

# THEA 492D: Contemporary Theatre— British Epic Theatre

Fall 2026

3 Credits/45 Contact Hours

Prerequisites: None.

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course will engage students in exploring modern British plays that were influenced by the work of German dramatist, director, and theatre theorist Bertolt Brecht (1896–1956). Brecht was not only one of the most influential theatre artists of the twentieth century but also a key figure in the development of political drama and epic theatre, which was all about “rendering the familiar strange” (capitalism, patriarchy, racism, etc.) so that it could be changed. In 1956, shortly after Brecht’s death, his theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, toured London to perform several of his plays, including *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. These London performances were seen by several British directors, who explored Brecht’s ideas in their own later work and influenced subsequent generations of theatre artists in Great Britain. Brecht himself was familiar with British culture and adapted plays by William Shakespeare (*Coriolanus*), Christopher Marlowe (*Edward II*), and George Farquhar (*The Recruitment Officer*). Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* (1928), a collaboration with composer Kurt Weill, adapted John Gay’s *The Beggars Opera* from 1728. Even though Brecht maintained London as a location, he moved the timeline to Queen Victoria’s coronation in 1838. This course introduces into Brecht’s dramaturgy and theatre theory, particularly his influential concepts of defamiliarization (*Verfremdung*), *Gestus*, historicization, and *Fabel* as well as their umbrella term of epic theatre. The major focus, however, is on a range of modern British playwrights who, often with critical intent, adapted the techniques of epic theatre for their own work, including David Hare, Caryl Churchill, Edward Bond, Mark Ravenhill, and Debbie Tucker Green. In our discussion of their plays, we analyze how these dramatists apply, adapt, and transform Brecht’s ideas and aesthetics, and I will invite some of the playwrights under discussion for a Q&A session to our class. We will also take two field trips to performances of Brecht(ian) plays in London, and I will try to organize post-show talk backs with the involved theatre artists. If possible, we will also watch video recordings of London productions of the plays covered in class at the Department of Theatre and Performance of the Victoria and Albert Museum. (The course calendar below may be subject to change depending on London’s theatre schedule, which will become available closer to the start of the semester.) Methodologically, this course will provide a combination of lectures by the instructor (to introduce new material and explain terminology) and experiential learning, including in-class discussions, group readings of dramatic texts, interpersonal assignments, and attendance of theatre performances.

### **DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

1. Students can demonstrate familiarity with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and modern British plays influenced by it.
2. Students understand Brecht's theatre concepts and can apply them to the analysis and interpretation of modern British political drama.
3. Students can use writing effectively to communicate their understanding of theoretical concepts and interpretation of plays.
4. Students can use research resources specific to the field of theatre and drama, in an ethical manner.
5. Students demonstrate critical thinking skills through oral and written means.
6. Students can effectively organize their writing and demonstrate rigorous work ethic.

### **SAC-SPECIFIC PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:**

1. Gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of other cultures and their environments: *in this context, the tradition of modern political drama in Great Britain, with a particular focus on plays first produced in London.*
2. Develop different perspectives in regard to other nations: *particularly with regard to one of the German theatre artists of the 20th century and how he influenced modern British drama.*
3. Develop increased capacity to analyze issues with appreciation for disparate viewpoints: *through in-class discussions of a broad range of social and political ideas reflected in drama (capitalism, socialism, feminism, racism, war, etc.) and your oral presentation of journals by other students in class.*
4. Acquire increased respect and tolerance of differences—all contributing to a citizenry better able to succeed in the 21st century: *through encounters and engagement with international students at the University of Roehampton.*

### **SAC-SPECIFIC COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

1. Demonstrate awareness of own cultural values and biases and how these impact their ability to work with others: *through in-class discussions and work in group projects.*
2. Demonstrate knowledge of diversity with a focus on the population or topic of interest in the specific Study Abroad program: *understand the diverse range of modern British plays with regard to their representation of class, gender, and race.*
3. Communicate appropriately and effectively with diverse individuals and groups: *through in-class discussions and your oral presentation of journals by other students in class.*
4. Demonstrate an increased capacity to analyze issues with appreciation for disparate viewpoints: *by the end of the semester, you will be able to analyze and appreciate the different viewpoints of the modern British dramatists covered in class.*

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Punctuality and attendance at all classes. There are no unexcused absences. Students who are absent for a period of time for medical or personal reasons should talk to me and be prepared to provide appropriate documentation. After one unexcused class absence your grade will go down by one level (i.e.: a "B+" becomes a "B"). Lateness occurs when a student arrives for class up to 15 minutes later than the scheduled time; arrival after 15 minutes will be counted as an absence; two latenesses equal one absence.
2. Careful reading of all assigned materials, *before* class.
3. Thoughtful and energetic participation in all class discussions.
4. Writing assignments have to be handed in *on time* (no exceptions!).
5. Bring the appropriate readings to class with you.

## **PLAGIARISM**

Plagiarism is a serious offence and will be dealt with accordingly. **See the UH Student Conduct Code (<https://manoa.hawaii.edu/studentsuccess/conduct-code/policies/#II>):**

“Plagiarism is [...] an act of academic dishonesty and includes, but is not limited to the use, by paraphrase or direct quotation, of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgement. It also includes the unacknowledged use of AI technology and/or materials prepared by another person or agency available publicly or through a purchase.”

## **ASSIGNED READINGS:**

All texts are available as electronic copies on Lamakū or as digital playscripts on Drama Online (through Hamilton Library).

## **ASSIGNMENTS (all to be submitted as Word or Google Doc files):**

1. Journal—You will be expected to keep a journal, in which you document your responses to the class discussions and assigned readings of the past week! Your weekly entries should be in the **350-400 words** range. Your responses may focus upon any of the following: the writers’ key ideas, definitions, points-of-view, methodologies, and thematic interconnections with other readings discussed in class. Stylistically, this should be less a formal academic assignment than a personal blog. Please date your entries. Every Monday you are expected to email your most recent journal entry as a Word file to your instructor or send a notification that your Google Doc journal has been updated. Please keep in mind that you are not writing this journal primarily for your instructor, but for other yet-to-be-determined students in class! In **Week 5** you will exchange your journal entries collected so far with another student in class. In **Week 6** you will give a **mid-semester presentation** on this student’s journal, in which you focus on what you consider its highlights and outstanding traits: insightful and perceptive observations, original and surprising remarks, statements that you strongly agree (or disagree) with, arguments that made you reassess your own opinion, and the overall style, tone, and approach of your partner’s journal. In **Week 11** you will exchange the journal entries that you have written since the mid-semester journal presentations with a different partner in class and give this **final journal presentation** in **Week 12**.

2. Midterm Exam—The midterm exam will take place in **Week 6** and will cover the subjects discussed in class up to that point. The exam will consist of one essay question, two shorter questions, and ten identification terms. (More information to follow.)

3. Response Papers—We will attend two productions of Brecht(ian) plays in London that will be performed this semester. You will write a **350–400 words paper** in response to each performance, analyzing how it reflects or utilizes Brecht’s epic theatre concepts. You are expected to submit the responses in **Week 4** and **Week 8**. (However, the course calendar may be subject to change depending on London’s theatre schedule.)

4. Term Paper—For your final project, choose a British play influenced by Brecht not covered in class. The author may be a playwright who has been discussed, but it may also be a play by another dramatist in the tradition of British political or epic theatre (the instructor can provide you with suggestions). Please write a **12-page paper** (font size 12 and 1.5 spacing) on this play, analyzing in detail how the concepts of epic theatre—defamiliarization (*Verfremdung*), *Gestus*, historicization, and *Fabel*—apply to it, but also how it compares to (and potentially differs from) the other plays discussed in class. Please submit the assignment at the beginning of **Week 12**. You will also be expected to give an in-class **presentation** of this assignment during that week. Please let your instructor know in **Week 9** which play you choose for this project.

**GRADING CRITERIA:**

Midterm Exam	30 points (30%)
2 Response Papers (10 points each)	20 points (20%)
Term Paper (20 points for paper, 5 points for oral presentation)	25 points (20%)
Journals & Journal Presentations	20 points (10%)
Participation in Class	5 points (10%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100 points (100%)</b>

**GRADING SCALE:**

97%–100% = A+	77%-79% = C+
93%–96% = A	73%–76% = C
90%–92% = A-	70%–72% = C-
87%–89% = B+	67%–69% = D+
83%–86% = B	60%–66% = D
80%–82% = B-	Below 60% = F

## SCHEDULE

### WEEK 1

Course Introduction, Brecht's Life and Work

#### Readings

- Meg Mumford, "A Life of Flux." From *Bertolt Brecht* (Routledge 2009), 1–47.

### WEEK 2

Brecht's Epic Theatre: Defamiliarization (*Verfremdung*), *Gestus*, Historicization, *Fabel*

#### Readings

- Bertolt Brecht, "Short Organon for the Theatre." From *Brecht on Theatre*, 3rd. ed., ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn (Bloomsbury 2015), 229–255.
- Meg Mumford, "Brecht's Key Theories." From *Bertolt Brecht* (Routledge 2009), 48–90.

### WEEK 3

British Influences on Brecht, Case Study: *The Threepenny Opera*

#### Readings

- Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*. From *Brecht Collected Plays: Two*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (Bloomsbury 2007), 91–170.
- John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*. From "*The Beggars's Opera*" and "*Polly*," ed. Hal Gladfelder (Oxford World's Classics 2013), excerpts.
- Rudyard Kipling, *Poems*, ed. Peter Washington (Everyman's Library 2007), selections.

### WEEK 4

Two Other Major Plays by Brecht

#### Readings

- Bertolt Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*. From *Brecht Collected Plays: Five*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (Bloomsbury 2003), 107–186.
- Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. From *Brecht Collected Plays: Seven*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (Bloomsbury 2010), 141–240.

**DUE: Response Paper #1 (more information to follow; this deadline may change depending on the London Theatre calendar)!**

### WEEK 5

British Reception of Brecht

#### Readings

- John Bull, "Trumpets and Drums in the Night: The 1956 Berliner Ensemble Season in London and its Aftermath." From *Anglo-German Theatrical Exchange*, ed. Rudolf Weiss, Ludwig Schnauder, and Dieter Fuchs (Brill Rodopi 2015), 43–65.

- Christopher Innes, “Brechtian Influences: Epic Stagecraft and British Equivalents.” From *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press 2002), 113–132.
- Janelle Reinelt, “Introduction.” From *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (The University of Michigan Press 1994), 1–16.

**Exchange Your Journal for Mid-Semester Journal Presentations with Other Student in Class!  
Midterm Review**

**WEEK 6**

**Midterm Exam**

**Mid-Semester Journal Presentations**

**WEEK 7**

David Hare

Readings

- David Hare, *Fanshen: A Play* (Faber and Faber 1976).
- Bertolt Brecht, *The Decision*. From *Brecht Collected Plays: Three*, ed. John Willett (Bloomsbury 2012), 61–91.
- Janelle Reinelt, “David Hare: Social Gestus in Private Scenes.” From *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (The University of Michigan Press 1994), 109–142.
- Michael Patterson, “Brecht Revisited: David Hare’s *Fanshen*.” From *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge University Press 2003), 125–137.
- Bert Cardullo, “Brecht and *Fanshen*.” From *Studia Neophilologica* 58 (1986): 225–230.

**WEEK 8**

Edward Bond

Readings

- Edward Bond, *Red, Black and Ignorant* (The Dramatic Publishing Company 1989).
- Janelle Reinelt, “Edward Bond: Parables for Our Times.” From *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (The University of Michigan Press 1994), 49–80.
- Christopher Innes, “Edward Bond: Rationalism, Realism and Radical Solutions.” From *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press 2002), 152–178.

**DUE: Response Paper #2 (more information to follow; this deadline may change depending on the London Theatre calendar)!**

**WEEK 9**

Caryl Churchill

Readings

- Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (Nick Hern 2001) and *Escape Alone* (Samuel French 2016).
- Janelle Reinelt, “Caryl Churchill: Socialist Feminism and Brechtian Dramaturgy.” From *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (The University of Michigan Press 1994), 81–108.

- Elaine Aston, “But Not That: Caryl Churchill’s Shape Shifting at the Turn of the Millenium.” From *Modern Drama* 56.2 (Summer 2013): 145–164.
- Anja Hartl, “Political Theatre between Dialectics and Absurdity: Caryl Churchill’s Twenty-First-Century Plays.” From *Brecht and Post-1990s British Drama: Dialectical Theatre Today* (Bloomsbury 2021), 131–166.

**Inform Your Instructor of Your Choice of Play for the Term Paper!**

**WEEK 10**

Mark Ravenhill

Readings

- Mark Ravenhill, *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (Methuen 2009). (Selected scenes.)
- Bertolt Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*. From *Brecht Collected Plays: Four*, ed. Tom Kuhn and John Willett (Bloomsbury 2003), 115–206. (Selected scenes.)
- Anja Hartl, “‘In-Yer-Face’ Theatre and the Crisis of Dialectics: Mark Ravenhill’s Post-Brechtian Drama in Anti-Dialectical Times.” From *Brecht and Post-1990s British Drama: Dialectical Theatre Today* (Bloomsbury 2021), 29–62.
- Markus Wessendorf, “‘Fear and Misery’ Post-9/11: Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*.” From *The Brecht Yearbook* 36 (University of Wisconsin Press 2011), 336–351.

**WEEK 11**

debbie tucker green

Readings

- debbie tucker green, *stoning mary* (Nick Hern 2005).
- Marissa Fragkou and Lynette Goddard, “Acting In/Action: Staging Human Rights in debbie tucker green’s Royal Court Plays.” From *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, ed. Vicky Angelaki (Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 145–166.
- Nicola Abram, “Staging the unsayable: debbie tucker green’s political theatre.” From *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 2.1 (2014), 113-130.

**Exchange Your Journal for Final Journal Presentations with Other Student in Class!**

**WEEK 12**

**DUE: Term Paper!**

**Final Journal Presentations**

**Oral Presentation of Term Paper**