
THR331 (Section 001)

Contemporary Theatre in Historical
Context

Theme: Representations of Power &
Visibility

Instructor: Philip U. Effiong, PhD

Meeting Times: Zoom (Tu Th 8:30 - 9:50 a.m.)

Office: Rm. 225 Theatre Building (542 Auditorium Rd.)

For Questions/Information: Send email or request zoom meetings

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Introduction: The acquisition and implementation of power and control continue to provoke debate and controversy. For several playwrights and performers, the portrayal of characters in power positions, or the transfer of power from one character to another, has become their method of challenging the existing status quo and recommending more equitable methods of power distribution. This theme will be our main focus in a variety of historical and social contexts, and the basis for analyzing how selected plays address a range of topical issues, including religion, identity, bigotry, sexuality, war, and resistance. Though these plays are written by Americans, our goal is to achieve a global perspective. David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, for instance, raises questions about broader Western and Asian political ties, while Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* crisscross international boundaries and highlights an African American's response to violent conflicts over resource control in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Contemporary will not be restricted to drama spanning the period from the mid-20th century to the present but will be determined by the current relevance of the subject matter of each play and the extent to which it continues to provoke controversy and debate.

Running Theme: All plays for this class address situations where power is displayed, replaced, challenged, or appropriated, or where expected power roles are switched. In *Machinal*, for instance, the controversy over the resort to violence as a resistance stool is addressed from the standpoint of a repressed wife who, despite eliminating her oppressor, is forced to contend with societal authority. Song in *M. Butterfly* ends up being the manipulator rather than the submissive Asian "butterfly," while Gallimard emerges as the wounded "butterfly." *The Thanksgiving Play* raises important questions about the visibility and significance of Native Americans despite attempts by a largely Caucasian cast to devise a politically correct Thanksgiving play during Native American Heritage Month. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the delineation of the central power figure as female seems to redefine power dynamics within a largely patriarchal society.

Such power challenges or redefinition of roles is initially introduced through minstrel performances where the emphasis is not on the conventional whites in blackface, but on the controversy surrounding blacks in blackface (as well as the implications in modern TV shows and other performances).

Course Goals

- Examine ways in which drama challenges or reorders established sociopolitical hierarchies
- Recognize the consequence of such challenges, which range from self-sacrifice, chaos, and uncertainty to growth and awareness
- Identify the difference between the willing and unwilling rejection of the status quo

- Highlight significant social and historical experiences, and show how they have shaped theatrical styles, traditions, and themes
- View and discuss video presentations of selected plays, or videos that underline the thematic focus of each play and the vision of each playwright

Required Texts

- August Wilson, *Fences*
- Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*
- Dale Wasserman, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
- David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*
- Larissa FastHorse, *The Thanksgiving Play*
- Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*
- Quiara Algeria Hudes, *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*
- Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal*

Other Reading Material (available on D2L in "Supplementary Reading" under "Content")

- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. "Islam Is a Religion of Violence."
- Alsayegh, Majid. "Muslims in America."
- Azuma, Eiichiro. "The Lure of Military Imperialism: Race, Martial Citizenship, and Minority American Transnationalism during the Cold War."
- Ewing, Charles. "Psychological Self-Defense."
- Franke, Irina, et al. "Prison mental healthcare."
- Freytes, I. Magaly and Elizabeth M. Hannold. "The Impact of War on Puerto Rican Families: Challenges and Strengthened Family Relationships."
- Erhart, Ryan S. and Deborah L. Hall. "A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis of the Content of Stereotypes About Native Americans."
- Garcia, Carmen Méndez. "'This is my place, Mama Nadi's': Feminine Spaces and Identity in Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*."
- Johnson, Kirk. "Once a 'Cuckoo's Nest,' Now a Museum."
- Murty, Komanduri S. et al. "Race and Class Exploitation: A Study of Black Male Student Athletes (BSAS) on White Campuses."
- Peyman Amanolahi Baharvand, "The Failure of the American Dream in August Wilson's *Fences*."
- Read, Jen'nan Ghazal. "Muslims in America."
- Rodríguez, Mariam López. "New Critical Approaches to *Machinal*: Sophie Treadwell's Response to Structural Violence."
- Salem Mgamis, Majid. "'Prison Theatricals': Carcerality and Gender Perception in David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*."
- Sampson, Henry T. "Early Black Musical Shows: Historical Overview."
- Schroeder, Patricia R. "Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race."
- Seethaler, Ina. "'Big Bad Chinese Mama': How Internet Humor Subverts Stereotypes about Asian American Women."
- Weiss, Katherine. "Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*: Electrifying the Female Body."

Other Resource: Videos (available on D2L in "Videos" under "Content")

Reading, Discussion, and Assignment Schedule

Jan. 11: Introduction to class

Jan. 13: The minstrel tradition and blacks in blackface (PowerPoint presentation)

- Read “Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race” (available on D2L)
- Read “Early Black Musical Shows: Historical Overview” (available on D2L)

Jan 18: Conclude the minstrel tradition and blacks in blackface (PowerPoint presentation)

Jan. 20: (no zoom class) David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (negotiating sexual identity)

- Watch *M. Butterfly* video (101 minutes, available on D2L)

Jan. 25: *M. Butterfly*: sociopolitical and power considerations

- Discuss “‘Prison Theatricals’: Carcerality and Gender Perception in David Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Big Bad Chinese Mama” (available on D2L) (also browse <http://www.bigbadchinesemama.com>)
- Discuss “Afterword” to *M. Butterfly* (available on D2L for texts without “Afterword”)

Jan. 27: Discuss *M. Butterfly* and production history

Feb. 1: (no zoom class) First short essay on D2L (Go to “Assignments” under “Assessments” for details)

Feb. 3: Islam in America, religiopolitical concerns & different perspectives

- PowerPoint: “Islam in America”
- Discuss Majid Alsayegh, “Muslims in America” (available on D2L)
- Discuss Jen’nan Ghazal Read, “Muslims in America” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Islam Is a Religion of Violence” (available on D2L)
- Suggested videos (available on D2L). Watch outside class.
 - Town Hall Debate: Should Americans Fear Islam? (17 minutes)
 - Extended interview: Millennial Muslims on life in America (8.58 minutes)
 - Ayan Hirsi Ali: Full Interview (10 minutes)
 - Watched: A True Story of Muslim Profiling in New York (20 minutes)

Feb. 8: Discuss *Disgraced* and production history

- In-class video: *Disgraced* Trailer, play by Ayad Akhtar (5.24 minutes, available on D2L)
- In-class video: Meet the Playwright: Ayad Akhtar, writer of *Disgraced* (5 minutes, available on D2L)
- Recommended video: Meet Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar (https://youtu.be/hP7hpM4c2_Q?t=147) (6.33 minutes)
- Recommended video: ‘Disgraced’ interrogates definitions of identity and Islam (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuZXPJbUx5k>) (6.36 minutes)

Feb. 10: (no zoom class) Sophie Treadwell, *Machinal* (structural violence)

- Watch *Machinal* video - full Play by Bennington College, 2013 (71 minutes, available on D2L)

Feb. 15: *Machinal*: core power (gender?) issues

- Discuss “Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal*: Electrifying the Female Body” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Sophie Treadwell’s Response to Structural Violence” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Psychological Self-Defense” (available on D2L)
- Recommended: “Justice for Women Who Kill in Self Defence” (available on D2L)

Feb. 17: Discuss *Machinal* and production history

Feb. 22: (no zoom class) Second short essay on D2L (Go to “Assignments” under “Assessments” for details)

Feb. 24: (no zoom class) Confinement & mental healthcare

- Watch movie: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (120 minutes, available on D2L)

Mar. 1: Confinement & mental healthcare (cont.)

- Discuss “Prison mental healthcare” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “We are still flying over the cuckoo’s nest” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Once a ‘Cuckoo’s Nest,’ Now a Museum” (available on D2L)
- Watch video before class: *Bedlam Behind Bars: Mental Health Problems in American Prisons* (30 minutes, available on D2L)

Mar. 3: Discuss *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and production history

Mar. 8 & 10: Break, no class

Mar. 15: (no zoom class) Gender (dis)empowerment and resource control

- Watch video: *Blood in the Mobile* (53mins, available on D2L)

Mar. 17: Gender (dis)empowerment and resource control (cont.)

- Discuss “‘This is my place, Mama Nadi’s’: Feminine Spaces and Identity in Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Victims in the Limelight: Subverting Abuse Tropes in Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined*” (available on D2L)

Mar. 22: Discuss *Ruined* and production history

Mar. 24: Martial citizenship and the quest for identity

- Discuss “The Impact of War on Puerto Rican Families: Challenges and Strengthened Family Relationships” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “The Lure of Military Imperialism: Race, Martial Citizenship, and Minority American Transnationalism during the Cold War” (available on D2L)

Mar. 29: Martial citizenship and the quest for identity (cont.)

- Discuss *A Soldier’s Fugue* and production history

Mar. 31: Portrayals of Native American—celebration or condescension?

- Discuss “A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis of the Content of Stereotypes About Native Americans” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “Myths and Stereotypes About Native Americans”
- In-class video: *The Rise and Fall of the Lakota Empire* (6 minutes, available on D2L)

Apr. 5: Discuss *The Thanksgiving Play* and production history

Apr. 7 (no zoom class): Third short essay on D2L (Go to “Assignments” under “Assessments” for details)

Apr. 12: (no zoom class) Sports—empowerment or exploitation?

- Watch movie: *Fences* (139mins, available on D2L)

Apr. 14: Sports—empowerment and exploitation (cont.)

- Discuss “Race and Class Exploitation: A Study of Black Male Student Athletes (BSAS) on White Campuses” (available on D2L)
- Discuss “The Failure of the American Dream in August Wilson's *Fences*” (available on D2L)

Apr. 19: Discuss *Fences* and production history

Apr. 21: (no zoom class) Fourth short essay on D2L (Go to “Assignments” under “Assessments” for details)

Apr. 26: (no zoom class) Prepare monologues or dialogues for submission on Flipgrid (see details in “Announcements” on D2L)

- Submit all monologues or dialogues no later than Apr. 28 at 12 noon.

April. 28: (no zoom class) View and comment on monologues/dialogues on Flipgrid. Class ends!

Dec. 17: Final project due on Tuesday, May 3, 2022, at 9:45 a.m.

Attendance Policy: You are required to attend and stay to the end of every online session. Documented proof is required for unavoidable absences, which may be the result of illness, court appearance, job interview, death, religious holiday, birth of a baby, etc. If you encounter technical or other issues that affect your attendance and participation, you need to inform me of these issues in a timely manner so that I can work with you to manage them.

I will be flexible in my implementation of an attendance policy. Two unexcused absences will be overlooked, after which I will penalize further absences. Two points will be deducted from your final score for each absence. If you accumulate a total of five absences, 0.5 will be deducted from your final grade. This means that a grade of 3.0 will drop to 2.5. A total of 6-10 unexcused absences will result in a deduction of 1.0 from your final grade, while 11 or more unexcused absences will result in a deduction of 1.5 from your final grade and the submission of a report on your absences. It is my prerogative to accept or reject excuses given for absences.

Assignments

- Four short answer essays on D2L (32 points)
- Final project (analysis of a production of one of the plays and proposal for artistic engagement) (40 points)
- Class presentation (16 points)
- Scene performance (12 points)

Course assignments and final grades will be based on MSU's 4.0 grade scale as indicated below.

Grade Scale

92-100=4.0	87-91=3.5	82-86=3.0	77-81=2.5
72-76=2.0	67-71=1.5	60-66=1.0	00-59= 0.0

Classroom Conduct: Students will interact respectfully with fellow students and the class instructor. The instructor will equally treat all class members with respect. This means that there will be no room for cursing or interruptions, making bigoted statements, being loud or displaying any other form of rude and disruptive conduct. Students should avoid using cell phones or other device in a distractive and disruptive manner.

Resources for Students

- For assistance with writing research and other class papers, students may consult The Writing Center. This includes consultation on digital writing projects as well as a Grammar Hotline. The Writing Center is in 300 Bessey Hall. For further information, go to: <http://writing.msu.edu>.
- International students are encouraged to take advantage of the ESL Writing Lab, which assists with course readings, writing assignments, proofreading, and revising papers. For more information on the Lab, visit: <http://elc.msu.edu/esl-lab>.
- Located in Room 332, MSU Union, the Student Success Collaborative (NSSC) offers a range academic support services to students. These include seminars and workshops on skills enhancement, learning methods and effective time management. The NSSC also provides one-on-one tutoring on critical reading and related academic concerns. Further details on the NSSC's services can be accessed at <http://nssc.msu.edu>.

Students with Disabilities: Michigan State University does not discriminate against students with documented mental or physical disabilities. If you have a disability that requires accommodations in this or any other course, contact your instructor immediately as well as the *Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities* located in 120 Bessey Hall. To meet with a counselor, call 353-9642 (voice) or 355-1293 (TTY). Accommodations do not automatically excuse absences or delinquent behavior.

Academic Integrity: MSU prescribes specific guidelines to ensure that students maintain high standards of academic honesty and discipline. These are outlined under its policies on "Protection of Scholarship and Grades" and "Integrity of Scholarship and Grades," which charge students to refrain from any form of academic dishonesty, including cheating on tests or plagiarizing on written assignments. This means that papers submitted by students will not have been copied from the Internet or other source and will not be a replication of the works of other students. This also means that the consultation of external sources for research is to be properly acknowledged using an acceptable form of citation. Turnitin will be used to check essays for plagiarism. MSU policy cautions that the consequence for academic dishonesty and/or plagiarism is a failing grade on an assignment or course. In addition, failure resulting from dishonesty will be brought to the attention of the appropriate academic dean. More information on cheating and dishonesty can be accessed at the Office of the University Ombudsperson webpage: [MSU RO: Academic Programs](#).

Online SIRS evaluation policy: Michigan State University takes seriously the opinion of students in the evaluation of the effectiveness of instruction and has implemented the Student Instructional Rating System (SIRS) to gather student feedback (<https://sirsonline.msu.edu>). This course utilizes the online SIRS system and you will receive an e-mail during the last two weeks of class asking you to fill out the SIRS web form at your convenience. Participation in the online SIRS system involves grade sequestration, which means that the final grade for this course will not be accessible on STUINFO during the week following the submission of grades for this course unless the SIRS online form has been completed. Alternatively, you have the option on the SIRS website to decline to participate in the evaluation of the course.

Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct: Michigan State University is committed to fostering a culture of caring and respect that is free of relationship violence and sexual misconduct, and to ensuring that all affected individuals have access to services. For information on reporting options, confidential advocacy and support resources, university policies and procedures, or how to make a difference on campus, visit the Title IX website at www.titleix.msu.edu.

Limits to Confidentiality: Assignments submitted for this class are generally considered confidential pursuant to the University's student record policies. However, students should be aware that University

employees, including instructors, may not be able to maintain confidentiality when it conflicts with their responsibility to report certain issues based on external legal obligations or that relate to the health and safety of MSU community members and others. As the instructor, I must report the following information to other University offices if you share it with me:

- Suspected child abuse/neglect, even if this maltreatment happened when you were a child,
- Allegations of sexual assault or sexual harassment when they involve MSU students, faculty, or staff, and
- Credible threats of harm to oneself or to others.

These reports may trigger contact from a campus official who will want to talk with you about the incident that you have shared. In almost all cases, it will be your decision whether you wish to speak with that individual. If you would like to talk about these events in a more confidential setting, you are encouraged to make an appointment with the MSU Counseling Center.

Possible Course Amendments: Course Content may be changed or amended during the semester. Students will be notified if such changes are necessary.