THEA 2344: American Drama and the Social Self  
T/TH 1:00-2:30 pm  Room FH 131

Instructor: Dr. Keith Byron Kirk  
E-mail: keithbkirk.ed@gmail.com  
Location: Room FH 131  
Office: 133-D (Kirk) Wortham  
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:30-3:30pm or by appointment

Course Description

This course is a survey of drama in the United States from the eighteenth century to the present. Although this is an enormous topic, the plays we will read have been selected to represent a broad variety of periods, styles, and perspectives. We will explore the relationship of drama to social, political, and cultural forces. The course will look at social context, exploring supposed ideas of “canonicity”, and the importance of specific content each as guideposts toward a more complete understanding of the uniqueness of American Drama and its place in the construction of an American identity.

Learning Outcomes

We’ve designed this course with the following goals in mind:

- You will become conversant with many of the major periods, movements, figures, debates, and events in the history of American theatre.
- You will grapple with the issue of canonicity in theatre: how and why certain works are selected to stand out among others as especially worthy of attention and production.
- You will understand that writing is contextual and develop skills in research, textual analysis, and persuasive writing specific to theatre.
- You will be able to construct a coherent, non-obvious thesis statement for a critical essay; that essay will demonstrate your understanding of the conventions, standards, and methods of scholarly writing within the discipline of theatre studies.
- You will be able to make a clearly written, thoroughly researched, and correctly documented argument about the theatrical qualities and cultural significance of a selected play.

Required Texts Available at UH Main Campus Bookstore or Amazon.com

The required readings will be provided either through via email from Dr. Kirk or the course TA Ms. Tyrrell Woolbert.

Assignments and Grading

Quizzes and Discussion Questions: Starting in week two, nearly every one of our class meetings will be devoted to the discussion of a particular play and/or a critical reading. At the beginning of each Tuesday class period, you will be given a quiz made up of four short-answer essay questions about the play of the day. Each individual quiz is worth two points. At the beginning of each Thursday class period, your discussion question will be collected. These
questions should be written on a single note card that will be provided for you. Obviously, these assignments are meant to ensure that you are keeping up with the reading, but they are also intended to help foster lively classroom discussions by calling attention to important aspects of the plays.

**Research Paper:** Your major written assignment in this course will be to research and write a comprehensive critical introduction to an American play of your choice. This means that you will create a critical frame for readers to understand multiple aspects of the play: its historical context, its author’s life and other works, its dramatic structure, its production history, its theatrical qualities, and its cultural significance. The ultimate aim of your paper will be to argue for the inclusion of your chosen play in the canon of American drama. The idea of canonicity (in our usage, the way certain works are deemed standard or essential to a working knowledge of American drama) will deeply inform this course. We will examine historical and current debates surrounding the idea of canonicity itself. The final paper will allow you to make a well-thought-out contribution to this discourse.

The final paper should run **8-10 double-spaced pages** (12-point Times New Roman font). You should have the play you wish to write about selected by **October 30**. The class period on **Oct. 30** will be devoted to a workshop on framing your argument and organizing the structure of your paper. A first draft of your paper will be due **in class on Dec. 2**. [Turning in the first draft on time is worth **seven points**. If you do not show up to class on **Dec. 2** with a hard copy of your first draft, you will lose the seven points.] On **Dec. 2**, we will do a peer-review exercise, and then each of you will be given class time to present an abbreviated version of your argument about why your chosen play merits canonical status today. This is a chance to demonstrate your research and critical thinking. The final draft of your paper is due by noon on **Dec. 12** via email. [KeithBKirk.ed@gmail.com]

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is literary theft and a betrayal of trust. The term is derived from the Latin word for kidnapper and refers to the act of signing one’s own name to words, phrases, or ideas which are the literary property of another. *In short, you’re simply too on the ball and too talented to bother with shady scholarship. ‘Nuff said…*

**Final Grade Breakdown:**

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Play Quizzes (13 @ 2 pts. apiece)</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submit discussion question(s) (10 @ 2 pts.)</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>On-time submission of First Draft</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Draft of Research Paper</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
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**Final Grading Scale:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>94-100</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>B-</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>D-</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>0-59</td>
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GPA Protocol: To satisfy prerequisite and degree requirements, students must earn a minimum C (2.00) grade in each course attempted in theatre and dance (both required and elective) at the University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance. Students who receive a grade of C- or below in a School of Theatre & Dance major course must retake the course and complete it with a minimum of a C grade.

Course Policies

Class Environment: In class, we expect you to be attentive and respectful toward your classmates. Such respect involves: arriving on time to class, silencing cell phones, refraining from texting or otherwise playing with your phone, keeping outside reading material stored away, and generally staying alert.

Absence and Lateness: This course follows the UH School of Theatre & Dance policy regarding absence and lateness.
  - Three absences = one full letter grade deduction (i.e. a "B" becomes a "C").
  - Four absences = two full letters grade deduction.
  - Five absences = automatic "F" grade for the course.

Entering class after the roll has been called constitutes lateness. Lateness for two classes = one absence.

Course Outline

Prior to first class session read - David Ball Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays [Available at the UH Campus Bookstore]

Week 1 INTRODUCTIONS
Aug. 26th COURSE INTRO/LECTURE Canonicity/Context/Content – The Beginnings of American Drama to Minstrelsy and Backwards and Forwards by Ball
Aug. 28th Continue Lecture and Visit from Ms. Stephanie Lewin-Lane Theatre Librarian.

Week 2
Sep. 2nd THE ESCAPE; OR A LEAP FOR FREEDOM by William Wells Brown*
Sep. 4th THE OCTOROON by Dion Boucicault

Week 3
Sep. 9th TRIFLES by Susan Glaspell*
Sep. 11th MACHINAL by Sophie Treadwell*

Week 4
Sep. 16th RACHEL by Angelina Grimke *
Sep. 18th ALL GOD’S CHILLIN’ GOT WINGS by Eugene O’Neill *
Week 5  
Sep. 23rd  *Porgy* by Dubose Hayward and *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin  
Sep. 25th In-Class Discussion of Assigned Readings and Film Clip

Week 6  
Sept. 30th  *A Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill*  
Oct. 2nd  *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams* 

Week 7  
Oct. 7th  *Waiting for Lefty* by Clifford Odets  
Oct. 9th  *One Third a Nation* by Arthur Arent 

Week 8  
Oct. 14th  *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry*  
Oct. 16th  *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez* 

Week 9  
Oct. 21st  *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman*  
Oct. 23rd  *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deavere Smith* 

Week 10  
Oct. 28th  *Buried Child* by Sam Shepard  
Oct. 30th  WORKSHOP FINAL PAPERS 

Week 11  
Nov. 4th  *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang*  
Nov. 6th  *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck (Adapted by Frank Galati)* 

Week 12  
Nov. 11th  *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* by Tony Kushner*  
Nov. 13th  *Seven Guitars* by August Wilson* 

Week 13  
Nov. 18th  *This Is Our Youth* by Kenneth Lonergan  
Nov. 20th  *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks* 

Week 14  
Nov. 25th  *Ruined* by Lynn Nottage*  
  **THANKSGIVING BREAK Nov. 27th – 30th**  
  Dec. 3rd  DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH PAPERS 

Week 15  
Dec. 2nd  Present and Discussion of Final Papers  
Dec. 4th  Present and Discussion of Final Papers
FINALS WEEK
Dec. 13th? (Friday) FINAL PAPERS DUE—NO LATER THAN 12:00 p.m.
Critical Readings – Supplemental (Not Required) See Dr. Kirk


Week 13 – August Wilson, “The Ground on Which I Stand” and Video: “How to Survive a Plague”

Week 14 – No critical reading. HAPPY THANKSGIVING!!!