

TH250-15 Post-War British Theatre and Social Abjection

24/25

Department

SCAPVC - Theatre and Performance Studies

Level

Undergraduate Level 2

Module leader

Nadine Holdsworth

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 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 Black British identities.

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: 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. 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 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: 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. This session 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.

Week 3: 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 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 Chloe Moss's The Way Home, 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.

Week 4: In recent years there has been persistent concerns with the 'migration problem', human trafficking and the growing numbers of deaths at sea as thousands flee war-torn countries and persecution or seek a better standard of living. Even if migrants and asylum seekers reach Britain, the legacy of the British Empire and its history of colonization, slavery and colonial rule, means that new migrants to Britain are often perceived as inferior 'alien' and 'Other'. In this session we will address the various manifestations of Britain's un-ease with migration and look at how Clare Bayley's play The Container (2007) and Lampedusa (2015) by Anders Lustgarten attempt to theatricalise the plight of those seeking to enter Britain.

Week 5: This week we will look at two theatrical first-hand accounts of the asylum process in Frances Poet's Adam (2017) and Nicola McCartney and Dritan Kastrati How Not to Drown (2023 [2019]). We will consider how asylum journeys are narrated, the impact and politics of first-person testimonial and themes of safety, survival and identity.

Week 7: No Fixed Abode During this week's session we will look at social, political and cultural responses to homelessness in Britain. We will look at two theatrical pieces that address the experience of living in temporary hostels. Exploring the multiplicity of experiences presented, we will consider representations of the state and the hostel inhabitants. We will think about the responses that are invited and how the pieces generate calls for a politics of different listening and care through the theatrical strategies they employ.

Week 8: Austerity and Abject Communities

Description: In this session we will consider how playwrights have explored the relationships between class, poverty and abjection in the context of periods of history when working-class communities and subjects have come under sustained attack from government policies that render them 'chavs', the 'undeserving poor' and socially abject. The session will look at a range of work that may include Gary Owen's, Iphigenia in Splott and Scottee's Class

Week 9: Telling Different Stories

The session will focus on Eclipse's work particularly through Revolution Mix, which is an initiative to place Black narratives at the heart of British Theatre, with the express aim of highlighting that Black British stories are so much more than slavery, immigration and teenage gang crime. We will think about the dominance of 'ghetto' narratives and the ramifications of hidden histories and

unheard stories.

Week 10: 'Angry Black Women'

This week we will address ways that contemporary Black British playwrights have called out the persistence of white privilege and the denigration of Black subjectivities. The connecting thread for the discussion concerns ideas of legibility, particularly the ways that Black bodies; Black subjectivities are persistently framed in relation to a number of reductive and vilified racial stereotypes of the angry and/or violent person of colour. We will consider Jasmine Lee-Jones's *Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner* (London, Methuen 2019) and Somalia Seaton's *Fall of the kingdom, Rise of the Footsoldier* (London, Oberon 2016)

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.

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

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.

Holdsworth, Nadine (2020) *English Theatre and Social Abjection*, Palgrave, 2020

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.

[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 (12%)
Tutorials	2 sessions of 30 minutes (1%)
Private study	35 hours (24%)
Assessment	90 hours (62%)
Total	144 hours

Private study description

Preparatory reading and viewing prior to seminars

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 A2

	Weighting	Study time
Portfolio	50%	45 hours
Focusing on one theme you will work in small groups of 2-3 to create an illustrated portfolio that interrogates the ways in which 'social abjection' is evident and/or contested in society, culture and the arts. This illustrated portfolio may take the form of a film, website, narrated powerpoint, mock newspaper/magazine or another form to be approved by the module convenor. You are free to present your material in a creative/non-linear way e.g to include images, mind-maps, annotated texts, cartoons, etc.		
Essay	50%	45 hours

Feedback on assessment

Oral and written

Availability

Courses

This module is Core for:

- Year 2 of UTHA-W422 Undergraduate Theatre and Performance Studies (with Intercalated Year)

This module is Optional for:

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