

Staging the Argument: Writing, Rhetoric, and Performance

English 461
Fall 2010
Fridays 5:00 to 8:00 p.m.

“You take [life] in and then give it back.”
::L.B. on Performance

PURPOSE

This course explores the rhetoricity of performance. It presumes that upon performing, one more than bides time: one *moves*.

One can, of course, move toward many ends. In *Staging the Argument*, we move to discourse in community. We move to reflect critically on issues that press us, and to help audiences engage those issues. In students' words, we move to “react” “carry” “communicate” “consider” “act out” “craft” “contact” “become one with a character” “see” “relay” “educate” “explore the human element” “usher people in” “provoke” “inform” “process” “hear” “convey” “intend” “do” “captivate” “shift” “feel” “create” “be” “relate” “share physically” and to “respond.” Move to “take apart something.” Move to “physically tell a story.” “Move,” as one student put it, “and change lives.”

Framed by critical investigations of the relationship between performance and rhetorical studies, this course explores theories on and creative practices for making and executing various forms of performance texts that aim to affect personal and community change. In addition to identifying and analyzing such theories and practices, we will create our own performance texts, focusing on exigencies of students' choosing.

Staging the Argument asks you not only to read performance texts as arguments, and to construct argument through written performance texts, but just as importantly (and as rhetorically) to embody the arguments you construct. This means bringing to stage the medium of *you*—your gestures, your movement, your voice in dynamic combination in order to *move* (as above).

We will also consider what about performing rhetorically extends “off-stage” to the everyday, is a kind of way of being.

PARTS

MOVEMENT

Performance for our purpose is, perhaps, a rhetorical act/ion (maybe an intervention) that requires a body to survive. We got about that far in our first-day-of-class discussion on performance's component parts. While we did not settle on parameters for what that body should comprise (e.g. the "desk"), we suspect motion is required—is, in a sense, the "cell" (smallest structural and functional unit) level force of performance acts.

It should come as no surprise that this course calls for movement. Movement in the big ways—"spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, politically, etc." as one student put it—but also the small ways: while you're performing your work, while you're enacting someone else's work, during class discussions, so forth. Please be mindful of your body language to the extent that it *will* impact how we perceive your characters and contributions. It *will* impact class momentum. Every person makes a difference.

PERFORMANCE

This is a participatory, hands-on class. In addition to a) reading your texts and b) those of others, you are asked c) to improvise. Think of it this way: we form an ensemble, and will practice performance techniques in class that require you to collaborate with others without the assistance of a script. As someone who is mightily uncomfortable "off-script," I ask you to take a chance. Some of the best writing happens this way.

The class culminates in d) a (*scripted*) performance for an out-of-class audience. The audience will probably consist of other students in the program and Education Justice Project volunteers. There will be one or more rehearsals for this outside of class.

N.B. Performance is required. But you will never be asked to enact something that makes you uncomfortable. While I hope you will challenge yourself with the material, you are welcome to "take a pass" as needed.

WRITING

We will write for performance both in and out of class. Homework most weeks consists of a **Short Performance Text** ("SPT"). Sometimes you will be asked to share your text with the class.

The major project for the course is a **Full Performance Text** ("FPT": 10-15 pages). This is due in parts:

- 1) proposal;
- 2) exigence manifesto (exigence manifesto; includes audience analysis and contextual frame, background research);
- 3) first two pages (to be reviewed in conference with me);
- 4) first five pages (to be workshopped);
- 5) the full performance text; then
- 6) short in-class presentation/performance (last day of class).

The FPT will be accompanied by a **Rhetorical Analysis** that explains the decisions you made crafting your piece.

These performance texts, as well as your in-class writing, will be turned in at the end of the semester in a **Portfolio**, for which you'll be asked to write a short introduction. The portfolio will be graded and returned.

You are also strongly encouraged to keep a **Writer's Journal**. This will not be graded, but can help you generate and store ideas.

WORKSHOP

This is a workshop class. Periodically throughout the semester, you will be asked to share your writing with the class, as well as to read and comment upon other students' work. We will also do a "proper" workshop for each student when rough drafts for the FPT are due. You will receive more information about this later, but generally, you should offer constructive criticism and praise, i.e. things you think will help the writer continue to improve his work.

READING

We will read performance texts and theory texts. While reading, I suggest you take notes in the margins. Mark elements of content (themes, etc.) and craft ("I like how s/he did x")—anything you might want to bring up in class. Keep a list of questions.

DISCUSSION

Class discussion will be largely student-directed. Here are the rules we came up with in class to govern discussion, and class participation more generally:

- Respect everyone's opinion.
- Express freely. But be respectful with your language*.
- Share the floor. Help extend the floor to others.
- Do not talk over someone else.
- Engage.

You will be asked to lead discussion/improvisation during the semester. Lead as you want to be led.

*Language exhibiting prejudice—racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.—will not be tolerated. Our class will have lively discussions, and we should prepare for the fact we'll not always agree. But personal bigotry and insult have no place in a university classroom.

GRADING

FULL PERFORMANCE TEXT (With Rhetorical Analysis)	40%
PARTICIPATION (Includes reading for class, discussion, in-class writing and performances, workshop, Final Performance.)	30%
SHORT PERFORMANCE TEXTS	20%
PORTFOLIO (Includes stages/drafts FPT, SPTs, introduction.)	10%

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course. *Be sure to keep all your writing for the Portfolio.*

SPT's and other short writing assignments will be graded on a three-point scale. 3=excellent, 2=good, 1=satisfies the minimum requirements, 0=doesn't satisfy requirements and/or missing. Both 3's and 2's count as "full marks."

The FPT and Portfolio will be graded on a letter scale: A=4.0; A-=3.67; B+=3.33; B=3.0; B-=2.67; C+=2.33; C=2.0; C-=1.67; D+=1.33; D=1.0; D-=.67; F=0.0.

CONFERENCING

There will be at least one round of one-on-one conferencing for FPT consultations. I will come to Reading Room a couple of times for this/"office hours" (see course schedule).

POLICIES

- *Late work*: better late than never.
- *Plagiarism*: unacceptable; may result in failing the course.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Is ever, ever subject to change. You will be apprised. **Readings/assignments are listed below on the day they are due.**

9.3 Course Introduction: What is Performance? Can Performance make a difference?

9.10 HO: Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror*.
XX: Exc: Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.
HO: Dwight Conquergood's "Rhetoric, Performance, and Ethnography."

DUE: SPT 1.

9.17 HO: Suzan Lori-Parks' *The America Play*.
HO: Jan Cohen Cruz' "The Problem Democracy Is Supposed to Solve: The Politics of Community-Based Performance."

DUE: SPT 2.

9.24 HO: Zell Miller iii's *The Evidence of Silence Broken*.
HO: Norm Denzin's "The Politics and Ethics of Performance Pedagogy: Toward a Pedagogy of Hope."
HO (opt): Kim Euell's "Shango's Mixtape: A Contextual Frame" from *Plays From the Boom Box Galaxy*.

DUE: SPT 3.

- 10.1 HO: Autoethnographic performance texts TBA.
HO: Exc: Performance autoethnography TBA.
HO: Exc: Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* I.

DUE: Proposal for FPT.

DUE: SPT 4.

OFFICE HOURS: Reading Room this week (date TBA).

- 10.8 HO: José Rivera's *Marisol*.
HO: José Rivera's "36 Assumptions About Writing Plays."
HO: Exc: Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* II.
HO: Augusto Boal's "Invisible Theatre."

DUE: 1st two (2) pages of FPT (for instructor feedback).

- 10.15 HO: Doug Paterson's "Three Stories from the Trenches: The Theatre of the Oppressed in the Midst of War."
HO: Dan Sullivan's "Theatre in East Harlem: The Outdoor Audience Gets into the Act."
HO: Cindy Rosenthal's "Living on the Street: Conversations with Judith Malina and Hanon Reznikhov, Co-Directors of the Living Theatre."

DUE: SPT 5.

OFFICE HOURS: Reading Room this week (date TBA).

- 10.22 HO: Radio performance texts TBA.
HO: Diana Taylor's "Making a Spectacle: The Mothers of the Playa de Mayo."
HO: Marguerite Waller's "Border Boda or Divorce Fronterizo?"

DUE: Exigensto (for all but FPT I Group).

DUE: 1st five (5) pages of FPT for FPT I Group only.

- 10.29 HO: Silent performance texts TBA.
HO: The Rhetorical Body TBA I.

DUE: SPT 6 (for all but FPT II Group).

DUE: Exigensto (FPT I Group).

DUE: 1st five (5) pages of FPT for FPT II Group only.

- 11.5 WORKSHOP I.

HO: FPT I Group readings.

HO: The Rhetorical Body TBA II.

DUE: Workshop comments for FPT I Group.
DUE: 1st five (5) pages of FPT for FPT III Group only.

11.12 WORKSHOP II.

HO: FPT II Group readings.
HO: Language performance texts TBA.

DUE: SPT 7 (for all but FPT IV Group).
DUE: Workshop comments for FPT II Group.
DUE: 1st five (5) pages of FPT for FPT IV Group only.

11.19 WORKSHOP III.

HO: FPT III Group readings.
HO: Mac Wellman's *Infrared*.
HO: Exc: Mac Wellman's "Speculations."

DUE: SPT 8 (for all but FPT V Group).
DUE: Workshop comments for FPT III Group.
DUE: 1st five (5) pages of FPT for FPT V Group only.

11.26 WORKSHOP IV.

HO: FPT IV Group readings.
HO: Samuel Beckett's *Endgame I*.
HO: Rachel Lois Clapham et al.'s *(W)reading Performance Writing: A Guide I*.

DUE: SPT 9.
DUE: Workshop comments for FPT IV Group.

12.3 WORKSHOP V.

HO: FPT V Group readings.
HO: Samuel Beckett's *Endgame II*.
HO: Rachel Lois Clapham et al.'s *(W)reading Performance Writing: A Guide II*.

DUE: SPT 10.
DUE: Workshop comments for FPT V Group.

12.10 **DUE:** FULL PERFORMANCE TEXT.
DUE: RHETORICAL ANALYSIS.

12.15 FINAL PERFORMANCE (date pending).

DUE: PORTFOLIO with INTRODUCTION.

FAQs

Q1: This syllabus seems kind of intense. Should I panic?

A1: No. We will work together and do our best to help each other get as much out of the readings as we can, and to produce work of which we are proud. Chances are, the syllabus will continue to evolve (things will be added based on our interests, things will drop off) as the semester unfolds, anyway.

Q2: This particular week, Week X, I am having a really hard time getting all my work done. What should I do?

A2: The best and most you can without any degree of agony. The only totally inflexible deadlines are those related to workshop, and the FPT and Portfolio at the end of the course. If you anticipate being unable to meet these deadlines, talk to me.

Q3: Can I go over the page limit for SPT's or the FPT?

A3: Yes. The length guidelines are there to keep you from becoming overwhelmed. If you have more to say, though, say.

Q4: Can I go under the page limit for SPT's or the FPT?

A4: Yes. But for the FPT especially, you are encouraged to try to make the minimum page count, even if it means writing more than one piece, for the sake of experiment, and practice.

Q5: I am thinking of going totally outside the box for this SPT. I really have a vision here. Should I go with my gut, and leave the box, or be really concerned with whether my work will accord precisely with the prompt?

A5: Go with your gut.

Q6: Can I leave class early?

A6: If you feel you have reason, yes. Please let me know before class so that I can ready your parting materials.

Q7: Can I miss class?

A7: If you feel you have reason, yes. Apprise and turn in homework in advance if you can.

Q8a: I really enjoyed this piece we read. I would like to read more like this.

Q8b: I would really like to read something totally different from everything we're reading, and I have an idea of what that might look like.

A8: Let me know and I will try to bring something in for reserves.

Q9: What if I have performance anxiety?

A9: I do too. We can mutually support.

Q10: Is the teacher obliged to participate in class activities like writing exercises and improvisation?

A10: No. But she will give it a shot periodically.

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