

TH250-15 Post-War British Theatre and Social Abjection

20/21

Department

SCAPVC - Theatre and Performance Studies

Level

Undergraduate Level 2

Module leader

Nadine Holdsworth

Credit value

15

Module duration

9 weeks

Assessment

100% coursework

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

This module will address the theatrical treatment of issues that have been at the heart of the British nation in the twenty-first century and subject to widespread public debate, media campaigns, political controversy and legislation: areas that may be covered include: migration, Gypsies and Travellers, riots, the 'chav', homelessness and the north/south divide.

Module aims

This module will address the theatrical treatment of issues that have been at the heart of the British nation in the twenty-first century and subject to widespread public debate, media campaigns, political controversy and legislation: migration, Gypsies and Travellers, riots and the north/south divide. As such, the module will address many of the pressing issues that are informing contemporary political debate about how the nation, national life and national citizenship are currently conceived, imagined and represented – whether that be current debates on migration heightened by presence of UKIP; discussions on the 'north/south divide' activated by plans for HS2 and heightened regional powers; concerns about what the London riots of 2011 meant socially and politically; or the widespread debates around the presence of Gypsies and Travellers prompted by the scenes of mass eviction witnessed at Dale Farm in Essex in 2011. The module is

concerned with questioning how and why playwrights, theatre-makers and performance companies have engaged with and responded to these issues as forms of political intervention and commentary. However, where appropriate, I am also keen to take a longer historical perspective in order to argue that many twenty-first century anxieties have their origins in an earlier post-war period and can be traced to legacies of empire, colonialism, post-war reconstruction and long-standing concerns with class, regionalism and race in Britain.

The module will highlight the ways in which theatrical practice has contributed to national debate by creating alternatives to dominant narratives and images of stigmatization evident in political campaigns, media discourse and popular debate. This approach functions in recognition of Jacques Rancière's call to generate moments of dissensus in the perceptual and aesthetic field, 'a fresh sphere of visibility', which effectively serves to question the logics of othering, marginalization and social abjection. Hence, the module will explore how theatre and theatricality has played a part in reframing events through its storying of issues as a way to trouble reductive perceptual framing and to insert a counter-mediation in the public sphere. As such, the module will address a range of different theatrical contexts and forms from large-scale plays for major theatres, to smaller-scale community pieces that encompass various styles including musicals, dance theatre, verbatim and monologues.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Introduction: National Objects

This introductory session will outline the concepts, ideas and debates underpinning the module

Weeks 2-3: National Implosion/Riotous Behaviours

From the 'urban riots' that rocked cities across England in the early 1980s; to what Bea Campbell has

described as the 'explosion of lawless masculinity in cities as disparate as Oxford, Cardiff and Tyneside' in

1991 to the 'race riots' that exploded in small northern towns such as Oldham and Burnley in 2001 and the

violence that spread across English cities during the summer of 2011, riots have occupied a prominent

place in the fabric of post-war British history. Over two weeks the module will look at how dominant

political assessments and media treatments of these riots generally focus on dysfunctional families, poor

or absent parenting, lawlessness, immigration, racial antagonism, lack of aspiration and blame disaffected

youth derived from the multi-ethnic so-called 'underclass'. We will look at various theatrical responses to

riots in recent British theatre history that may include Trevor Griffith's *Oi for England* (1982); Bryony Lavery's

Goliath (1997), Gillian Slovo's *The Riots* (2011) and Alecky Blythe's *Little Revolution* (2014), to explore the

different ways (thematically and aesthetically) that these playwrights have intervened to shed light on and theatricalise the frictions and fissures that led to these enactments of riotous behaviours.

Weeks 4-5: Blighting these Green and Pleasant Lands: Gypsies and Travellers

Twenty-First Century Britain has witnessed an increasing fascination and visible unease with the presence

of gypsy and traveller communities. In media discourse and political rhetoric, Gypsies and Travellers are

constructed as disruptive forces that unsettle 'settled communities' through illegal land development;

criminality, misuse of the Welfare State and concerns with dirt and mess. As such, Gypsies and Travellers

are cast as problematic others, deviants who fail to contribute to wider society and instead represent a

social burden. We will look at various cultural representations of Gypsies and Travellers from the high profile Dale Farm evictions, televisual representations such as *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* (2010-2012) and media campaigns such as the Sun's 'Stamp on the Camp' initiative launched in 2005. In terms of theatre, we will look at John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* (1958) and Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), which although produced over fifty years apart, raise remarkably similar issues regarding the tense relations between traditionally nomadic and settled communities and anxieties around space, place and identity and the need to exert control over the other.

Weeks 7-8: Re-Routing the North/South Divide A familiar discourse in Britain persists around the existence of a north/south divide, a geographical fault line running across England, which has been persistently called upon to explain differences in measurable indicators such as employment, income, health and social welfare, as well as the less tangible areas such as culture and character. Indeed, the north is all too often represented within a centre-periphery nexus, which positions the latter as inferior, antithetical to the former but also inescapably shackled to it and dependent upon it. The module will explore how ideas of 'the North' (industrial, masculine, working-class, hard-edged, culturally/socially inferior, etc.) have a powerful place in the cultural imagination. We will look at key examples such as Alan Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door* (1968); Andrea Dunbar's *Rita, Sue and Bob too* (1982); Jim Cartwright's *Road* (1986); Robin Soan's *A State Affair* (2000) and Lee Hall's *The Pitmen Painters* (2007) to explore strategies and recurring motifs in theatrical representations as a means of exploring the persistence of certain cultural imaginaries of the North that seemingly refuse to re-route.

Weeks 9-10: Migration and a Multicultural Society Arguably, immigration has constituted the largest change to post-war British society with social heterogeneity becoming a feature of life in many parts of Britain. Given the legacy of the British Empire and its history of colonization, slavery and colonial rule, new migrants to Britain were (and still are) often perceived as inferior and reified as 'stranger', 'alien', 'Other' (Ahmed, 2000). More recently, further waves of migration in 2004 and 2014 to Britain from member states of the European Union such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria have led to further debates on how migration has and is impacting on the landscape, resources and character of Britain. Indeed, the long-term and short-term settlement of migrants in post-war Britain has provoked questions about the nature of Britishness, citizenship and what belonging to a multicultural nation means. Over two weeks the module will consider these issues and look at a range of theatre pieces such as *Sing Yer Heart out for the Lads* (2002) by Roy Williams, *Journey to the West* by Tara Arts (2002), Vivienne Franzmann's *Mogadishu* (2008), Richard Bean's

England People Very Nice (2009) and Tamasha Theatre Company's The Arrival (2013), that have intervened in debates around migration and its consequences for the nation in order to explore the ambivalences, complexities and resistances that are and have been raised.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which playwrights and theatre-makers have used theatre to respond to, intervene in and debate issues around social abjection and display an understanding of why and how the concerns addressed relate to wider historical contexts.
- Show an awareness of how theories, issues and debates relating to social abjection, othering and British identity are explored in and through the subject matter, forms, creative processes and performance contexts utilised in a variety of theatre works.
- Describe and assess some of the textual, theatrical and performative strategies used in the works studied.

Indicative reading list

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Badiou, Alain. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. London: Verso, 2012.

Briggs, Daniel, ed. *The English Riots of 2011: A Summer of Discontent*. Hook, UK: Waterside Press, 2012.

Campbell, Beatrix. *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places*. London: Methuen, 1993.

Clark, Colin and Margaret Greenfields, eds. *Here to Stay: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*. Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2006.

Cox, Emma. *Theatre & Migration*. Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014.

Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. [1987] London: Routledge, 1992.

Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge, 2004.

Kirk, John. *Class, Culture and Social Change*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Kirk, Neville, ed. *Northern Identities: Historical Interpretations of 'The North' and 'Northernness'*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

Sams, Victoria. *Immigration and Contemporary British Theater: Finding a Home on the Stage*. Peter Lang, 2014.

Tyler, Imogen. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books, 2013.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London: Verso, 2012.

[View reading list on Talis Aspire](#)

Research element

Both of the assessments require the student to research concepts, theories and their application to cultural performance

Interdisciplinary

The students are asked to engage with political and cultural theory as a key part of the module

Subject specific skills

Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which playwrights and theatre-makers have used theatre to respond to, intervene in and debate issues around social abjection and display an understanding of why and how the concerns addressed relate to wider historical contexts.

Students will be able to show an awareness of how theories, issues and debates relating to social abjection, othering and British identity are explored in and through the subject matter, forms, creative processes and performance contexts utilised in a variety of theatre works.

Students will be able to describe and assess some of the textual, theatrical and performative strategies used in the works studied.

Transferable skills

Communication skills
research skills
presentation skills
analytical skills

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Seminars	9 sessions of 2 hours 30 minutes (15%)
Tutorials	1 session of 30 minutes (0%)
Private study	31 hours (21%)
Assessment	96 hours (64%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

Private study 31

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time
Portfolio	40%	38 hours
Focusing on ONE area create a portfolio or research poster in which you interrogate ideas of the 'socially abject' that lie behind at least 2 and no more than 4 different cultural (not theatrical) representations or engagements with your chosen theme.		
Essay	60%	58 hours

Feedback on assessment

Oral and written

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 2 of UTHA-QW34 Undergraduate English and Theatre Studies