

Modern British Drama

Professor Peter Saccio



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Peter Saccio received his bachelor's degree at Yale University on a General Motors Scholarship in 1962. He earned his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1968 with a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Woodrow Wilson Dissertation Fellowship, and a Jacobus Prize Fellowship.

Professor Saccio has taught at Dartmouth College since 1996, and was Chair of the English Department from 1984 to 1988. He has been a visiting professor at Wesleyan University and University College, London.

He is the author of several books, and over 24 articles published and papers delivered. He is currently working on two books: *Henry V: Shakespeare in Performance*, and an edition of *Mad World, My Masters*, for *The Complete Works of Thomas Middleton*.

In addition to teaching at Dartmouth, Saccio devised and directed *The Famous Victories of William Shakespeare*, a dramatic reading of scenes and speeches from the history plays performed with seven Dartmouth colleagues, Hopkins Center, Dartmouth, 1990; *Bodies and Brains*, an evening of scenes from contemporary British drama; and *The Glories of our Blood and State*, a dramatic reading of Shakespearean kings, performed with a colleague at the Hopkins Center and various libraries in New Hampshire and Connecticut between 1978 and 1980. He has directed performances of *Twelfth Night*, *Cymbeline*, and *Macbeth* at Dartmouth's Hopkins Center.

Saccio also acts, playing Harry Kane in Pinter's *The Collection* and Jabez Stone in MacLeish's *Scratch* in 1982; *Henry IV* in Getty's *Plum Jack* (an operatic version of the Henriad) in 1989; and a host of other roles throughout his acting career.

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Modern British Drama

Scope:

This series of eight lectures examines the role theater has played in British culture and society over the past 100 years. We witness the evolution of the stylistic conventions of the British play, from the genteel drawing-room comedies of the late nineteenth century to the radical political theater of the last decade. Through this brief survey of some of the great innovators of the dramatic arts of the modern era, we begin to understand how and why the play has changed so dramatically, and we realize the importance of the political and social context in which these works were written.

The first lecture provides a general overview of the important works and authors of the past century, and it introduces us to the interactive nature of theater itself. We touch on continental and American influences upon British play-writing and examine the effect of governmental involvement in the theater over the years. We begin to understand what a vital part of British culture the theater is, and how important it is to understand the political and social framework in which each play was written.

The second lecture introduces us to two authors whose works are true keystones of British theater: Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. The comedy of the upper-class drawing room was created and perfected by these two legends of theater; we are introduced to the character of the “dandy” and appreciate two of the greatest wits of the written word.

In Professor Saccio’s third lecture, we study George Bernard Shaw, who changed the dramatic form from entertainment to didacticism. Socioeconomic conditions in England changed the role of the theater from pastime for the leisured class to forum for an exploration of moral and economic issues.

After World War II, an important archetype in literature emerged, and in Lecture Five we consider the origins of the “angry young man,” whose voice emerged from John Osborne’s play, *Look Back in Anger*.

In the next two lectures, we explore the works of two of the most important and innovative playwrights of the modern era: Samuel Beckett, whose dark dramas of alienation forever changed theatrical conventions and the way we perceive our relation to the universe; and Harold Pinter, whose portentous pauses and dramas of defensive aggression left audiences with a chilling sense of unidentifiable menace.

Tom Stoppard, the subject of Lecture Seven, created his own category—the thinking man’s play. The more rigorous and traditional an education an individual has had, the more likely he or she is to understand and delight in Stoppard’s clever parodies and ingenious manipulations of classic works.

The final lecture focuses on two authors who represent an entire body of work—the political drama. Caryl Churchill aggressively questions standard stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and family; David Hare boldly addresses a wide variety of political issues with a strong gift for characterization.

Changes in British society affected and were reflected in the theater of the times. Playwrights reacted to the social circles, governmental constructs, and economic conditions around them, using the essential elements of theater—characterization, set, dialogue—to exaggerate, parody, manipulate, or deconstruct them.

Lecture One

British Theater: 1890 - 1990

Scope: We are introduced in the first lecture to the institution of theater as well as its history and traditions in Great Britain. Professor Saccio discusses the nature of dramatic art itself, reminding us that theater is a uniquely social and interactive art form as well as a reflection of British society and a symbol of national identity. We examine the origins of governmental involvement in theater, both through financial support and through censorship, and we begin to understand the political framework in which playwrights have operated in the last hundred years.

Outline

- I. Unlike other media, dramatic art occurs in a certain place and time, in the “here and now.”
 - A. It is incomplete without its audience.
 - B. The subject matter need not be visible or realistic. It can be historical, fantastic, or allegorical.
- II. The long history of theater in Britain makes it a vital element in British culture.
 - A. Since the Middle Ages, the theater has been an integral part of society.
 1. Attending plays is a proper part of a child’s upbringing and education.
 2. Shakespeare’s achievements have guaranteed theater a permanent place in British culture.
 - B. Modern British drama is part of European cultural innovation.
 - C. Irish and American influences have contributed to English theater; however, there are uniquely English elements.
 1. Theatrical tradition is manifest in a series of companies (the Independent Theatre, the Stage Society, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre), and talent and involvement have been handed down from generation to generation through personal connections (John Gielgud, Noel Coward, Laurence Olivier).
 2. After World War II, theater was partly subsidized by the government; high art became a matter of national prestige.
 3. Theater became “the place to be” for young Britons with artistic ambitions. It became the obvious mode of expression, much as fiction and journalism did in the United States.
- III. Class is a major issue in modern British drama.
 - A. The dominant form has been the upper-class comedy of manners.
 - B. Innovations in play-writing that have taken place since the 1950s define themselves in relation to the comedy of manners.
 1. This durable form of theater was reinvented in displaced forms in the 1960s and 1970s.
 2. The rising voice of the working class articulated a rebellion against the politeness of the comedy of manners.
- IV. Censorship of the theater illustrates the social and class concerns of British culture.
 - A. In the 1730s, the government wielded preemptive power over playwrights in order to suppress political satire; performances unapproved by the Lord Chamberlain were proscribed.
 - B. During the Victorian era, censorship focused on religion and morality.
 - C. Modern playwrights, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, tried to compromise with the Lord Chamberlain in an attempt to redefine the stage as a viable medium of expression.
 - D. The repeal of censorship laws in 1968 extended the discourse of theater to all subject matter and all social classes.

Questions to Consider:

1. How did the history of the theater in England unfold to become such a lasting and integral part of this country's culture?
2. How were the British government and class system reflected in the production and content of plays?

Lecture Two

Comedy of Manners: Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward

Scope: This lecture focuses on two of the most prominent and easily identifiable British playwrights of the modern age—Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward. Although both men came from middle-class backgrounds, their success and self-fashioned social personae brought them into elite circles of society, and their comedy of manners plays reflect the lives and concerns of this leisured class. These plays both gently mock and loosely reflect the drawing room conversations and relationships of the “idle rich.”

Outline

- I. The plot of the comedy of manners play revolves around the social lives of the elite upper class.
 - A. The primary focus is relationships—courtships, marriages, and love affairs.
 - B. The important points in these plays are what one “should” or “should not” say, and how wittily and gracefully one says such things.
 - C. This class of people is gently satirized by Coward and Wilde, who held in common an ambivalence about it.
 1. The graceful elegance and carefree lifestyle—uncomplicated by such matters as work—were admired and envied by these two authors, who came from middle-class backgrounds and aspired to establish themselves in these circles.
 2. Wilde and Coward also disparaged these people for their hypocrisy and affectation, perhaps because they could never be truly “one of them.”
- II. Wilde’s and Coward’s biographical information is somewhat similar.
 - A. Both were young when they achieved success at their craft.
 - B. Wilde was born into a middle-class, Irish Protestant family and entered aristocratic circles on the merits of his own education and wit. However, the end of his life was marked by sexual and legal scandal.
 - C. Coward was born into the lower middle class in a London suburb. He began his career as a child actor and also created his own social position. His success continued throughout his life and he became accomplished in many other areas.
- III. Between 1891 and 1895, Oscar Wilde wrote four comedies that created and solidified his reputation.
 - A. The protagonist of each of these works is a stock character known as a “dandy.”
 1. The dandy figure lives for style and aesthetic success.
 2. The dandy is peripheral: his function is to make clever comments on the world, but he is not useful in the plot. Therefore, he makes a difficult central character.
 3. Wilde himself was a dandy.
 - B. Wilde’s comedies attempt to incorporate the dandy figure in dramatic form.
 1. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the dandy evolves from a commentator into a romantic figure.
 2. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the dandy becomes the villain.
 3. In *An Ideal Husband*, the dandy remains detached, connected with the plot only by chance and circumstance.
 4. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s best-known work, all the characters are dandies; the plot simply furnishes opportunities for the dandies to utter witticisms.
 - C. *The Importance of Being Earnest* may be read as genial social satire and theatrical burlesque.
 1. The characters are idle, trivial, and indulgent, but thoroughly amusing.
 2. The play lightly mocks such literary conventions as love at first sight, the overcoming of obstacles to succeed in a romance, and the ability of a virtuous woman to reform a rake.
 3. Characters and conventions are handled as fantasy; the play is more of an idyll than a biting criticism.
 4. A world of pure play frees the human spirit.

- D.** In his plays and in his lifestyle, Noel Coward embodied the high style of the 1920s and 1930s.
1. His characters are elite and aristocratic, as Wilde's characters are, but they are more likely to have a profession, usually in the artistic arena.
 2. Language and clever conversation, rather than the standard plot or melodrama, are the focal points of the cafe society that Coward portrays.
 3. *Private Lives* concerns the relationship between two temperamental lovers who defuse anxiety through wit and strengthen our sense of resilience with their resourcefulness and belief in the *carpe diem* theme. They cope with the realities of life with flippancy and humor.

Suggested Reading:

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Coward, Noel. *Private Lives*

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast the backgrounds and lifestyles of Noel Coward and Oscar Wilde.
2. How did each author manipulate and alter standard conventions of drama and literature?

Lecture Three

George Bernard Shaw: Socialist and Prophet

Scope: George Bernard Shaw was one of the most important and prolific authors since Shakespeare. Unlike his predecessors, he used the stage as an instrument of “moral propaganda,” a forum for the discussion of social and political issues. As a socialist, he felt that the root of all evil in society was the inequitable distribution of wealth; as a realist, he took issue with the prevailing “myths” of Victorian morality, that marriage and family were (and should be) indissoluble. He believed in the right of the individual to do his fair share of work, to receive enough compensation to make a life for himself, to try to find happiness with or without a family, and to do away with any practice or institution which did not leave him fulfilled. In short, the desires and needs of individuals should always be held more sacred than any abstract moral imperatives imposed by society.

Shaw also held strong spiritual beliefs, which in essence centered around a Life Force. This force of cosmic vitality, which Shaw believed exists in all living things, was always striving to evolve into something greater, to become divine.

Shaw held beliefs which would today be considered feminist, and the two plays on which Professor Saccio focuses in this lecture (*Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and *Saint Joan*) featured strong-willed females as protagonists.

Outline

- I. Shaw aimed to improve and educate, not entertain, his audiences; he saw plays as dramatized debates. However, his plays have mass appeal as well as polemical merit.
 - A. He saw fine art as the most effective way to preach and prophesy about moral and economic issues, most notably what the scandal of capitalism had done to the “have-nots” of British society.
 - B. The Fabian Society, which Shaw helped to found in 1884, was a group of intellectuals who saw socialist reform as the appropriate solution to society’s problems.
 1. Although Shaw was a socialist, he and the members of the Fabian Society did reject several of Marx’s theories: the idea of the historical inevitability of socialism’s success; the need for violent revolution; and the inherent moral rectitude of the lower classes.
 2. The Fabian Society believed in two areas of equality: equal income (the end of “slave wages”), so that all citizens would be in a position to make decisions about their lives; and equal work, to abolish the practice of some people working fourteen-hour days while wealthy heirs and heiresses stood idle.
 - C. Shaw’s moral theories paralleled his economic theories.
 1. Victorian “myths” of the stable nuclear family and lifelong affectionate marriages were outdated and constricting; children should not be bound in duty to their parents, or the parents to one another, if these individuals are not truly fulfilled by these bonds.
 2. Those who seek to perpetuate these rigid codes are clinging to “angry idealism” and preventing individuals from living freely and happily.
- II. *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, a play considered controversial because it centers around prostitution, illustrates Shaw’s beliefs.
 - A. Mrs. Warren is one of four daughters, and she watches as the two siblings who make “appropriate” and respectful” choices for women of their time and position have their lives destroyed. Therefore, she and another sister make a successful career of managing a string of brothels. The play opens as Mrs. Warren’s sister has retired in comfort.
 1. Mrs. Warren argues that her career demonstrates character and self-respect (two terms usually reserved for virgins or faithful wives).
 2. Through Mrs. Warren, Shaw is not defending or condoning prostitution, but rather exposing the social system which drives women into it. He lauds Mrs. Warren’s resourcefulness and pragmatism.

3. Mrs. Warren's daughter, Vivie, is unconventional in her own way: she has chosen to follow a male-dominated career path, and she rejects the typically female pursuits of culture, society, and romance (each represented by a potential suitor).
4. The play ends without a tidy resolution: Vivie turns her back on the role of dutiful daughter, refusing to care for her mother in her advancing years. She fulfills her duty to herself, not to society's expectations of her.

III. *Saint Joan*, which opened in 1923, illustrates the "Life Force" at work in late medieval Europe.

- A. Shaw imbues the heroine of this well-known story with a force of personality which represents the cosmic vitality known as the Life Force.
- B. Shaw believed that true fulfillment for the individual lay in the service of the Life Force. For Saint Joan, this is embodied in her unimpeachable allegiance not to the Church, or to the throne, or to any institution—but to God, with whom she communicates as an individual.
- C. The trial scene is especially masterful because the debate is so strong on both sides. Shaw accepts that defiance of authority can lead to social chaos and that both the creative vitality of the individual and the inspired wisdom of society's leaders can lead us in the right direction.
- D. Thus Shaw was a pragmatist, a utilitarian, and also a fundamental optimist.

Suggested Reading:

Shaw, George Bernard. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

_____. *Saint Joan*.

Questions to Consider:

1. According to Shaw, what was the role of the individual in society? What function should those in authority perform in society?
2. Compare the three main female characters we have examined in this lecture: Mrs. Warren, Vivie Warren, and Saint Joan.

Lecture Four

John Osborne Looks Back in Anger

Scope: Postwar Britain, suffering economic austerity and a crisis in national identity marked by the end of the imperial empire, created an atmosphere ripe for dissatisfied and disenchanted young writers and audiences. While this lecture concerns only one work written during one year in the history of British theater, the play is extremely significant in that it marked a turning point in dramatic expression and gave rise to the voice of the new generation, epitomized by the archetypal “angry young man.” Osborne’s unconventional and impolite language broke literary conventions and expressed clearly his generation’s frustration with the social conventions in English society.

Outline

- I. Despite the Allied victory of World War II, the war had a devastating impact on Britain.
 - A. After India gained her independence in 1947, Britain ceased to wield imperial power.
 - B. Six years of bombing had destroyed much of the country’s physical power.
 - C. Food rationing and other symbols of wartime austerity continued years after the war’s conclusion.
 - D. The effects of the Labor Party’s great social and political experiment were slow to manifest themselves.
- II. In British theater, the time was ripe for a radical change in the style and content of new plays.
 - A. The older generation, mourning Britain’s loss of great-power status, was disappointed by the life it was left with after the war.
 - B. Younger Britons who grew up during the war had spent years “doing without” and looking forward to postwar changes that never came. Thus the “angry young man” was born.
 - C. Two major events in 1956 contributed to the atmosphere in which Osborne’s angry young man emerged.
 1. The Suez Canal crisis marked the end of Britain as an imperial power.
 2. Great Britain was unable to summon resources to aid the student revolt in Hungary.
 - D. In 1956, George Devine founded the English Stage Company as a writer’s theater, a place which sought out and gave voice to new writers who broke old molds.
- III. Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* follows a conventional format with a realistic story line, but it also breaks new ground in many ways.
 - A. The play takes place in a working-class London flat. Jimmy is an educated but coarse young man married to Allison, the upper- middle class daughter of a former colonel.
 1. Jimmy detests Allison’s family, which he sees as representative of all that is wrong with English society.
 2. The colonel makes a brief appearance, and two other characters join the action: Helena, an actress friend of Allison’s; and Cliff, a friend of Jimmy’s who lives with the couple.
 - B. While the plot is simple (Allison has a miscarriage, Jimmy commits adultery with Helena), it is Jimmy’s denunciations of the world around him that form the crux of the play’s message.
 1. The language of the characters breaks the unspoken rules of discourse in British theater; it is neither courteous nor civil.
 2. Jimmy rails against the English “stiff upper lip” and the “phonies” with whom he feels surrounded. He also criticizes established religion, pretentiousness, the social system, government, and the fact that there are no longer any great causes for which he can fight.
 3. Mostly, Jimmy is furious about the lack of deep feeling he sees around him. He feels that to be alive is to suffer, to live with pain, and not to suppress or escape from this pain.
 - C. Jimmy feels nostalgic about the Edwardian period in English history (a time he never knew).
 1. The pastoral fantasy of carefree long afternoons playing as a boy and the competent protection of adults resonate with Jimmy more than the political realities of his day.

2. It is suggested that above all else, the “angry young man” regrets most of all the loss of youth.

Suggested Reading:

Osborne, John. *Look Back in Anger*

Questions to Consider:

1. How does this play break social, literary, and dramatic conventions?
2. Why was this play, and the “angry young man,” so welcomed by Osborne’s peers at the time it was first produced?

Lecture Five

Samuel Beckett Waits for Godot

Scope: Samuel Beckett is one of the most important authors in modern drama because he created an entirely new mode of play-writing. His plays represent the drama of alienation represented by his “theater of the absurd” and his intensely minimalist style. He stripped standard elements of theater down to a bare minimum, and he allowed nothing to be accepted, confirmed, or even understood. The crux of absurdism is that no single system or formula fits or explains the inexplicable facts of our condition. In dramatic form, absurdism is defined by incoherence, incongruity, and inconsistency.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the cornerstone of contemporary drama, the elements of set, plot, characters, and dialogue are handled in a way unlike anything that came before. This grim and avant-garde work marked such a radical change in theater that it has attained the landmark status of work such as *Hamlet*. The play is penetrating, powerful, and impossible to analyze in any linear, tidy, or lucid manner.

Outline

- I. Samuel Beckett’s life gives us some explanation of the bizarre works he created.
 - A. As an Irishman living in France, Beckett was much less concerned than his predecessors and contemporaries about social issues.
 - B. Beckett was an expatriate who spent most of his life in Paris, fought for the Resistance, and was forced to flee from the Germans into the French countryside.
 - C. He was an intensely private man who guarded the details of his life. When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969, he refused to claim it in person. However, he was extremely active in the productions of his works.
- II. *Waiting for Godot* is a landmark drama that introduces us to Beckett’s notion of the alienated consciousness.
 - A. The essential elements of theater are carefully and deliberately broken down.
 1. *Plot*: it has been said that this is a play where “nothing happens—twice.” The action of the play centers around two tramps waiting near a tree for a man named Godot, whom the audience knows will never appear. At the end of the play, a messenger tells the tramps that Godot will not be there, but that he would appear the next day.
 2. *Character*: Not only are the players’ personalities and histories never fleshed out, but we are never certain even of their real names. The lack of fixed nomenclature parallels the lack of fixed identity.
 3. *Set*: The set of this play consists of only three elements: a tree, a path, and the moon. The tree is bare one day and full the next (a symbol of stasis, but without a sense of place). The path apparently originates and leads to nowhere (a symbol of movement which is deprived of direction). The moon moves about in an absurd manner (a potentially identifying mark in the cosmos behaving erratically).
 - B. The theater of the absurd exhibits a blatant and deliberate disregard for logical coherence.
 1. The term “theater of the absurd” was coined in 1961 in a book by Martin Esslin, and refers to the existentialist theory of the fundamental disharmony between people and the world around them.
 2. Beckett presents *images* of absurdity rather than writing an existential play. Time and causality are suspended, but without making a principle of it.
 - C. The play is full of nonsensical contradictions and defies both theological and sociopolitical analyses.
 1. *Waiting for Godot* is an experience, not an allegory or statement.
 2. Beckett suggests that we live in a world of stark desolation. We face blankness, cut off even from our fragmented minds.

Suggested Reading:

Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting For Godot*

Questions to Consider:

1. What is the “theater of the absurd,” and in what ways is *Waiting for Godot* representative of this genre? Read other Beckett works, particularly those without any dialogue at all (such as *Act Without Words I* and *Breath*). How do these works further illustrate absurdist theater?
2. Was Beckett an existentialist? Why or why not?

Lecture Six

The Menace of Harold Pinter

Scope: This lecture focuses on Harold Pinter, who became one of the most prestigious English playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s. Although Pinter's style is difficult to comprehend without an understanding of Beckett, Pinter is not an imitator. He surrounds the stage with Beckett's void and blankness, but the action itself is realistic. Pinter's characters and situations are suffused with a sense of something being "not quite right," of some sinister mystery playing itself out and never revealing itself to us, the audience. Pinter forces his audience to refocus their attention on the stage, on the physicalness of the characters, rather than on any personal reflection inspired by metaphor.

Professor Saccio describes three well-known Pinter plays in this lecture, then turns to focus on *The Homecoming*, first produced in 1965. This play is a powerful example of Pinter's use of defensive aggressive behavior, of the juxtaposition of crude conversation with hostile confrontation, domestic doldrums with savage violence. If Beckett changed drama by what he omitted, Pinter changed it by leaving things out, but also by creating a sense of foreboding about those very things which were left out.

Outline

- I. Beckett's influence on Pinter and others who followed is incontestable, but Pinter's style is unique and readily identifiable.
 - A. A Pinter audience is deprived of key details about the characters and their histories, much as a Beckett audience is. However, Pinter's plays operate in everyday, realistic situations.
 1. In *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Birthday Party*, the dramatic situations initially appear familiar and realistic, but an undercurrent of anxiety and hostility runs through the action.
 2. We perceive a threat or menace between characters but are not provided with explicit motivations or resolutions.
 3. Characters in these plays, usually working-class and rarely likeable, feel the need to protect, defend, and prohibit other characters in different ways.
 4. A minimalist void is imposed around a realistic situation; and an atmosphere of uncertainty and menace permeates the action.
 - B. Whereas Beckett's characters seemed ultimately unaware of and unconcerned by their connections to one another, Pinter's characters are consumed by the need to keep a watchful eye on one another, to defend themselves, and to challenge each other.
 1. *The Room* shows a woman terrified of visitors to the flat she shares with her husband. At the end of the play, they brutally attack a blind man, and the woman herself becomes instantly blind.
 2. In *The Dumb Waiter*, two hit men await orders to carry out an act of violence which is unexpected only because of the identity of the victim.
 3. *The Birthday Party* takes place in a shabby seaside boarding house. A failed pianist is attended to by the landlady and is visited and attacked by two representatives of a nefarious organization.
- II. *The Homecoming*, first produced in 1965 by the Royal Shakespeare Company, pits one family member against another in a working-class setting.
 - A. The play centers around two generations of brothers and the unexpected arrival of one son's new wife.
 1. The father, Max, is a retired butcher and a widower; his brother, Sam, is a chauffeur.
 2. They live with their two sons: Lenny, a violent pimp; and Joey, a witless demolition worker.
 3. The oldest brother, Terry, is a professor of philosophy in the United States. His family has never met his wife, Ruth, until the couple arrive unexpectedly in the night for a visit.
 4. Ruth not only stands up to Lenny's antagonism and hostility, but she immediately displays her own brand of aggression and menace.

5. At the end of the play, Ruth's husband leaves her with his family and returns to the States. Ruth and the rest of the family negotiate a situation for her whereby she will provide sexual and financial service to her new family by earning her living as a prostitute.
- III. Pinter juxtaposes the normalcy of family life with images of real savagery and with three main devices whereby characters in *The Homecoming* and other Pinter works threaten or ignore each other.
- A. *Reading the newspaper*: characters who read the newspaper in Pinter plays are rarely interested in the paper's contents; rather, they use the newspaper as a barrier, as a way of showing someone else that they are being ignored.
 1. In *The Room*, a man reads the newspaper without uttering a word as his wife chatters on.
 2. In *The Dumb Waiter*, one thug reads the paper while the other talks to him.
 - B. *Food preparation*: This domestic activity usually connotes an intimate, caring relationship. It is a bid for attention.
 1. The wife in *The Room* fusses over her husband's tea as she prepares it for him.
 2. The thugs in *The Dumb Waiter* attempt to fix tea, receive strange food orders, and await their orders in the basement of a restaurant.
 3. In one of the few scenes of domestic civility in *The Homecoming*, Ruth and Max exchange compliments on the quality of a meal and coffee that each has prepared.
 - C. *Language*: Pinter uses dialogue as the art of "getting at" someone. The author's acute ear for idiom enables him to use a shifting level of diction as a warning, as a form of aggression. The language of Pinter's stage direction is also extremely significant; "Pause" and "Silence" are his most famous directions. These are *aggressive* silences—a deliberate refusal to speak, to engage with another character.

Suggested Reading:

Pinter, Harold. *The Room*
 _____ . *The Dumb Waiter*
 _____ . *The Birthday Party*
 _____ . *The Homecoming*

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare and contrast the use of characterization, dialogue, setting, and plot in works by Pinter and Beckett.
2. Describe and refer to specific behaviors in Pinter plays through which characters defend, ignore, and threaten each other.

Lecture Seven

The Inventions of Tom Stoppard

Scope: Tom Stoppard is known as one of the most witty, inventive, and highbrow authors of modern British drama. His style is very “English,” although he was born in Czechoslovakia. His works may be defined as the “comedy of *mental* manners,” full of countless literary and philosophical references. Professor Saccio identifies five characteristics of Stoppard’s works: extravagant, complicated plots; clever parodies; word games and allusions; sight gags; and a constant concern with ideas.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Stoppard’s most famous work, has two obvious theatrical parents: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. By both revisiting and manipulating central themes, characters, and dramatic devices in these two plays, Stoppard creates a stimulating take on the grim absurdist drama.

Outline

- I. Stoppard was greatly influenced by Beckett and Miller, but his works are uniquely innovative; Professor Saccio calls Stoppard the author of the “intellectual aristocracy,” and considers the viewing of Stoppard’s clever plays a “reward” for years of rigorous education. He explains the five salient characteristics of a Stoppard play:
 - A. Ingenious, self-consciously elaborate situations provide the plots in Stoppard’s works.
 1. For example, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* turns the plot of *Hamlet* inside down. We only encounter the prince, queen, and new king of Denmark when they happen to come across Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
 2. *Travesties* is another of Stoppard’s works with an ingenious plot which interweaves history and fiction.
 - B. Stoppard has a gift for parody.
 1. *The Real Inspector Hound* uses the device of the “play within a play” to toy with the murder mystery genre.
 2. *Jumpers* parodies both the world of academia and the English murder mystery.
 - C. Word games and humorous literary rhetoric are cornerstones of any Stoppard play.
 1. Puns, riddles, literary and philosophical allusions, quotations, and foreign language references are common.
 2. Stoppard challenges his audiences to draw on their knowledge of literature, history, and philosophy; some may consider this type of theater “elitist.”
 - D. Physical acrobatics on the stage match the linguistic dexterity used by Stoppard. “Sight gags” are common and ingenious in works such as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and *Jumpers*.
 - E. There is a pervasive concern with ideas, both playful and passionate.
 1. *Arcadia* addresses the question of the relationship between art and society.
 2. The existence of God provides the subject of a philosophical argument in *Jumpers*.
 3. The nature of death is a dominant theme in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.
- II. These plays are variants on the comedy of manners; they are, instead, comedies of intellectual farce. The focus shifts from courtship rituals (in the mainstream comedy of manners) to mental rituals, to the art of axioms, quotations, and rhetorical arguments. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which made its debut in 1967 at the National Theatre, is a perfect example.
 - A. The play is obviously connected to *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*.
 1. The plot concerns the two attendants from Shakespeare’s play receiving instructions to find out what is bothering the Danish prince.
 2. Hamlet’s problems take on a new dimension when we are denied his perspective, when we hear about them through two peripheral characters.
 3. We are not provided with any additional information about the two main characters; we know, and

- they know, only as much as we would know from reading or seeing *Hamlet*.
4. The two main characters can be compared to Beckett's Gogo and Didi; they are helpless to their surroundings; they are unable to control their own surroundings; and they are unable to provide us with their personal histories.
- B.** The play contains all elements identified in Stoppard's works.
1. The play opens with a perfect existentialist conversation, which alludes clearly to Descartes.
 2. The first sight gag involves the tossing of coins which always turn up "heads."
 3. The play contains several examples of the "Irish Bull" (a term which refers to two contradictory words or sentences juxtaposed); for example, Hamlet is called "stark raving sane."
 4. The two characters engage in a dialogue game, where they are allowed to speak only in questions, and no declarative statements are permitted.
- C.** Comparisons and contrasts with *Waiting for Godot* are especially germane when considering the way death is handled in each work.
1. The character of the Player in Stoppard's work can conceive of death only in theatrical terms, only as a performance.
 2. Beckett's play exists in a sort of suspended void, a timeless world where there is no reason to suppose that anything will change, and that we are experiencing a fragment of time between the womb and the tomb.
 3. Guildenstern defines death simply as an absence, "not being," an exit without a later re-entrance.
- D.** The relation of the human mind to the world surrounding us is also explored.
1. Stoppard forces us to question one of the major texts of our culture. Are we sure we understand *Hamlet*, or is it, like everything else in our reality, a product of chance, of accident? Is this great work, too, meaningless?
 2. The play-within-a-play theme is examined and used to remind us that theater—indeed, that life—is merely a pastime, merely a game we use to fill the empty void, until we inevitably cease to be.
 3. Humans' connections to one another are handled differently here than in *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas Gogo and Did constantly bicker, Stoppard's two characters console and sustain each other, displaying support and resilience.

Suggested Reading:

Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz andn Guildenstern Are Dead*

Questions to Consider:

1. Compare Stoppard's vision of man's relationship to the world around him, and the inevitability of death, with that of Beckett.
2. Read *Jumpers* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Cite several literary, historical, and philosophical allusions from each work, and explain how they draw on and contribute to an educated audience's appreciation of these disciplines.

Lecture Eight

Political Theater: Caryl Churchill and David Hare

Scope: Political theater comprises a significant body of work in modern British drama, particularly from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Plays written to depict or challenge the entire political and social order, and to awaken the nation's conscience, have recently become a central part of British culture. The model for twentieth century political drama was furnished in large part by the German Brecht.

Although previous playwrights discussed in these lectures have held fervent beliefs about government and social systems, it is radical artists such as Caryl Churchill and David Hare who focused the action of their plays on these issues and made bold statements about what was wrong with society. Shaw, as we have learned, used theater to preach his socialist ideals, but he envisioned change as a matter of gradual, long-term reform. Osborne's work appears radical, but in reality he focused less on promoting the doctrines of any particular platform than on calling on people to feel passionately about *something*. Beckett's, Pinter's, and Stoppard's important works in the 1960s were not political in nature (though Stoppard and Pinter did make minor political statements in later works in the 1980s). The "proletarian drama", which grew out of fringe workshops in the 1970s, became a central part of the repertory of subsidized theater.

Outline

- I. Once again, it is necessary to understand the historical context in which these authors operated in order to analyze the works they created.
 - A. Among the factious issues of this most recent period were recessions, labor disputes, racial tensions, violence in Northern Ireland, women's and gays' rights, and class struggles.
 1. Margaret Thatcher's economic policies were based on her attempt to privatize what had been previously government-controlled enterprises. These policies were unpopular with many in the leftist artistic community, both because of funding cuts in the arts and because of the plight of the lower-class, which these critics blamed on Thatcher.
 2. Thatcher, a Tory, was widely parodied on the stage.
 - B. Fringe theater sought to give a voice to society's fringe groups and to question and challenge long-held British conventions.
- II. In 1979, Caryl Churchill, working with a fringe workshop company called Joint Stock Theatre Company, wrote *Cloud Nine*.
 - A. The first act of the play is set in the Victorian period in colonized Africa. We met Clive, a colonial administrator, and his family and servants.
 1. Clive is the head of the outpost and the family; this parallels England's position of control and dominance.
 2. The characters are played by actors of opposite sex and gender; this was not written for comic effect, but to shatter old stereotypes and suggest that the desires and roles of men and women are not as different as conventions claim.
 3. The characters' established codes of behavior and familial roles conflict with their true desires.
 4. Betty, the wife, longs for a life of adventure and is in love with an explorer, who is in fact gay.
 5. The family governess, who Clive forces to marry the explorer, is in reality a lesbian who loves Betty.
 6. Clive's son acts more like a girl than a boy and has a crush on the explorer.
 - B. Act II depicts the same family in London a century later, but the characters have only aged 25 years.
 1. The yokes of old stereotypes of gender and power have apparently been lifted; Betty is divorced, her daughter has an enlightened marriage, her son is in a relationship with a man.
 2. The characters have not, however, found the utopia they assumed they would enjoy as soon as they acted on their true desires; with each character's independence comes a variety of problems.
 3. Churchill reminds us that freely pursuing any kind of sexual fulfillment we wish does not guarantee

happiness; this struggle with new realities is handled in a pensive manner, with a conclusion that self-knowledge is the most important and reliable quality to espouse .

III. David Hare is considered the most ambitious of the current political dramatists.

- A. *The Secret Rapture* addresses the nature and limits of human goodness.
- B. He also wrote a trilogy of plays dealing with major British institutions: *Racing Demons* (the Church of England), *Murmuring Judges* (the legal system), and *Absence of War* (political parties).
- C. Hare is particularly concerned with the issue of individual privacy, and is skillful in depicting moments of fluid individual feeling.

Suggested Reading:

Churchill, Caryl. *Cloud Nine*

Hare, David. *The Secret Rapture*

Questions to Consider:

1. Choose several works from these eight lectures. Consider each author's use of the essential elements of drama: character, setting, dialogue. Examine the opening and closing scenes. Compare and contrast the works you have chosen on the basis of how each playwright handles these elements. Discuss the significance of the social and political context in which each play was written.
2. Consider the question of the purpose of theater. Citing examples from each lecture, discuss the effectiveness of dramatic arts in reflecting contemporary life, demanding change, challenging the intellect of the audience, and causing us to reflect on our place in the universe.

Biographical Notes

Beckett, Samuel (1906-1989). Generally acknowledged as the most important and innovative writer in the postwar period, Beckett was born in Dublin to middle-class Protestant parents. Although he received his M.A. from Trinity College in Dublin in 1931, Beckett lived much of his life as an expatriate, moving to Paris in the late 1920s to teach English and eventually joining the Resistance movement during the second World War. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1969.

Coward, Noel (1899-1973). Prominent English playwright, actor, composer, and director. The characters in Coward's 27 plays are typically wealthy and snobbish couples. Apart from his theater works, Coward wrote sketches, revues, musical comedies, and operettas. He also directed and acted in several films, performed in cabarets, and wrote three autobiographical works. He was knighted in 1970.

Hare, David (b. 1947). Hare is a prominent member of the British theatrical left. A founder of the Portable Theatre and the Joint Stock, he served as resident dramatist and literary manager of the Royal Court Theater, London, between 1967 and 1971, and at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1973. His most successful play was *Pravda* (1985), which he co-wrote with Howard Brenton.

Pinter, Harold (b. 1930). The son of a Jewish tailor in East End London, Pinter was born into the working class and was frequently the target of anti-Semitic harassment during his childhood. He attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and was brought to trial as a conscientious objector to military service on two occasions. His 1956 marriage to Vivien Merchant has recently ended in separation. Pinter wrote poetry and fiction before turning to play writing in 1957. He has occasionally acted in his own plays.

Osborne, John (b. 1929). Osborne began his theatrical career as an actor and playwright in provincial English repertory theaters. His plays usually focus on an individual character and upon the force of his language rather than his action. Many of Osborne's plays depict the frustration of living without hope in a world filled with false values.

Shaw, (George) Bernard (1856-1950). Born into a lower-middle class in Dublin, Shaw's formal education ended when he was fifteen. After moving to London at the age of twenty, Shaw began his career as a writer of novels, literary criticism, and journalism. He married in 1889. He wrote many plays between the years of 1892 and 1948, and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1925.

Stoppard, Thomas (b. 1939). Born in Czechoslovakia under a different name, Stoppard was forced to flee with his family from Hitler's rule. His family moved to Singapore and was again forced to flee, this time from the Japanese; Stoppard's father was killed during their escape. In British India, Stoppard's mother met and married an English army major who adopted Stoppard and his brother, gave them his name, and brought the family home with him to England. Stoppard began his literary career as a journalist, and wrote his plays after being strongly influenced by Samuel Beckett and Arthur Miller.

Wilde, Oscar (1854-1900). Wilde was born in Dublin to an artistic middle-class family. He excelled at Trinity College and Oxford and won the coveted Newdigate Prize for poetry. Wilde became rapidly known in the social circles of London for his unique dress and quotable witticisms. In addition to play writing, Wilde was an editor, reviewer, and novelist. Although Wilde married in 1884, he later became exposed for homosexual affairs and, after a scandalous trial, repudiated by the society that had once cultivated him. He died in disrepute after serving two years in prison.

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Selected Major Plays of the Dramatists Dealt with in this Course

Beckett, Samuel

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Happy Days, 1961.
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Rockaby, 1981.

Churchill, Caryl

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Cloud Nine, 1979.
Top Girls, 1982.
Softcops, 1984.
Serious Money, 1987.

Coward, Noel

The Vortex, 1924.
Hay Fever, 1925.
Private Lives, 1930.
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Design for Living, 1933.
Blithe Spirit, 1941.
Present Laughter, 1942.

Hare, David

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Knuckle, 1974.
Fanshen, 1975.
Plenty, 1978.
A Map of the World, 1982.
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Betrayal, 1978.

Shaw, George Bernard

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