

DOCUMENTARY THEATRE CREATION

Stony Brook University, Department of Theatre Arts
EGL 387 – Playwrighting
Fall 2015, T/R 10:00-11:20
Location: **HUM 2032**

E. Ann Kaplan, Distinguished Professor of English and Cultural
Analysis and Theory

Office—HUM 2093

Office Hours—Tues/Thurs 11.30 to 12.30

Wed 12.00pm to 1.00 or by appointment

EGL 387: Playwrighting

A workshop devoted to planning and writing finished scripts for the stage. This course offered as both EGL 387 and THR 326.

Prerequisite: WRT 102; one D.E.C. B or HUM course; one D.E.C. D or ARTS course

3 credits

Main Course Description:

This course invites you to engage deeply in contemporary socio-political events, particularly as related to environmental and human trauma and the complex, lingering issues related to Hurricane Sandy. With the help of faculty in Theatre Arts, we will study interview techniques in general as well as those specific to victims of disaster. We will then create a document and performance piece to be presented on the stage. You will learn the basics of psychic trauma so as to understand what some of your interviewees will have experienced and may still be working through. The interdisciplinary nature of the course, which includes Theatre Arts, film/photography, environmental humanities and cultural studies, creates a unique opportunity to bring together writers, performers, journalists, and

digital artists who will periodically talk in the class. No prior creative writing, research, or acting experience is necessary.

Additional description and context: we will use a specific interview technique that eschews note taking or recording (see “Interview Technique and Guidelines). This year’s subject matter is Hurricane Sandy and Environmental Trauma. We will explore our given subject from as many different angles as we desire in order to get as full a rendering as possible. For instance, for a previous incarnation of this class the subject was “the gut” and our class explored the bacterial biome, body dysmorphia disorder, digestion, fat shaming, “gut” feelings, etc.

Course Pre/co-requisites: none.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Demonstrate knowledge of various theatre companies and techniques of Interview-based theatre.
- Analyze existing interview-based texts.
- Analyze critical essays relevant to course research
- Apply a specific technique used to conduct and record interviews.
- Recreate interviews as monologue performances.
- Assemble interviews into a performance text.
- Evaluate performance text for its theatrical efficacy and for its ability to provide a varied and diverse perspective on [the](#) given topic.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- To analyze critical texts relevant to the topics in the course
- To deepen one’s understanding of acting, writing, and research by interviewing and examining “real” people.
- To experience first hand a leading technique of collaborative theatre creation.
- To gain more control over the means of production and of creating theater.

ATTENDANCE:

This is a workshop and collaborative class, attendance at every class is crucial to the process and, thus, mandatory. Two unexcused absences will result in a half-grade reduction to the final grade. Each absence thereafter will result in further half-grade reductions. Excused absences (significant illness) must include documentation from the treating physician (not just the family doctor.) Urgent family matters (such as a death in the family) will be treated with sympathy and

understanding but will also require specific and official documentation. Lateness - two times late is equal to one absence.

Required Texts (Available in Bookstore)

Plays:

The Exonerated by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen.

The Laramie Project by Tectonic Theatre Group

Critical Commentary

Trauma: Explorations in Memory, edited by Cathy Caruth

Articles (to be distributed in class) and available on Blackboard:

“The Uses of Empathy: Theatre in the Real World” by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen.

“The Civilians: How we Work”

E. Ann Kaplan, “Prologue: Hurricane Sandy” and “Why Trauma Now?”

Additional material will be distributed in class.

Students should also budget for photocopying of assignments.

GRADING

Assessment overview:

- Assigned readings.
- Research presentations, oral and written.
- Conducted interviews.
- Performance/memorization of interviews.
- Collaborative interview assembly.
- Final performance.

Course grade – A = 95 and above, A- = 90-94, B+ = 87-89, B = 84-86, B- = 80-83, C+ = 77-79, C = 74-76, C- = 70-73, D+ = 67-69, D = 65-67.

Specific grading for coursework:

Interviews = 45 points total.

Two interviews and one multimedia or “found text” presentation worth 15 points each. You may choose to do three interviews instead of the multimedia presentation.

Each interview grade will be based on three criteria:

- interview quality (thoughtful questions, preparedness, content and variety of the three interviews.)
- the “re-creation” in class (being prepared to perform, not read the interview.)
- a clear, cogent write-up of the interview (typed) with all supporting materials properly prepared and posted to Blackboard on time.

“Writing” of the final performance piece = 20 points.

Editing the interviews to create the text of the performance piece will be done collaboratively, in small groups, in class and outside of class. Grading rubric includes staying within the parameters of time and subject matter, using a variety of interviews to present an in-depth exploration of the topic, “cutting and pasting” interview texts to create a dialectic.

Final performance = 20 points.

Grade based on preparedness, knowing cues, and not reading off the page.

Attendance and participation = 15 points.

Participation includes active listening and substantive contributions to all discussions, including our initial brainstorming and research, classmates’ interviews, and our process of theatre creation.

Late assignments will be marked down significantly.

CLASS AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE:

Course schedule is subject to change depending on class size and logistics. All changes will be posted on Blackboard. It is the student's responsibility to check emails and Blackboard regularly. This is important.

Tuesday, August 25

Introduction to the course and the topic of Hurricane Sandy
Brief introduction to the history and methodology of the Joint Stock approach to documentary theatre, Kenneth Weitzman's special area.
Discussion of E. Ann Kaplan's work about and relevance to what we're doing.

Introduction of performance subject for exploration and initial brainstorming exercise.

Discussion of interview/performance technique – guideline sheets reviewed.
Scheduling of interviews/performance times – sign-up sheets.

Assignment for next class:

Read Blank and Jensen, "The Uses of Empathy" (BB)
Brainstorm ideas for interviews
Initial research assignment: Everyone bring in an article or personal experience related to Hurricane Sandy. One excellent source for research is the website superstormsandyresearchlab.com

Thursday, August 27

In-class visitor (to be confirmed)
Discuss reading and research.
Discuss any remaining syllabus questions.
Set any remaining interview scheduling
Continue discussion on topic/research, interview ideas, and questions to ask.

Assignment for next class:

The Exonerated by Erik Jensen, Jessica Blank,
Note: Laramie Project to be read by September 3

Tuesday, September 1

Discuss reading and research.

Assignment for next class:

Read *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and The Tectonic Theater

Thursday, September 3

Discuss *Laramie*

Discuss any research not discussed on Thursday

Assignment for next class:

Read Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony” in Caruth, p.61-75
Read Caruth, “Introduction” to her anthology (?)
Interviews

Tuesday, September 8 (NO CLASS—LABOR DAY)

Assignment for next class:

Interviews

Thursday, September 10

Interview recreations and discussion – 3

Assignment for next class:

Interviews.

Tuesday, September 15

Interview recreations and discussion – 4

Thursday, September 17

Interview recreations and discussion – 4

Assignment for Next Class:

Read Laura S. Bown, “on a feminist approach to psychic trauma”, in Caruth, 100-112

Tuesday, September 22

Interview recreations and discussion – 2

Discuss “on a feminist approach to psychic trauma”,

Thursday, September 24

Interview recreations and discussion—4

Assignment for next class:

Read Kai Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in Caruth
183-199

Tuesday, September 29

Interview recreations and discussion—2 (Round 1 complete)

Discuss reading

Take stock of first round of interviews.

Begin to discuss Trauma and round two interviews.

Assignment for next class:

Read E. Ann Kaplan, “Prologue: Hurricane Sandy” (BB)

Thursday, October 1

Discuss Reading

Continue discussion of trauma

Assignment

Second round interviews

Tuesday, October 6

Interview recreations and discussion – 4 (second round)

Assignment:

Read Kaplan “Why Trauma Now”? (BB)

Thursday, October 8

Interview recreations and discussion – 2

Discuss Kaplan

Possible guest speaker.

Tuesday, October 13

Interview recreations and discussion – 2 (if needed)

Powerpoint Images of Community Response to Hurricane Sandy

Assignment

Begin work on proposal for multimedia or found text or locating 3rd interview.

Thursday, October 15

Visitor to class (Mary Tresciatti)

Assignment for next class:

Post Proposal by October 20 class
Interview recreations and discussion - 4

Tuesday, October 20

Interview recreations and discussion - 4
Proposals Due.

Thursday, October 22, (we left this out)

Interview recreations and discussion —4 (Round 2 might be complete here)

October 27th

Interview recreations if necessary.
Possible Guest Speaker (to be decided)
Assignment for next class
Second round interviews

October 29th

Remaining Interviews; Complete Round 2 (if necessary)
Take stock of interview material so far
Multimedia/found text in-class discussion/presentation (depending on time)

Nov 3

Visitor or look at their multimedia here
Post on Blackboard

Thursday, November 5

Thematic headings/Act titles and writing teams.

Assignment for next class:

Read all interviews/research materials/writings and highlight all appropriate material.

Tuesday, November 10 and Thursday, November 12

Group editing in class; First draft of the final performance text created.

Assignment for next class:

Finish performance text draft.

Tuesday, November 17 - Tuesday, November 24 (3 classes)

Read through of first draft and make revisions

Final adjustments/overlap negotiations/revisions to script

Assignment for next class:

Prep for rehearsal and performance.

NB: Wed Nov. 18: Required Workshop and Performance

Superhero Clubhouse workshop on creating environmental theatre during Campus Life, 1:00-2:20, Staller Center, location tba.

Jupiter by Jeremy Pickard and the Superhero Clubhouse, Staller Center, time tba.

Tuesday, December 1 and Thursday, December 3

Rehearse/run through.

Finals Period: December 11: 11.15-1.45

Performance and wrap-up.

INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE AND GUIDELINES

Choose your interviews well. Pick people to interview who will give you the most interesting and varied content. Remember, we are exploring this topic from as many different angles (direct and oblique) that we can.

Note: you may not interview someone you know well.

Spend time preparing thoughtful questions. Study them before the interview, but do not bring written questions to the interview.

Allow the interview to veer off in unexpected directions. The most interesting details may be found in the digressions.

Try not to ask leading questions; e.g. “Isn’t it terrible that...” Try to approach each interview with an open mind; avoid value judgments in general.

Observing and listening is key: observe details of physicality, intonation, speech patterns, etc.

Do not tape record the interview and do not take notes during the interview. When the interview is finished, go somewhere quiet and write down, stream of consciousness, everything you remember about the interview and the interviewee. Do not worry about proper chronology as you write. You will subconsciously create a kind of order to the interview that will likely not be chronological. If chronology is very important to the interview, then this can be adjusted during the re-creation in class and/or in the typed version distributed to the class.

Your typed account of the interview must be posted *prior* to the start of class on the day of your re-creation. Post it to Blackboard in the folder labeled with your name and group number on it.

INTERVIEW RE-CREATION GUIDELINES

Bring in notes written in an easy shorthand format so that you can refer to them if need be; note cards are best.

“Perform” the interview “out” to the class. Sit in a chair or on the ground or sit however the person you interviewed sat.

You may not read from your notes. This must be a kind of performance. You may, however, refer to you notes here or there. But you should come to class prepared, so that in all likelihood you won’t need the notes.

The preferred performance style of the re-creation is that of understatement. Caricature should be diligently avoided. The goal is not to comment on the person interviewed but to capture their essence in one or two spare strokes; a detail or two, such as a rapid speech pattern or the fact that s/he always smiled when recounting upsetting details is plenty. Respect is key.

Your typed account of the interview must be posted *prior* to the start of class on the day of your re-creation. Post it to Blackboard in the folder labeled with your name and group number on it.

The typed account should be written in full sentences (as full as the sentences of the interviewee’s were, meaning no shorthand or outline.) Include a heading that lists your name and the first name only of the person you interviewed. In your interview account, do not include the questions you asked or what you said during the interview, only what the interviewee said and did. But do email to the professor one separate copy of the questions you prepared for the interview.

GUIDELINES FOR EDITING PERFORMANCE TEXT

We will come up with 5-6 thematic subject headings that will serve essentially as the “Acts” of the final performance piece. Each student will choose or be assigned to a small group in charge of writing one particular thematic section or Act.

Each Act will be constructed as a self-contained play - meaning, it could stand alone as a one-act play.

Prior to the editing session, for homework, each student will read the texts of *all* the interviews done during the semester and underline any material that fits within his/her particular act.

Each group will also bring in suggestions, if any, more multimedia components to accompany the text.

During the class(es) in which we edit:

Bring in laptop and/or hard copies of all interviews.

Each group will collaboratively arrange their highlighted material into a performance text (by cutting and pasting highlighted sections onto a document.)

As a group, discuss your highlighted sections (and multimedia) and brainstorm an approach to creating your Act. At the end of class each group will discuss their approach, their rhyme and reason for organizing their Act as they did.

A page/time limit will be established at the beginning of class.

Cut and paste ‘character’ names so each line of dialogue has a corresponding character name (and actor) assigned to it.

Note: a single actor should not play more than one character within each Act (each actor will play only the characters he/she interviewed.)

No sentences may be altered, cut, or added to. For example, if the sentence is transcribed as “Jack went up the hill.”, it cannot be used in the performance text as: “Jack *ran* up the hill.”, or “*He* went up the hill.”, or “Jack went up.”, etc., etc.

Complete sentences can, however, be re-ordered. This is to say, the chronology of the interview can be re-ordered. But try to remain true to the interview; the original sense and context of the interview should be preserved. Do not include or add any stage directions.

Keep the play moving. Avoid long sections of text delivered by one character.

READ-THROUGH

Each group will post copies of their Act on Blackboard for all to see. Include a page that gives a character (and actor) list. If other elements such as slides, video, music, etc. is going to be used, post it *and* bring those elements in to class.

The class will establish an Act order then read through each of them. Each group not reading will assign a group member to keep track of dialogue that overlaps with dialogue in their Act (*important to note not just that there is an overlap but with whose group the overlap exists.*)

Decisions about cuts (in overlaps and in general) will be negotiated. The reason each group used particular pieces of dialogue (or multimedia) will be taken into account. The Professor will have final say on any and all cuts.

After cuts are made, the class will do a second read-through after which final cuts will be made and final versions of each Act will be handed in. Performance text is now set.

Professors will make copies of the complete performance text.

PERFORMANCE

Study the script. Be very familiar with your part and *memorize* your cues. We will rehearse the performance piece, working transitions in particular.

Performances, as with the interviews, should be “out” to the audience. You will have a script in hand but do not read your dialogue, perform it.

Please be true to the understated way in which you performed your character in class. An audience should not change this.

The Professor will greet the audience and introduce the piece. Each Act title will be introduced by an actor, as will the characters at the top of each Act.

When not speaking, (or, if called for in the text, “interacting” with the character speaking) actors’ heads should be focused down on the script so no dialogue between characters is assumed falsely. This will also avoid any assumed “comment” on the character being made by another character or actor.

DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS) STATEMENT (must be the following language)

If you have a physical, psychological, medical or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services, ECC (Educational Communications Center) Building, room128, (631) 632-6748. They will determine with you what accommodations, if any, are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential.

[In addition, this statement on emergency evacuation is often included, but not required:
Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and Disability Support Services. For procedures and information go to the following website: <http://www.stonybrook.edu/ehs/fire/disabilities>.]

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT (must be the following language as approved by the undergrad council):

Each student must pursue his or her academic goals honestly and be personally accountable for all submitted work. Representing another person's work as your own is always wrong. Faculty are required to report any suspected instances of academic dishonesty to the Academic Judiciary. Faculty in the Health Sciences Center (School of Health Technology & Management, Nursing, Social Welfare, Dental Medicine) and School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures. For more comprehensive information on academic integrity, including categories of academic dishonesty, please refer to the academic judiciary website at <http://www.stonybrook.edu/uaa/academicjudiciary/>

CRITICAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT (must be the following language as approved by the undergrad council):

Stony Brook University expects students to respect the rights, privileges, and property of other people. Faculty are required to report to the Office of Judicial Affairs any disruptive behavior that interrupts their ability to teach, compromises the safety of the learning environment, or inhibits students' ability to learn. Faculty in the HSC Schools and the School of Medicine are required to follow their school-specific procedures.