THDN 345-01 Theater for Social Change

Spring 2024

Day/Time: M/W 10:00AM-12:00PM

Room: TC156

Instructor: Godfrey L. Simmons, Jr.

Office Hours: Tuesday 4-5:30PM

Office: Austin 311

Email: Godfrey.Simmons@trincoll.edu

**THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

**This performance-intensive course introduces documentary-based ensemble theatre making and performance as a mode of participatory action research for initiating social change. During the semester students will engage in the process of making and performing original works of theatre that investigate real circumstances, examine existing perceptions, identify critical issues, and generate a public forum for social dialogue. The course work will focus on techniques based on the work of Augusto Boal and other methodologies. It will include individual research to explore ethical questions and diverse perspectives regarding freedoms and limitations of academic and personal expression in the context of maintaining responsibility and well-being within a multicultural society.**

* **What is Theater for Social Change?**
* **What forms of performance am I viscerally drawn to or want to see?**
* **What change do I want to make?**
* **What community am I serving with my work?**

**Specifically Theatre Makers (i.e., YOU) will:**

* **Understand basic building blocks of dramatic storytelling.**
* **Learn/Deploy different methods for using Theater for Social Change.**
* **Learn how to give constructive feedback using the Lerman Method.**
* **Create/Co-Create 3-4 pieces of Theater for Social Change.**
* **Revise and refine work based on discussions with peers and the instructor.**

**Course Structure**

**This will be largely a practical class. There are many theories behind Theater for Social Change, and while these theories may be touched on, that will largely be in the service of making things. This class does not require that you must be a theater maker, though many of you ARE theater makers. The course will assume that since we all are citizens of the world we have the right and the expertise to create or co-create a meaningful piece of theatrical storytelling that moves our peers toward change and justice.**

**There are four levels of engagement throughout the semester in this practical class:**

**Engage: We will engage with the expertise and experiences you already bring to the room through icebreakers, theatre games, story circles and responses to assigned readings/viewings. Story Circles, Interviews and Self Investigation exercises will figure heavily here. You must know and share yourself before you can credibly create or co-create Theatre for Social Change and practice care for your artist colleagues or your audience. These exercises will also help us determine what topics you’d like to work on in terms of your pieces.**

**Model: We will examine different models of theater for social change, sometimes troubling our preconceived notions of what Theater is. We will read published models in class and examine video examples of staged protest. We will review examples of theater for social change here at Trinity and in Hartford. We will step into some of the roles of these pieces/models of theater for social change to get a feel for why it works.**

**Make: You will create/co-create at least 3-4 examples of theater for social change. Two of them are predetermined and will be done as a group of at least 3-4 people: A Living Newspaper and A Forum Theater Play. The other piece(s) will be determined based on student interest and social justice issues you’d like to work on. Examples are the Confessional Monologue, acts of protest, storytelling/healing rituals, etc.**

**Respond: In this class we will be following the Liz Lerman Critical Response process given below. It takes some practice, but successful participation will mean embracing the model and offering feedback generously to your classmates about their writing. Participation also means you have done any assigned reading before class and come ready to discuss the material.**

**(from http://danceexchange.org/projects/critical-response-process/)**

**1. Statements of Meaning: Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, striking in the work they have just witnessed.**

**2. Artist as Questioner: The artist asks questions about the work. After each question, the responders answer. Responders may express opinions if they are in direct response to the question asked and do not contain suggestions for changes.**

**3. Neutral Questions: Responders ask neutral questions about the work. The artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. For example, if you are discussing the lighting of a scene, “Why was it so dark?” is not a neutral question. “What ideas guided your choices about lighting?” is.**

**4. Opinion Time: Responders state opinions, subject to permission from the artist. The usual form is “I have an opinion about \_\_\_\_\_\_, would you like to hear it?” The artist has the option to decline opinions for any reason.**

**A Note on Story Circles, Forum Theater and Living Newspapers**

**The Story Circle is a technique crafted by the late John O’Neal, Founding Artistic Director of Free Southern Theater and Junebug Productions, intended to foster a safe and intimate space for difficult dialogues. People have to feel comfortable in order to share their stories. Story Circles encourage deep listening, verbal expression, respect for every participant’s story, and an appreciation for the cultural gifts and talents of diverse groups of people. We will use the Story Circle process to collect narratives from each other and possibly other people who are involved with or who recognize that their lives are being influenced by the issues we choose to examine. Our class will supplement this ethnographic information with research and from this devise performances.**

**Forum Play*:*Also referred to as theater of the oppressed or participatory theater, forum plays offer an interactive platform where audience members actively engage in the exploration and resolution of social and political issues. Developed by Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal, forum plays turn spectators into "spect-actors" who not only observe but actively participate in the performance.**

**A Living Newspaper presents factual information on current events to live audiences. Capitalizing on theater’s power to both entertain and instruct, Living Newspapers aim to dramatize issues of national social, political, and economic importance. This form originated in Russia and gained prominence in the US in the 1930s as part of the federally funded Works Progress Administration. Under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project (FTP), which employed out-of-work artists during the Depression, the Living Newspaper created and staged works on the social issues of the day, ranging from agricultural and environmental issues to global politics, race relations, and urban housing crises. Living Newspapers urge social action and reject the conventions of commercial theater in favor of the more direct, experimental techniques, including agit-prop and audience participation. These performances mobilize a diverse and democratic cast of experts and amateurs engaged in what FTP Director Hallie Flanagan termed “the struggle of many kinds of people to understand the natural and social and economic forces around them and to achieve through these forces a better life for more people.” Given the role of fabricated news stories in our current age, we desperately need to revive and renew experiments with the Living Newspaper.**

**JOURNAL**

**Students are required to keep a Citizen Artist’s journal/notebook. Any blank notebook or journal will do. Be always prepared to record thoughts, ideas, images, observations, bits of overheard conversation, things that tick you off (yes rants) possible play topics, and physical gestures. *I expect you to write in it every day*. This could be stream-of-consciousness ramblings like Julia Cameron’s Morning Pages, or poetry, an intellectual or visceral idea you’ve been pondering, or a description of a transcendent image. Periodically, I may ask you to share/present from your journal/notebook. It will be handed in periodically throughout the semester. I won’t read it carefully. I want to make sure you’re developing that writing and observation muscle. Let your creativity take up space in your collegiate life!!**

**REQUIRED BOOKS/PLAYS**

**WHAT TO SEND UP WHEN IT GOES DOWN by Aleshea Harris (Will be at bookstore later in the semester. Please buy this one if you can)**

**Concord Theatricals**

**WAITING FOR LEFTY by Clifford Odets (**[**online**](https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4931626/mod_resource/content/2/WAITING%20FOR%20LEFTY%20BY%20CLIFORD%20ODETS.pdf)**)**

**Dramatist Play Service**

**ONE-THIRD OF A NATION by Arthur Arent (**[**online pdf**](https://mars.gmu.edu/items/278b35be-3834-49aa-93f7-52a9c24a0f66)**)**

**(a living newspaper)**

**ANGELS IN AMERICA by Tony Kushner, 1992 (both parts!)**

**Theatre Communications Group**

**ISBN-10: 9781559363846**

**THE THANKSGIVING PLAY/WHAT WOULD CRAZY HORSE DO?**

**by Larissa FastHorse, 2018**

**Theatre Communications Group**

**ISBN: 978-1-55936-961-9**

**There will also be other readings on Moodle or on reserve at the library.**

**SUGGESTED READING**

**Augusto Boal: Theatre of the Oppressed**

**Keith Johnstone: Impro**

**Hallie Flanagan: ARENA, The Story of the Federal Theatre Project**

**Michael Rohd: Theatre for Community Conflict and Dialogue**

**DEPARTMENTAL PRODUCTIONS**

**REQUIRED ATTENDANCE:**

**Rodgers’ and Hammerstein’s Cinderella – Directed by Michelle Ong-Hendrick**

**Thursday-Saturday, March 21-23, 7:30pm**

**Saturday, March 23, 3:30pm**

**Goodwin Theater, AAC**

***Senior Thesis Projects - Week I***

**Tuesday, March 26, 7:30pm – Cassidy Willie-Lawes**

**Wednesday, March 27, 7:30pm – Caroline Frederick & Lily McMahon**

**Various Locations**

***Senior Thesis Projects - Week II***

**Tuesday, April 2, 7:30pm – Ugne Tumonyte**

**Wednesday, April 3, 7:30pm – Ren Logan**

**Thursday, April 4, 7:30pm – Tara Iyer**

**Various Locations**

***Student Choreography Concert* – Directed by Rebecca Pappas**

**Thursday & Friday, April 18-19, 7:30pm**

**OPTIONAL:**

**Last Night**

**(Theater and Dance Class Sharing)**

**Wednesday, May 1, 5:30pm**

**Performance Lab, Trinity Commons**

**GRADING**

**You will not be graded on talent — you will be graded on your effort and growth of creative work. The final grade is an amalgam of several factors: effort, timeliness of assignments, preparedness for, and participation in classes, the earnestness of revisions and the effort you put into your projects. Here’s the grade breakdown:**

**Participation: 20%**

**Assignments: 15%**

**Journal: 10% (Not on quality, but on keeping it up to date!)**

**First TSC Project: 15%**

**Living Newspaper Work: 20%**

**Forum Theater Work: 20%**

***IMPORTANT NOTE: THIS SYLLABUS AND THE UPCOMING SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS/EVENTS IS A LIVING DOCUMENT, BASED ON THE MAKEUP AND NEEDS OF THE CLASS. JUST LIKE WE WOULD BE IN MAKING A THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE PROJECT WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS OR RESPONDING TO AN URGENT EVENT, WE NEED TO BE NIMBLE IN A CLASS ABOUT THEATER FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.***

**COURSE POLICIES**

***Please…***

* ***Come to class on time or let me know if doing so consistently could be a problem. Class will always begin at 10:00 (and end at 12:00). Sans mitigating circumstances, chronic lateness (or early departures) could affect your grade. Communicate with me.***
* ***My office hours are an opportunity for you to connect with me, a chance to ask clarifying questions about content, explore what you many want to do after you graduate, and find support for your work in class specifically or in school generally.***
* ***Because the work we are doing entails building a community around our writing, Theater for Social Change relies on folx being present. In general, more than 2 absences during the semester could also affect your grade. (Exceptions: observance of religious holidays, illnesses) 3 lates or early departures of 5 minutes or more will count as an absence. Again, I need you to communicate with me if there are mitigating circumstances.***
* ***If you are unable to attend class, inform me by email beforehand so I can plan accordingly.***
* ***Absolutely NO electronic communications are allowed during class time. Turn off your cell phones/devices and keep them put away and out of view during class.***
* ***Wear clothes and footwear that are comfortable and will allow you a free range of movement in class. Do NOT wear flip-flops. Please.***
* ***Assigned papers and other written assignments must be turned in as hard copies. No electronic (email) copies will be accepted.***

***CONTEXTUALIZING OUR WORK TOGETHER***

**We are all individuals with multiple sociocultural identities that intersect and shape our worldview through the lens of privilege and oppression. These identities directly impact your work as an artist in this class because you, your mind and your voice are the tools needed to tell stories as a playwright. My commitment to you as your instructor is to minimize systemic forces of oppression within the classroom such as ableism, classism, racism, sexism, transphobia, and heterosexism in efforts to create a safe learning environment for all of us. I ask that you also join me in this commitment to foster respect for one another, enhance solidarity, and build community.**

**POSITIONALITY STATEMENT**

**As a heterosexual, Black, cis-gender Black man, I strive to cultivate a compassionate learning environment that affirms and supports the whole student. Given that we’re navigating challenging times as a community (COVID-19, Anti-Black Racism, mental health concerns etc), I am committed to creating an atmosphere of open communication, access to campus resources, and an empathetic mindset. We will get through this together. Please view the resources on the final page of the syllabus.**

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

**It is critical that you submit only your own, original work for this class,**

**and that you follow scrupulously appropriate academic standards for acknowledging the work of others in your writing and research**

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**Trinity College is committed to creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students with disabilities who may need some accommodation in order to fully participate in this class are urged to contact the Student Accessibility Resource Center, as soon as possible, to explore what arrangements need to be made to assure access.**

**If you have approval for academic accommodations, please notify me by the end of week two of classes. For those students with accommodations approved after the start of the semester, a minimum of 10 days’ notice is required. Please be sure to meet with me privately to discuss implementation.**

**Student Accessibility Resources can be reached by emailing**

[**SARC@trincoll.edu**](mailto:SARC@trincoll.edu)**.**

**Statement On Use of A.I.**

**You may have heard by now about increasingly popular publicly available artificial intelligence (A.I.) tools that produce writing when given human input/prompts. There have been many concerns raised by teachers across grade levels and institutions about the prospect of students using such technologies to cheat by having an A.I. write their essays or other writing assignments for them. We are in an art-making class, so the need for A.I. on your writing assignments should be negligible. You may, though, feel like you can get away with it, as most written assignments will be short - 3-5 pages. However, a word of caution: any attempt to pass off A.I. writing as your own in this class constitutes a violation of Trinity College's intellectual honesty policy. As the Student Handbook explains, “Intellectual honesty assumes that students do their own work and that they credit properly those upon whose work and thought they draw” (28-37; 28). Failure to abide by the policy may result in censure, suspension, or even expulsion. The use of A.I. writing tools for the purposes of cheating is also practically unwise for the following reasons:**

* **As with any other kind of cheating, the main person you’re cheating is yourself – if you don’t put in the work of developing your writing skills organically, you’ve just paid a bunch of money to learn nothing, and that lack of organic skill development will catch up with you eventually.**
* **In a word, A.I. writing is not consistently good, and it’s risky to use. A.I. writing software – in its best current iteration – produces writing that is mostly formulaic and generic, lacks the ability to meaningfully integrate critical contextual detail, and cannot properly cite / synthesize sources (in fact, it often fabricates them, which is a major academic integrity violation if caught).**
* **It is simply much easier to write your own work in this class. A.I. writing tools are notoriously context-blind, and in a class where written work draws on localized concepts and points of discussion from our class (including written reflections on your own personal writing process), you’re likely going to get frustrated if you try to ask an A.I. to perform these tasks for you. I’ve tested the writing prompts & assignments I’ve developed this semester with some of the best A.I. writing tools out there, and none of them can consistently produce writing that meets the standard required for this course.**
* **As a human reader and your teacher, I don’t care what you can get an A.I. program to write. I want to hear your unique voice and help you develop it into something you can use and be proud of throughout your life, in a wide array of contexts. So please be genuine in your writing for this class – I promise that will make things far more enjoyable for all of us.**

**And just to illustrate the need for transparency and ethics: this statement was adapted from a statement by Alex Helberg here at Trinity. I could’ve A.I.’d this, but just giving the damned credit was easier.**