audio clip of plays I provide you below, and be prepared to discuss them in class.

Assessment, Project #2

For project #2, polishing a 5-minute segment of your play to be performed, you will be developing your skills used in the second phase of writing, 2. Editing/polishing/craft. Pieces will be assessed on your understanding of dialogue, character, and story. We will engage in a dramaturgy process, which will generate ideas for re-writing your plays. You will submit two re-writes of the five-minute segment of your play.

Texts

Required to purchase (available in bookstore, and on hold in the library)

E-book and Used Copies Acceptable

Auburn, David Proof, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001

Tannahill, Jordan, *Get Yourself Home Skylar James*, in Age of Minority, Playwrights Canada Press, 2013

Fornes, Maria Irene, *Mud* in Plays PAJ books 2001

Nolan, Yvette, The Unplugging, Playwrights Canada Press, 2013

Parks, Suzan-Lori, Venus, Theatre Communications Group, 1997

Readings

On Play Format, on Re-writing, available online in Moodle

Listening

<https://dramaticarts.usc.edu/theatre-community-unites-for-after-orlando-project/>

Screenings

Of 1-2 theatre documentaries.

“Theatre of War”

“The Rest I Make Up” A New Documentary on Maria Irene Fornes (if available) TBA

Assessment

Workshop/In Class Assignments/Cultural Document Worksheets: 20%

Discussions/Participation: 15%

Play Project (45 pages): 40% (10% per deadline, see below, 20% for final deadline)

Final Presentation (5 minutes): 35% (10% per re-write, 15% for presentation)

Policies

Dress: Wear comfortable clothes you can move in, as we will be workshopping, rehearsing, and staging plays.

Attendance: Come to class on time. You may miss up to two classes with an excuse, but you are responsible for getting the information on anything you have missed, and turning in the assignments as soon as possible. If you are late more than 3 times, this will count as an absence.

Workshop Day: All students will be asked to upload 5-10 pages of their plays, ready to workshop, by February 22. All students will be ready to workshop their plays, at any point from February 22-28th. Approximately 4 students per class will workshop a section of their play during these 5 days. As workshop time is precious, being ready on the 22nd will ensure that each student gets time. (Students may update the moodle submission after February 22nd, if they wish.)

Assignments: Turn your assignments in on time. Do not let them pile up, or you will quickly get overwhelmed. You are learning to have a daily writing process, to meet writing goals. Assignments are due at the beginning of class (unless otherwise specified, as in the case of the first draft of your play, which is due at 5pm, to allow time for Tutor response). Late assignments without a medical or compassionate reason are marked at 40% off. You must complete all assignments to receive a passing grade. The final day to hand in outstanding assignments is 1pm the final Monday of the course.

Social Media: Bring your laptops to class, but keep them closed unless an activity requires them to be open. Respect others by giving them your attention when they are presenting or during discussion. Please keep your phones off during class.

Paperless Class Room: We will be working with a paperless classroom, as much as possible. An exception may be during the rehearsal period of the 5-minute clip of your play. You will be invited to submit your work via Moodle.

Meetings with Instructor: Office Hours will be M-F, 1:30-2:30 pm

Good Citizenship: will be employed, meaning that I expect you to have openness to a variety of types of material/aesthetics, especially of the work of your fellow students. Students are encouraged to write about whatever subject matter they wish.

Plagiarism/Honour Code: Violations will be vigorously dealt with. Ensure that you are familiar with the Honour Principle, which applies to all coursework, including class discussion and participation.

<https://questu.ca/academics/catalogue-calendar-policies/>

Grade ranges and letter equivalencies: In this class, all of your marks will be provided to you in number format. Those will be reconverted back to letter grades in the determination of your final grade. The letter grade and number scale I use is: A 90–100, A- 85–89, B+ 80–85, B 75–80, B- 70–75, C+ 65–70, C 60–65, C- 55–60, D 50–55, F below 50.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(This schedule may change to adjust to the needs of class)

Phase One:

Introduction/Beginnings/Tools

Class #1 Tuesday, Feb. 14

Exploring Format, creating plays from questions,

Link to openings of plays, Explanation of Cultural Document Worksheet

It is recommended that you do your writing exercises before you do your course readings.

Assignments:

1. Write 250-500 words about the play you want to develop for the course, submit it to Moodle
2. Read *Get Yourself Home* Skylar James by Jordan Tannahill
3. Listen to *After Orlando* play recording <https://dramaticarts.usc.edu/theatre-community-unites-for-after-orlando-project/>
4. Fill Out Cultural Document Worksheet for *Get Yourself Home* Skylar James
Link: <http://www.theater-historiography.org/2011/01/01/brian-herrera/>, submit it to Moodle
5. Read Tony Kushner handout

Class #2 Wednesday, Feb. 15

Discussion *Get Yourself Home* Skylar James, *After Orlando*

Workshop, your ideas for plays

Assignments:

1. Write monologue for your play, submit it to Moodle
2. Read *Proof*
3. Fill out Cultural Document Worksheet for *Proof*
Link: <http://www.theater-historiography.org/2011/01/01/brian-herrera/>, submit it to Moodle

Class #3 Thursday, Feb. 16

Discussion, *Proof*

Workshop your monologues

Assignments:

1. Write 2-3 page scene for your play, upload it to Moodle
2. Evening performance, Selected Readings from Elaine Avila's plays, MPR, 7pm

Class #4 Friday, Feb. 17
Discussion/Q & A, Selected Readings from Elaine Avila's Plays
Workshop your scenes

WEEKEND

Assignment:

1. Read *The Unplugging*
2. Fill out Cultural Document Worksheet for *The Unplugging*
Link: <http://www.theater-historiography.org/2011/01/01/brian-herrera/>
upload it to Moodle
Write 1-2 page outline for your play, upload it to Moodle

Class #5 Monday, Feb. 20 Discussion, *The Unplugging*
Workshop, your outlines
Fornes Creation Exercises

Phase Two: Creation

Assignment:

1. Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to Moodle
2. Read *Mud*
3. Fill out Cultural Document Worksheet for *Mud*
Link: <http://www.theater-historiography.org/2011/01/01/brian-herrera/> upload it to Moodle

Class #6, Tuesday, Feb. 21
In Class Screening, "Theatre of War" (MEET IN SCREENING ROOM)
Discussion, *Mud*, Discussion, Writing Process

Assignments:

1. Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to moodle
2. Read *Venus*
3. Fill out Cultural Document Worksheet for *Venus*
Link: <http://www.theater-historiography.org/2011/01/01/brian-herrera/>
Upload it to moodle

You will now be scheduled for in depth workshops, in class. You will be expected to choose a 5-10 page cutting of your play for us to read and workshop. Upload it as a separate file to moodle with your name and "Workshop" on the file, so we can easily locate it.

Class #7 Wednesday Feb. 22 Discussion, *Venus*
Lecture, Workshopping Methods, Feedback/Critical Response
Break into teams to workshop plays
Assignment: Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to moodle

DEADLINE: 15 PAGES DUE BY 5PM, WEDNESDAY FEB. 22

THIS IS A FIRM DEADLINE. IF YOU DO NOT MAKE THIS DEADLINE, YOU WILL NOT RECEIVE CREDIT FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT

Class #8 Thursday Feb. 23 Discussion, Working Methods
Workshop (Schedule, 4 students' work, 5-10 page selection)

Assignment: Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to Moodle

Class #9 Friday, Feb. 24
Workshop (Schedule, 4 students' work, 5-10 page selection)

Weekend Assignment: Write 10 pages of your play, upload it to moodle

DEADLINE: NEXT 15 (PAGES DUE BY 9AM MONDAY FEB. 27

THIS IS A FIRM DEADLINE. IF YOU DO NOT MAKE THIS DEADLINE, YOU WILL NOT RECEIVE CREDIT FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT

Week 3

Class #10 Monday, February 27
Workshop (Schedule, 4 students' work, 5-10 page selection)
Assignment: Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to Moodle

Class #11 Tuesday, February 28
Workshop (Schedule, 4 students' work, 5-10 page selection)
Assignment: Write 5 pages of your play, upload it to moodle

Class #12, Wednesday, March 1
Workshop (Schedule, 4 students' work, 5-10 page selection)

Play Due

Assignment: Write 5 pages of your play, put final touches on your play/film/series of short plays (45 pages), upload it to Moodle

DEADLINE: COMPLETE DRAFT OF YOUR PLAY DUE BY THURSDAY MARCH 2, 9AM THIS IS A FIRM DEADLINE. COURSE WORK FOR THE REST OF THE BLOCK IS DEPENDENT ON YOUR MAKING THIS DEADLINE.

Phase Three:
Re-writing/ Presentation

Class #13 Thursday March 2
Discussion, Process of Writing Draft one of play
Play reading Marathon

We will break into small groups to read our plays in their entirety, provide feedback, and help each writer pick 5 minutes to refine
Discussion/Brainstorm/Reflection on Staging Possibilities/Re-writing
Break into Rehearsal/work groups

Assignments: 1.Rehearse your pieces in your groups
2. Re-write your scene in response to rehearsal, upload it to Moodle

RE-WRITE #1 DUE BY 5PM, MARCH 2

Class #14 Friday March 3
Rehearsal/Presentations (this can be script in hand, so to allow for maximum re-writing)
10 groups will perform and receive notes

Weekend Assignment: 1. Rehearse your pieces in your groups/Re-write in response to rehearsal

Week 4

Class #15 Monday, March 6
Rehearsal/Presentations (this can be script in hand, so to allow for maximum re-writing)
10 groups will perform and receive notes

Assignment: 1. Rehearse your pieces in your groups
2.Re-write the final version of your scene in response to rehearsal, upload it to Moodle

RE-WRITE #2 DUE BY 5pm, MARCH 6

Class #16, Tuesday March 7
Performances, Quest Community, Time and Place, TBA (determined by class)

Class #17 Wednesday, March 8
Reflection/Recap
Possible participation in “Watch Me Work” with Suzan-Lori Parks at the Public Theatre in New York, via Howlround TV