A THEATER OF POLITICS & THE POLITICS OF THEATER

Instructor: Ari Roth

The Architecture of Community: Studying the Power and Politics,
Dramas and Dynamics of Building Community Through Art
Case Study: The Middle East Conflict On Stage

Preamble

Since 2006, this course has canvassed the Washington DC theater scene and discovered a wealth of offerings, many of them—not surprisingly—political in focus. Which prompts the question: What should the role of an arts community be in an essentially political town? To provide escape? Emotional engagement? A dissident voice? What might the impact (or challenge) of presenting politically-relevant work be in DC? What's the definition and the history of "political theater" and what distinguishes it from other entertainments (if anything)? We'll figure that out. What stories are being told now that reflect how we view the past, understand the present, and envision the future? We'll have a chance to think about the role of theater as it holds up a mirror to our society, as our focus moves from examinations inward and inter-personal, toward portraits which are more broadly regional and international in scope.

This is only fitting for Washington, where the matters are intensely local, national, and international all at once. And the theatrical culture here has trained its lens to be appropriately broad in focus. There's a story to tell about the evolution of DC as a growing, multi-faceted cultural town, a fitting update to what economist Richard Florida called in his noteworthy 2002 book, "The Rise Of The Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community And Everyday Life," now revised updated (http://www.creativeclass.com/richard florida/books/the rise of the creative class). specifically, DC has emerged as the second most vibrant theatrical city in the nation, rivaling Chicago and surpassing Los Angeles (second only to New York City) in number of performances offered, audience in attendance, and union actors appearing in Equity-contracted productions, with an unparalleled proliferation of new theatre buildings (over a billion dollars in construction and capital campaign costs over the past decade and a half). Locally, the city now boasts some of the finest classical, flagship and culturally-specific theaters in the country. What accounts for this explosion of I offer one reading of DC's cultural renaissance here ("Reagan's theatrical productivity? Legacy/Zelda's Children: The Explosion of DC Theater" - See more at http://www.howlround.com/reaganslegacyzeldas-children-the-explosion-of-dc-theater). This 2012 Washington Post series on "The State of DC Theater" should be read as well during the first two weeks as well:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater-dance/the-state-of-dc-theater/2012/01/03/gIQADvwIfP story.html).

Insulated from the worst of the economic stresses which gripped our country, DC enters a new era in its emergence as a theater hub, still balancing its artistic ambitions alongside populist and market-driven factors. What common themes are emerging this theater season? What do the offerings say about where we are now as a city, and as a country?

Rather than a sedentary study of theater history and the fundamentals of stage craft, we'll learn about the art form on-the-go, taking in work at the finest theaters this city has to offer. At its heart, this class is a theater appreciation course, with an emphasis on viewing plays in performance and in manuscript form, responding to them in post-show discussions, in blog entries, collected portfolio reflections, a final presentation, a public panel, and a group project.

We'll look at the fundamentals of what makes a play "work;" what makes a play-going experience successful, satisfying, usefully provocative, or unsatisfying. We'll develop a way of talking and writing about theater and a way of talking to theater artists about their work in post-performance sessions with the artists performing in the plays we'll be seeing and with other audience members in attendance.

Our Focus

As noted on page 1, the first weeks of our course will introduce us to the range and growth of the Washington theater scene and get us thinking about the function, purpose and expressions of the theater. We'll begin by reading Thornton Widler's OUR TOWN which will help us think about how a great writer challenged and exposed the illusion that is theater, seeking new ways to reinvent it so that it might more truthfully illuminate modern life. And we'll experience a modern-day adaptation of OUR TOWN in OUR SUBURB to see how a new writer breathes vitality and relevance into a modern classic. From the get-go, we'll tackle an essential theme of our semester: The ways that theater shapes community, makes community, and is in constant dialogue with its community. Theater J, the resident professional theater company of the Washington DC Jewish Community Center, will serve as our anchor theater, and also provide us with a good example of a larger community's structure, politics, and dynamics. The second half of the semester will concentrate on a case study, as we attend a series of plays pertinent to the Arab-Israeli conflict as part of Theater J's *Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival*, this year looking at "Narratives of Nation Building: Traditional and Post-Modern Dreams and Revelations," together with world premiere work being staged at Washington's flagship theater, Arena Stage.

Requirements & Guidelines

- Attendance: Students must attend all assigned productions over the semester with the class and all class sessions. (If illness prevents you from using the pre-purchased ticket, you will be required to purchase a new ticket and attend the play on your own.) Missing more than one regular in-class session, whether due to illness, vacation plans or work requirements will result in a lowering of grade by half a mark. Success in the theater is measured by showing up.
- Part I: Post at least 10 blog entries (minimum 300 words) on the Theater J blog within 48 hours of seeing any of the shows this semester. Post at least one additional comment (minimum 120 words) responding to a fellow student's post every week. Each satisfactory blog posting is worth 2 points; the weekly comment is worth 1. An unimpressive blog posting is worth 1 point. A non-substantive comment is worth 0. Any post later than 72 hours will be 1 point or less. To get an A, you must have accrued 30 total points (combined initial posts and comments; 3 points a week). Comments or responses to other blog postings also accrue toward your participation grade.

Postings should reflect your experience and appreciation of the production or assigned reading, and they should have an insight into what made the event successful for you or not. They can incorporate comparative elements to other plays seen during the semester. Please be considerate in your engagement with the art and with others, and do know your words will be read by people outside of our class. Remember to address others as well, check your spelling, and save your programs, so you can refer accurately to the characters, actors, and all the other participating artists by name.

You will have many extra credit opportunities during the semester to add to your total. With extra credit postings, you'll receive a maximum of 2 points for a comment and any additional responses.

• **Preparatory & Follow-Up Reading**: Don't go to the theater blind. Read something about the show before you come. Read the program/playbill given by the theater when you're at the performance, and after. Consider the play in light of reviews once you've experienced the play for yourself. Assigned background reading of plays and essays will include:

"Utopia In Performance: Finding Hope At The Theater" by Jill Dolan

OUR TOWN by Thornton Wilder (http://www.warwickhistoricalsociety.org/v1/docs/ourTown1.pdf) ALL MY SONS by Arthur Miller

"Staging Dialogue at Theater J: Negotiating Israeli Politics in Jewish Communal Encounters" by Elliot Leffler

RETURN TO HAIFA (short story) by Ghassan Khanafani)

RETURN TO HAIA adapted from the story by Ghassan Khanafani, adapted by Boaz Gaon Optional Text Book or Kindle read: "An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions For A New American Art" edited and introduced by Todd London

"How Theaters Can Combat the Stay-at-Home Mindset" http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304866904579266882201324884

- Links and Manuscripts: You'll receive pdfs of all expected reading material. We'll forward related feature articles and study guides along, as available.
- Participation: Students are expected to: participate in post-performance discussions; ask strong, insightful, respectful questions; be courteous, engaged members of the audience during performances; and, participate in class. Commenting on other people's blog postings incisively, supportively and advancing the discussion with a new idea will count positively toward class participation.
- Mid-semester portfolio presentation: Write a three-page, 900-1000 word reflection, using excerpts from blog postings, charting the trajectory of your play-going experience as a newcomer to DC. Discuss your paper in an engaging 6 minute presentation. Paper should include at least two quotations from the actual text of the original play in support your observations. You'll want to discuss:
 - What discoveries you've made about attending live-theater; how you're evolving as a theater-goer and responder; and, what qualities in blog writing you most admire in another classmate. Give examples, noting something you'd like to improve upon in your own writing.
 - What are the 3 most unforgettable theatrical moments of the first part of the semester and why. Be specific in describing a moment (that may or may not include a line of text).
 - o Develop a theme or thesis you've intuited that links several of the plays we've seen this or read. This can be a thesis you develop into a full-blown presentation at the end of the semester.

Final Paper (5-page, 1300-1500 words)

 Do a critical, comparative study of one author discussing three or more of her/his works; or, do three works relating to the same source material (in other words, two adaptations of an original classic).

- O Develop and expand on the mid-term presentation discussing any three or more of the plays seen over the semester. Refer with specificity to plot, action, character, dialogue, theatricality, and presentation, all as elements that convey a meaning that you are articulating as part of your presentation.
- **Group Project:** Create your own Mini-Festival as a theater. Your company should have a mission, a target community, and a proposed line-up that includes the selection of an older work, a contemporary work, a featured writer of standing, and a brand new commissioned work (that you conceive, create, and present at least a 4-minute scene). One of the works (including the new commissioned work) may be a film/video/musical presentation.

• Grading and Extra Credit:

- o Blogs 50% of overall grade
- o Midterm portfolio paper of first blog postings: 10% of overall grade
- o Midterm portfolio presentation of first blog postings: 10% of overall grade
- o Participation: 10% of overall grade
- o Final Paper: 10% of overall grade
- o Group Project: 10% of overall grade

Attendance at Optional Readings offered by Theater J will result in improved participation credit. Blog entries posted about Optional Readings offered by Theater J will result in higher Overall Blog Points.

• Class & Theater-Going Policies:

- o Two or more absences from class negatively affect the student's performance and integrity of the group outing experience, resulting in a lower grade.
- No personal electronic devices may be used during class or performance. Period. Use of a cell phone, PDA, laptop or any other form of personal electronic device during class or a performance will negatively affect a student's performance, resulting in a lower grade.

Schedule for the Semester

· Class #1

7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave. 1st floor auditorium Leave at 7:20 to catch 7:30 performance of

OUR SUBURB

by Darrah Cloud | Directed by Tony Award-winning actress and director Judith Ivey An homage to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, this world premiere invites audiences to suburban Illinois in 1977, when the Nazis threatened to march on Skokie. As two families prepare for Christmas and Hanukkah, two teenagers fall into an interfaith romance, and find themselves absorbed in a growing menace that turns to heartbreak, headlines, and then, magically, new hope, in this whimsical, innovative update of an American classic.

The play is followed by post-show discussion (students are extended to stay for all post-show discussions after every performance we attend):

The Story of the Sprawl: America's Suburbs

with playwright, Darrah Cloud, and Mary Corbin Sies, Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at University of Maryland, College Park, an authority on American suburbs from 1850 to the present, and Suleiman Osman, Associate Professor at The George Washington University, specializing in U.S. urban history, the built environment, U.S. cultural and social history, and the study of race and ethnicity, with a particular focus on the way urban space both shapes and is produced by culture and politics.

Reading Assignments:

Read OUR TOWN (http://www.warwickhistoricalsociety.org/v1/docs/ourTown1.pdf) by Thornton Wilder Also, "Utopia In Performance: Finding Hope At The Theater" by Jill Dolan And links from front page of the syllabus on Theater in Washington

• Class #2

Introduction to the Course themes... Discuss Our Town/Our Suburb A Theater and its Community: Case Study, Theater J

Continued Reading:

- "Staging Dialogue at Theater J: Negotiating Israeli Politics in Jewish Communal Encounters" by Elliot Leffler
- THE ADMISSION by Motti Lerner
- Optional "like" on FB: https://www.facebook.com/ArtistsAndAdvocatesForTheAdmission
- Selected chapter from "An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions For a New American Art" edited by Todd London (view "Past as Prologue: Dreams of An Ideal Theatre" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qBJY R1NdBE)
- 3 Optional Extra Credit Blogging Opportunity events: Theater J reading DCJCC Library

1529 16th Street

Tea @ 2 Play Reading

EAT YOUR HEART OUT

by Courtney Baron [SEP]

Alice and Gabe are desperate to adopt a child. Nance, a single mom just starting to date, struggles to connect with her teenage daughter Evie. And Evie wishes her best friend Colin could fall for her rather than just trying to fix things. With both humor and aching insight, these lives are woven together in a tale of parental hopes and fears, and of hearts consumed by longing.

• Optional!

Interview

Embracing Democracy: Ari Shavit in conversation with Leon Wieseltier At Adas Israel Congregation 2850 Quebec Street, NW, Washington, DC

Ari Shavit's newest book, *The New York Times* bestseller "My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel" is a thoughtful meditation on Israel's history, politics and crucial national questions. Drawing on interviews, historical documents, private diaries, and letters, as well as his

own family's story, Shavit illuminates the pivotal moments of the Zionist century to tell a riveting narrative that is both personal and national. Shavit will be in conversation with Leon Wieseltier, Literary Editor of the New Republic.

• Optional!

Panel Discussion

At DCJCC

Examining the History of 1948

A panel discussion on the creation of the State of Israel with Professor Donna Robinson Divine, Morningstar Family Foundation Professor of Government and Director of Middle East Studies at Smith College

Shay Hazkani, Visiting Scholar at Berkeley Institute for Jewish Law and Israeli Law, Economy and Society

Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

• Class #3

Meet in Class

• Class #4

Meet at Theater J (DCJCC) 1529 16th Street, NW - corner of 16th & Q Street at 7:10 for a 7:30 performance of

YELLOW FACE

by David Henry Hwang | directed Natsu Onoda Power

The lines between truth and fiction blur with hilarious and moving results in David Henry Hwang's unreliable memoir. Fresh off his Tony Award win for *M. Butterfly*, Hwang leads a community protest against the casting of a famous white actor as the Eurasian pimp in the original Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, condemning the practice as "yellowface." His position soon comes back to haunt him when he mistakes a Caucasian actor for mixed-race, and casts him in the lead Asian role of his own new play. When Hwang discovers the truth, he tries to conceal his blunder by passing the actor off as a "Siberian Jew." As Hwang struggles to 'save face' amidst family politics, international intrigue and government investigations, he explores timeless

questions surrounding cultural identity, dual loyalty, and responsibility. A 2008 Pulitzer Prize finalist staged by the visionary director of *Astro Boy and God of Comics*.

• Optional!

At Busboys and Poets 14th and V Streets, NW

Yellow Face playwright David Henry Hwang in conversation with Deepa Iyer (Executive Director of SAALT (South Asian Americans Leading Together) and DC poet Laureate E. Ethelbert Miller as part of A.C.T.O.R. (A Continuing Talk On Race), thinking about think Asian American Identity on Day 1 of Black History Month: Where are we after all these years of alliances and tensions between different communities of color in America?

• Class #5

Meet at Studio Theatre at 7:40 1333 P Street, NW (14th & P Streets) for the 8:00 performance of

TRIBES

by Nina Raine | directed by David Muse

Billy, a deaf man whose hearing family has never listened to him, comes to define his identity on his own terms in this sophisticated drama about family, belonging, and the limitations of language. Billy was born deaf into a garrulous academic family who raised him to lip read and integrate into the hearing world. When he meets Sylvia—who's going deaf herself—Billy decides it's time to speak on his own terms, sending shock waves through the family. Playing out in sign language, argument, music, and mesmerizing silence, this sophisticated drama examines family, belonging, and the limitations of language. A moving and surprising play from a rising star of the British theatre.

(UC/DC) 7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave. 1st floor auditorium

Optional reading:

At Theater J in the DCJCC library

1300 LAFAYETTE EAST

By Brooke Berman

Detroit, 1967. In the gleaming lobby of the Lafayette Towers, the Supremes are fighting, a young housewife is pining for something new, and Reena Walker - an aspiring Motown singer - is locked out of her apartment in a peignoir set paid for by a married man. Can a new relationship be forged atop this powder-keg of a city?

• Class #6

Meet at Arena Stage

1101 Sixth Street, SW (off Maine Ave - Metrorail: Waterfront station on Green line) Meet at 7:40 for a 8:00 performance of

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

By Bertolt Brecht | SEP Translated by David Hare | Directed by Molly Smith

Composition and Music Supervion by James Sugg

Movement Directed by James Leong

Kathleen Turner returns to Arena Stage after her sold-out run of Red Hot Patriot: The Kick-Ass

Wit of Molly Ivins to star in the mother of all roles. Tough-as-nails matriarch Mother Courage profits off the very war that steals her children from her one by one. But will the cost of war be higher than she's prepared to pay? Artistic Director Molly Smith helms this unique in-the-round staging of Brecht's powerhouse anti-war play fusing politics, satire and music into an epic theatrical experience.

Continued Reading:

PANGS OF THE MESSIAH by Motti Lerner

• Class #7

(UC/DC) 7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave. 1st floor auditorium In class visits from playwright Motti Lerner Read and/or view ALL MY SONS by Arthur Miller

• Class #8

Meet at Woolly Mammoth Theatre 641 D Street, NW (corner of 7th and D) at 7:45 to see the 8:00 performance of

WE ARE PROUD TO PRESENT A PRESENTATION ABOUT THE HERERO OF NAMIBIA, FORMERLY KNOWN AS SOUTH WEST AFRICA, FROM THE GERMAN SUDWESTAFRIKA, BETWEEN THE YEARS 1884-1915

By Jackie Sibblies Drury SEP Directed by Michael John Garcés

A rehearsal room descends from collaborative to absurd as a group of idealistic actors—three black and three white—come together to tell the little-known story of a centuries-old conflict in South West Africa. As the troupe try to recreate the extinction of the Herero tribe at the hands of their German colonizers, their own stories, subjectivities, and ingrained prejudices rise to the surface. Tensions mount as the actors discover the limits of their good intentions. One of *The New York Times* top 10 plays of 2012, *We Are Proud to Present...* is innovative, fast-paced, funny, and a wholly unique take on race, empathy, and the devastating consequences of our best intentions.

• Class #9

(UC/DC) 7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave. 1st floor auditorium Mid-Term - Portfolio (written and oral) Presentations (see p.3 of syllabus)

Continued Reading:

Prepare for screening of RETURN TO HAIFA, reading selectively from http://theaterjblogs.wordpress.com/category/return-to-haifa/

• Class #10

(UC/DC) 7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave. 1st floor auditorium Screen new documentary on the making of the international stage production of

RETURN TO HAIFA

a novella by Ghassan Kanafani, adapted for The Cameri Theatre by Boaz Gaon. A film by David A. Golderberg

Discussion with filmmaker and director Sinai Peter to follow

• Class #11

Meet at Theater J (DCJCC) 1529 16th Street, NW - corner of 16th & Q Street at 7:10 for a 7:30 performance of

THE ADMISSION

by Motti Lerner | SEP directed by Sinai Peter

Part of Theater J's Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival looking at "Narratives of Nation Building: Traditional and Post-Modern Dreams and Revelations"

An Israeli homage to *All My Sons* set in Haifa during the first Intifada. Giora is a young professor engaged to Neta but in love with Samia, the Palestinian daughter of a family friend who becomes troubled when Giora's father's company begins building on the site of a battle that took place 40 years ago. Giora struggles to find the truth about his father's war-time secrets, confronting the causes of his brother's death and how Giora came to incur his own war-time injuries in Lebanon. As Giora's family presses him to look forward, not back, the play asks how we can move forward toward peace while still wrestling with the ghosts of war. From the author of *Pangs of the Messiah* and the winner of the Prime Minister of Israel Award for Writers, and staged by a groundbreaking team of Israeli, Arab, Jewish-American and Arab-American artists, including Theater J's director of *Return to Haifa*, with Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian designers from the Israeli workshop process.

SPRING BREAK - NO CLASS

Class #13

Meet at Theater J/DCJCC at 7:15 for 7:30 reading of

1948

From the memoir by Yoram Kaniuk | Adapted for the Haifa Theater by Noya Lancet | Directed for Theater J by Derek Goldman

Part of Theater J's Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival looking at "Narratives of Nation Building: Traditional and Post-Modern Dreams and Revelations"

A journey through famed Israeli author Yoram Kaniuk's first year in Israel when we arrived fresh off the boat from the ravages of Europe sixty years ago. Kaniuk writes the most personal memoir of his career detailing his experiences as a mostly bewildered but determined 17-year-old member of the famed Harel Brigade of the Palmah, fighting in the War of Independence. Kaniuk's bestselling 1948 (or *Tashach*) was adapted for the Haifa Theatre in 2011.

• Class #13b

(UC/DC) 7 pm —1608 Rhode Island Ave (1 hour only) Preparing for Group Project and Final Papers

• Class #13c

Meet at Arena Stage

1101 Sixth Street, SW (off Maine Ave - Metrorail: Waterfront station on Green line) Meet at 7:40 for a 8:00 performance of

CAMP DAVID

By Pulitzer Prize Winner Lawrence Wright Directed by Artistic | Director Molly Smith

Sixty-two miles north of Washington, DC, nestled in Catoctin Mountain Park, lies the clandestine

retreat known as Camp David. For thirteen tumultuous days, President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn host Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in an attempt to create the impossible: Peace in the Middle East. How could such a massive thing be done in such a short amount of time? Artistic Director Molly Smith directs the world premiere of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Lawrence Wright's incredible new play based on incredibly true events.

Class 14a

Meet at Theater J/DCJCC In the Community Hall at 7:15 for 7:30 reading of

HAND IN HAND TOGETHER

By A.B. Yehoshua | Translated and directed by Guy Ben-Aharon

Part of Theater J's Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival looking at "Narratives of Nation Building: Traditional and Post-Modern Dreams and Revelations"

Esteemed Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua's latest drama depicts two of the historic meetings between Labor Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion and Revisionist Zionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky, first in London 1934 as Pinchas Rutenberg, veteran of the Bolshevik Revolution turned founder of the Palestine Electric Company, arranges for a clandestine meeting between the leaders of rival factions of the Zionist movement. Rutenberg hopes to broker an agreement that would end the (sometimes violent) conflict between the two groups and encourages them to work towards the common goal of establishing a Jewish homeland.

Class #14b

Meet at Theater J (DCJCC) 1529 16th Street, NW - corner of 16th & Q Street at 7:10 for a 7:30 performance of

GOLDA'S BALCONY

By William Gibson | Starring Tovah Feldshuh | Broadway Production supervised by Scott Schwartz

Part of Theater J's Voices From a Changing Middle East Festival looking at "Narratives of Nation Building: Traditional and Post-Modern Dreams and Revelations"

A riveting portrait of one of the great women of our time, Golda Meir, Golda's Balcony is the final work from Tony® Award-winning playwright William Gibson (The Miracle Worker, Two for the Seesaw), and an award-winning smash that, in 15 sold-out months on Broadway, set the record for the longest one-woman show in Broadway history. From the pogroms of Russia to the halls of the Knesset, the story of Golda Meir is the story of the state of Israel in the 20th century. Starring four-time Tony® and two-time Emmy® Award-nominated TOVAH FELDSHUH, this one-woman tour de force promises to be a thrilling, deeply moving and unforgettable night of theatre. "Enlightening! Tovah Feldshuh gives such a fiercely committed performance that she does more than just resurrect Golda Meir, she embodies an entire country! An enlightening view of Israel's creation." - Neil Genzlinger, The New York Times

• Class #15

Final Group Theater Project Presentations (see p.3 of syllabus)

Final Papers due April 21

Optional during Spring Brea
Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
Terrace Theater Kennedy Center Members
Nalaga'at Theater Deaf-Blind Acting Ensemble performs
NOT BY BREAD ALONE

Directed by Adina Tal

Eleven deaf and blind actors take the audience on a magical tour in the districts of their inner world: the world of darkness, silence and...bread. As the process of bread-making unfolds on stage, the actors and audience re-enact vivid or distant memories, recall forgotten dreams and joyful moments, and touch the spark of creation present in every one of us. *In Hebrew with English supertitles and American Sign Language. In partnership with VSA. Recommended for ages 12 and up.*