

Theater and Cultural Diversity in the United States
21M.621/SP.595
Spring 2008
Walker 201 WF 3:00-5:00
Thomas F. DeFrantz (10-272; 3-6957; DeFrantz@mit.edu)
web.mit.edu/21m.621/www

General Course Description:

This course explores contemporary American theatrical expression as it may be organized around issues of gender, and cultural identity. This exploration will include the analysis of performances, scripts, and video documentation, as well as the invention of original documents of theatrical expression. Class lectures and discussions will analyze samples of Native American, Chicano, African American, and Asian American theater, taking into consideration the historical and political context for the creation of these works. Performance exercises will help students identify theatrical forms and techniques used by these theaters, and how these techniques contribute to the overall goals of specific theatrical expressions.

Readings and Materials

Core Text

Psst... I Have Something To Tell You, Mi Amour by Ana Castillo, Preface by Sister Dianna Ortiz, (San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, 2005)

Contemporary Plays by Women of Color edited by Roberta Uno and Kathy A. Perkins (New York: Routledge, 1996)

Other readings to be distributed via Athena course locker. Check the website web.mit.edu/21m.621/www for information and reading materials.

Class Requirements:

1. Approximately 25 pages of reading and 1 hour of viewing weekly. Participation in class discussions will account for 10% of the final grade.
2. We will attend at least two performances of theater. Each student will write a short response paper, of 2-3 pages length, on the topics of the performance. Response papers will account for 10% of the final grade (5% each).
3. Participation as run crew or performer on one performance project on campus as approved by the instructor. Successful participation will account for 10% of the final grade.
4. Three performance projects on the topics described below. The performance projects account for 45% of the final grade (15% each):
5. A final group creative project, that draws on themes of the semester. The final assignment will account for 25% of the final grade.

PERFORMANCE POSSIBILITIES FOR RUN CREW/PARTICIPATION ON THE MIT

Campus

March 12 - 15 Kresge Little Theater

CANE (workshop)

Collaboration with SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology

Immersive-environment contemporary dance theater exploration of Jean Toomer's 1923 classic opus Cane. Workshop Performances Friday and Saturday @ 8pm

May 2 -3 Building 26 Hallways

JAZZ ALL OVER MIT

Guerilla dance performances via distributed music score in the hallways of MIT.

Performances Friday and Saturday at 5pm

REQUIRED PERFORMANCES ON CAMPUS

subUrbia

written by Eric Bogosian directed by David R. Gammons

presented by MIT Dramashop

Opening February 7, Performances February 7-9, 14-16 at 8 pm in Kresge Little Theater
48 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge MA

The play is set in a fictional suburban town, Burnfield, and is the story of several people trying to figure out their lives, while being visited by their sole successful friend. The story develops throughout the play revealing subtle flaws and noble traits in all of the characters.

Tickets: \$6 for students, \$8 general admission OPENING NIGHT SPECIAL: 2 for 1 ticket admissions!

Tongue, Smell, Color

Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Helmut Gottschild

February 28, 2008 7pm Broad Institute Auditorium, Building NE-30

Free and open to the Public

Helmut and Brenda Dixon Gottschild achieve a rare success in "Tongue" - a work that is highly provocative, profoundly personal, and very, very smart. It is an improbable success in that it weaves together dance, music, poetry, readings from academic texts, enactments of searing personal catharsis, and a unique physical vocabulary created by the scholar/artists. That it is a success explodes from the stage in every autobiographical truth the performers utter. Without flinching, they

confess the racialized points of attraction and desire which initially divide them, but ultimately bound them together. At times they inflect the autobiographical narrative with fragments of Brenda's groundbreaking scholarship in Africanist performance practice or Helmut's deeply-felt dance. The result is a huge advance in critical scholarship and performance, of vital importance to anyone interested in cultural studies, performance studies, dance, or the nagging persistence of "race" in the way couples view the world.

In the Heart of the America

written by Naomi Wallace, directed by Michael Ouellette
presented by MIT Dramashop

April 10 - 12 and 16-18 at at 8 pm in Kresge Little Theater 48 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge MA

Set during the first Gulf War, In The Heart Of America tells the story of a young Arab-American woman, Saboura, on a mission to find out what happened to her army enlisted brother Remzi. Her journey finds her crossing paths with many people who have been deeply affected by the horrors of war, including Remzi's best friend, Private Craver Perry. Although written in 1994, In The Heart Of America resonates with the current situation in Iraq, and the effects of war on family and friends.

Course Organization:

The course will be divided into six major units, as follows:

UNIT I Introduction and Overview - 3 Sessions Feb 6, [8], 13

What is culture? And how do we identify culture and performance in American theater? A sharing of family traditions and the creation of "stereotypical" history of immigration to the United States. This unit will provide students with a general overview of basic concepts such as theater, movement, culture, diversity, and composition.

read "What is Performance?" from the Performance Studies: An Introduction
edited by Richard Schechner, New York: Routledge, 2003, 1-21
view Ethnic Notions by Marlon Riggs (1987)
write Ethnic Notions response paper, due Wednesday, February 13
attend Suburbia performance by MIT Dramashop

Wednesday, Feb. 6 Guest Artist Workshop Melissa Blanco-Borelli

Melissa Blanco-Borelli received her B.A. from Brown University and her M.A. from USC. She completed her PhD at the University of California, Riverside in 2006, where her dissertation was entitled, "A Case of Hip-nosis: An Epistemology of the (Cuban) Mulata Body and Her Revolutionary Hips." Her work amalgamates critical race theory with dance theory, history, and cultural studies to make a case for embodied knowledge as an alternative to logocentrism, and to deconstruct the moniker of "tragic" from the trope of the "tragic mulata."

UNIT II African American Theatrical Traditions - 6 Sessions
Feb 15 (special event), 20, 22 (special event) 27, 29 (special event),
March 5

What are African American traditions of theater? How do music and dance figure in the construction of African American experience on stage? How is the "dancing black body" represented on stages?

In this unit, we will enjoy a series of lectures by dance theorist Brenda Dixon Gottschild on February 15, 22, and 29. **These lectures will take place in 32-155 at the normal classtime, 2-5pm.** In addition, we will attend a performative lecture by Professor Gottschild on February 28 at 7pm in room NE-30. Food Reception to follow performance!

- read "Combination Skin" by Lisa Jones in Contemporary Plays by Women of Color
- read for colored girls who have committed suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (excerpt) by ntozake shange ([1976] New York: Simon and Shuster, 1997)
- attend Tongue, Color, Smell performance by Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Helmut Gottschild, NE-30, 7pm Thursday March 28
- write "SubUrbia" response due February 20
- write "Reading the Black Dancing Body" lecture series responses due February 29

Performance Project #1 due March 5 - Autobiography Without Words

UNIT III Latino/a and Chicano Theatrical Traditions Part I -- 4 Sessions
March 7 (special event), 12, 14, 19

What sorts of Chicano and Latino/a American theatrical traditions have emerged in the past century? A focus on the plays of Miguel Piñero.

- read "The Book of Genesis According to Saint Miguelito," "La Metadona Está Cabróna," "There is Nothing New in New York," "No Hay Nada Nuevo en Nueva York," "Runnin' Scared," "A Poem for Joey's Mami's

Struggle,” and “Seeking the Cause” from Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings edited by Miguel Agarín and Miguel Piñero (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), pp 62-75

read Short Eyes by Miguel Piñero (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
view Piñero (2001)
view Freak (1998) by John Leguizamo
write Short Eyes character analysis

Friday March 7 Rafael Sanchez Visiting Artist from Design Studio for Social Intervention

DS4SI is dedicated to changing how social change is imagined, developed and deployed here in the United States. We are creating a design studio for the progressive arm of the nonprofit sector in order to support the sector’s ability to create new forms of effective social intervention and the exploration of new ways to be interventionists.

We believe that creating a space for design and intentionally supporting the development of a sector-specific design practice is imperative in order for the sector to break out of its box of exhausted forms. In so doing, we will liberate our vision, invigorate our spirit and be able to take the greatest possible advantage of this moment.

Performance Project #2 Due March 19 - Spoken Word Poetry Exercise

UNIT IV Asian American Theatrical Traditions - Four Sessions
April 2 (special event), 4, 9, 11

How can theater express Asian American cultural heritage? What sorts of stories do Asian diaspora playwrights chose to tell? A consideration of David Henry Hwang’s M. Butterfly.

read “R.A.W.” by Diana Son, in Contemporary Plays by Women of Color
view M. Butterfly by Hwang (1988, film, Cronenberg, 1993)
write Gender and Secrecy project, due Friday, April 11

Wednesday April 2 Kit Yan and Melissa Li Visiting Artists

Kit Yan wants people to realize that being queer is more than OK; in fact, it's hot. He uses humor and realism to accomplish this mission and leaves the audience begging for more.

Originally from Waipahu, Hawaii, Kit is a transgendered boi posing as a model queer minority to change the world through poetry. He has been slamming in the Boston slam scene since he was 18 and has won numerous slams all over Massachusetts. Kit was

featured with nationally recognized poets like Jason Carney, Iyeoka Okoawo, Reggie Gibson and Michael Brown. Before the age of 21, he landed a spot in the Lizard Lounge national slam team, competed in the Individual World Poetry Slam, and won the world's largest slam.

Kit fires up the audience by screaming in their faces about his personal experiences on identity, gender, politics, and cultural struggles, all the while retaining the status of being an all around nice guy. Kit has slammed and performed at colleges and schools including Harvard, Wellesley College, Babson College, UMaine, Colby, Tufts University, Olin College, and Northeastern University. Kit released his first CD, but is now working on revamping it to include his newly testosteroneed voice.

Melissa Li is a fierce Asian-American lesbian singer-songwriter, who has performed in the Boston area for over 8 years. Her music is a mixture of folk rock and pop, with a hint of soul and a whole lot of queer, and heavily influenced by Ani DiFranco, Jonatha Brooke, Kris Delmhorst, Deb Talan, Melissa Ferrick, and a slew of other pop/rock/folk divas. Through deeply personal acoustic songs, often punctuated with a vocal style reminiscent of hip hop, Melissa rants about love, loss, and social injustices.

Melissa started performing in high school talent shows, developing songwriting skills and teaching herself the guitar at the age of 15. She performed wherever she could, starting from small coffeehouses, community groups and even in underground train stations. Since then, she's carved a name for herself as one of the most talented and popular Asian-American performers in Boston. She has performed at the Brattle Theater, Somerville Theater, and Boston Pride main stage to an audience of hundreds. She has also performed in most colleges and universities across New England.

Performance Project #3 Due April 11 - Gender and Secrecy

UNIT V Latina/Chicana Theatrical Traditions - Part 2 - 4 Sessions April 16, 18, 23, 25

Visiting Artist Ana Castillo will come work with us on her play.

MLK Visiting Professor Ana Castillo is a novelist, poet, essayist and painter who has used every means necessary--the clack of typewriters, the flap of mimeograph machines, the thwip of copiers, the tick of e-mail and her personal blog--to tell the tales that had to be told.

read [Psst... I Have Something To Tell You, Mi Amour](#) by Ana Castillo, Preface by Sister Dianna Ortiz, (San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, 2005)
write [Psst...](#) research analysis

perform Psst... in class

UNIT VI Reaching Beyond Diversity - 2 Sessions
April 30, May 2

How can we reach beyond the rubric of diversity to explore particular histories and theatrical methodologies?

read “Black Text, White Director: Issues of Race and Gender in Directing African American Drama” by Ellen Donkin in Upstaging Big Daddy (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1993) pp 79-87

“the bodies between us” by lê thi diem thúy in The Color of Theater: Race, Culture, and Contemporary Performance edited by Roberta Uno (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002) pp 322-343

view Fires in the Mirror by Smith (1993)

Final Group Projects due May 7 and 14