



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **Literary, Theatrical and Cinematic Approaches to Drama**

Curriculum Unit 95.02.10  
by Paul E. Turtola

### **Introduction**

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One of the many small burdens for high school students seems to be reading a full length play. Some students say they don't spend the time to read a play because it isn't interesting enough to them. Some of them hide reading deficiencies that they have, and this disorder makes the chore seem like a nearly endless one (some are unaware that reading deficiencies even exist). Others don't have the attention span to stay with what they are reading and fail to comprehend the text fully.

After hours of television viewing, it seems that teenagers are attuned to the visual and acoustic elements of whatever it is that they are watching: students usually produce answers to a play's basic who, what, where and when questions. But few respond critically and many fail to answer the more important questions of how and why. Such shortcomings produce the absence of proper thematic understanding of the artist's work.

### **Objectives of the Unit**

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This course, through a number of projects, will strengthen students' powers of observation and, in time, they will think more critically about many things they see and hear. This will apply not only to drama, but to other problems they face in life outside school as well.

To think critically and know what to look for and listen to, students must be attentive to the scripts covered in the course. The course will be a fun way to learn about the worlds of theater, literature, acting and film, and will help young people develop a sense of personal growth along the way. It will attempt to reach young peoples' desires to know more about themselves and learn about new, interesting things in the theater and film world that they couldn't learn in any other class at school. Throughout the unit, students will express themselves in a knowledgeable and articulate manner, using the vocabulary and terms found in the class, as well as data they will acquire in their own study.

By explaining drama to students through three important theater artists, the playwright, actor and director, it will be possible to teach teenagers respect for the work that these artists contribute to their craft. Rather than studying just the text of a play for its content, the course will allow students to study the people who make the

play happen. Instead of the conventional English class treatment of a play as text, the course will go a step further in its treatment by showing how the text becomes a live, theatrical event.

The course offers three approaches to drama: the literary work of the playwright, the theatrical work of the actor, and the cinematic work of the director. It will delve into the reasons why a play is written by spending time understanding the writer's personal experiences and beliefs. It will explore the work of the actor, challenged to portray a character from the play and, finally, it will give students insight into how a director interprets and presents the drama as a living theatrical or film event.

In an academic setting, students are often tested on a play's meaning, or they write papers that deal with various themes contained in the work. These methods are valid educational concepts, for they teach students how to analyze literature and develop their writing skills, but the original intent of the play, as theater, is often overlooked. By teaching students the role that artists play in an artistic event first, they can better appreciate the merits of plays and enjoy reading them more than they had in the past. By taking outside approaches to a drama, i.e.-the literary, theatrical and cinematic ones-reading a play becomes a prerequisite for their writing, acting or directing work, and if students enjoy what they are doing in the course (performing scenes, interviewing artists, watching and reviewing films), reading plays will become less work and more fun.

## Strategies for the Unit

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Much of the course will be spent on performing scenes from plays on the reading list that follows the unit. The reading list covers a great variety of styles and time periods, and the instructor should prepare scenes using as many items from the list as possible. This will give students a chance to choose their own material, and give them a sense of theater history as well. In addition to the plays on the list, there will be a need to add productions of plays performed at local theaters as well as in school productions.

Before students can be encouraged to study the life of some unknown playwright, or understand the creative work of a director, they will want to find their own personal reasons for researching writers and directors. When students begin exploring their own talent (and the scenework in class will allow them the opportunity to do so), they will seek ways of helping themselves improve. By using scene work early in the course, students actively become aware of better ways of getting work done. If students have fun with acting and seek ways of finding out how to get better at it, they will accept the need to read plays and research people.

## Unit Description

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### **The Literary Work of The Playwright**

Students may become interested in drama if they take the opportunity to discover the author's reasons for writing a play. Political, historical and economic aspects of the writer's work can help the student understand how people live and behave at various periods in history. After reading a play and knowing its background, the individual can form an opinion based on an observation of the material, learn a previously unknown aspect of history, or be influenced by a particular style or philosophy.

The main focus in a student's research on the literary work of the playwright will be to take the writer's personal reasons for writing the work as the central idea. Did the playwright write the play as an autobiographical account, or choose to write biographically about someone important? Is the writer making a statement about someone or something in particular? What were the events that enabled the author to write the play?

With the playwright as the focus of the literary aspect of drama, the classroom's library will need to include an array of plays from many theater styles. Plays ranging from the Greek and Roman tragedies, medieval pageant plays, "commedia dell'arte", Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages, early modern drama, and to the present should be represented with as many copies as needed for each student in the class. If it is not possible to have so many scripts available, then many styles need to be shown through performance events and film to provide an adequate sense of theater history.

### **Strategies for Literary Work**

The following research materials are samples of the teaching of a playwright's work(s) to a high school theater class. A number of renowned playwrights who span the early classical periods to drama as we know it today, should be studied throughout the course. This unit focuses on two modern American playwrights, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, with commentary on a sample of their work. The instructor should limit the amount of time spent in the classroom lecturing on these writers, and students should work on this material outside class and concentrate primarily on scene work during class. The point is to make class time the most enjoyable part of the course by working on scenes from plays. Using this acting approach at the start of the course will make students want to find out more about the character they are portraying. By reading the play on their own, students can work and develop at a pace that is comfortable and productive.

Students will develop a discipline of their own towards researching playwrights outside class and periodically will need to show their work to receive proper credit for the course. Combined with watching plays at local theaters and reviewing films watched in class or at other movie theaters, the course should be interesting and diverse enough to keeping even a teenager satisfied.

## Two Samples of Literary Work

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### A. Tennessee Williams

Born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, Tennessee was the son of a shoe salesman who moved his family to a dark and dreary tenement in St. Louis. Using this Missouri city as the setting of his play, “The Glass Menagerie”, Williams created his drama by using personal family experiences.

After moving to St. Louis, both Tennessee and his sister Rose responded badly to their newer, more dreary environment, and both had breakdowns as a result of this horrid change in their lives. Tennessee became so ill that he suffered partial paralysis and was unable to participate in many school activities. A highly intellectual young man, he spent a large amount of time reading and developing his writing talent. Though Tennessee later overcame his physical problems and left the family to pursue a career in writing, his sister Rose was a much sadder case. Rose became so desperately ill from depression that her family decided to have a lobotomy performed on her. This strategy, however, was not effective, and Rose sank into an even more passive and hopeless state than before. Williams felt awful about this tragic situation, feeling guilty for not talking his parents out of such a horrid operation to his sister. This sorrow stayed with him and was the impetus for writing a play that represented his family’s dramatic story.

#### “The Glass Menagerie”

In “The Glass Menagerie”, Tom Wingfield’s memories are similar to the playwright’s own recollections of himself and of his sister’s happier school days as well. The play in its entirety acts as a memory for Tennessee Williams, for it comes very close to his actual experience with his family and is a tribute to the sister he dearly loved. The character of Laura Wingfield is a stunning depiction of Williams’ sister, Rose, a physically and psychically frail young woman, who withdraws from life after the family moves to St. Louis. Like Rose, Laura becomes a great disappointment to her mother (Amanda). She calls herself a cripple and has no self esteem or hopes for the future that her mother has planned for her. Rather than fight to avoid her shyness and physical handicap, Laura retreats into a fantasy world of tiny glass animals that she collects in the family tenement. Williams uses Tom Wingfield to voice his own thoughts, and, as a younger Tennessee, he rebels against his mother’s Old South principals and ideas about success. His ambition to write fuels his desire to leave his family and St. Louis behind, just as his father’s love of the sea did just a short time before. Wingfield doubles as the narrator, and it is he who calls this story a “memory play.” According to the playwright’s own production notes, the memory play uses projections and special music to recall the past.

#### “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”

Tennessee Williams wrote about his family experiences in other plays as well. In “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”, William recalls deriving the title from a phrase that his father, Cornelius, used about his mother: he would often tell his wife that she made him “as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof.” Williams created the role of Big Daddy with his father in mind, as well as using the son (Brick) in an autobiographical way. It is with this character that he offers hints about his awareness of his own homosexuality, although he revealed that personal element only obliquely in this play and other works until he “came out” during an interview with David Frost in 1970. It is worth noting that in the film version, all suggestions of homosexuality were removed, and it focused instead on the character’s immaturity and his need to grow up sufficiently to be able to assume the responsibilities of marriage (the role of Brick was played by Paul Newman).

The strong personal experiences of Tennessee Williams' life provided the material for his plays. While not all writers are as emotionally and personally close to their material, Williams' dramatic situations accompanied by the sharp, naturalistic dialogue he uses to recreate his memories, make him one of America's greatest playwrights.

## **B. Arthur Miller**

Another example of the literary work that is contained in the course deals not so much with biographical elements that a writer includes in a work, but with the need for the writer to express feelings or strong beliefs to an audience.

Arthur Miller is one of the most important, and most honored playwrights in American history. He was born in New York on October 17, 1915, the second of three children. His working-class family had a deep influence on him, and in all his plays there is a sensitivity to the common man and those struggles through which he defines himself and his place in society.

Arthur Miller's work covers a wide range of material, much of it growing from his childhood memories of a tightly-knit and eccentric Jewish family. In his youth, Miller was actively involved with political issues and experienced problems with anti-Semitism in the thirties and forties. While Tennessee Williams used personal experiences for their emotional impact in his writing, Arthur Miller chose to create his work to express his political concerns and focused the content and themes around his personal views about certain issues.

### **"The Crucible"**

"The Crucible", written in 1953, is an example of Miller's interpretation of the social hysteria sweeping the United States. Critical reaction to the play was mixed. Many admired its craftsmanship and theatricality, but many also thought it was too blatantly topical, too obviously based upon the Joseph McCarthy hearings. Only when the play was revived in an Off-Broadway production a few years later did it find a truly enthusiastic reception. It ran for over 500 performances, and was finally seen not as a piece of political tract writing, but as an engaging and timeless drama. The proof of this universality is seen in its continued popularity, not only in this country, but around the world.

The play portrayed witchhunts of seventeenth century New England and concentrated on the young girls of Salem Massachusetts. When it was written, America was in the midst of an outbreak of fear and accusation, and the anti-Communist hysteria of Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), was well under way. The Committee held hearings to flush out suspected Communists from all areas of American life, particularly the arts. Many artists and performers came under unfair scrutiny for their political views and allegiances, and were often asked to testify against their friends. Many critics denigrated the play because they thought it was a thinly veiled attack on that event.

During this period, many artists were blacklisted and therefore prevented from working in commercial theaters and movie companies. Some were imprisoned for not testifying at others' trials, and some had their reputations and careers destroyed. Arthur Miller was fearless in facing down the HUAC, and he was convicted of contempt of court for not testifying against his friends. For a time he, too, was blacklisted, but his contempt decision was reversed and he was not imprisoned. Given his personal political stance during this volatile time, it is not surprising to see that Miller's themes usually center on matters of social concern.

## Activities for Literary Work

-Research each play's background before reading it. A brief study should be made of events that may have influenced the writer, so that the student may understand the writer's reasons for writing the work,

-As an assignment, the student must select a topic dealing with one of the following items and be able to report to the class the results. This and other background material may lend insight into why the play was written.

Choose among the following:

-The local history of the period.

-The cultural context of the play's characters.

-Important events that occurred.

-Religious or political ideals people might have had.

-After reading "The Glass Menagerie", come up with a list of examples from the script that reinforce the playwright's personal experiences. What characters were used to support the playwright's views? Were any characters used to oppose them? Are there any elements of the design of the play (sets, lighting, music, costumes or make-up) written into the script that enhance the playwright's message? This last question will be an interesting project in itself, for if the play is later seen in performance or on film there may be more responses towards the treatment of the play and whether it served the playwright's theme very well.

-Take a play that deals with a historical reference or a political bias, like "The Crucible", and challenge the student to come up with a contemporary comparison to what was read. Has this contemporary event influenced anyone to write about it? Try to develop a list of any plays, books, movies or songs that may be based on a recent occurrence. If a student has a talent for creating something, assign an interpretation of a modern event in recent history to work on, then write a play, make a video, compose a song or choreograph a dance or movement piece that expresses views about an influential event. Some modern examples may include: terrorism in the USA, the presently unpopular political system, the outbreak of AIDS, poverty, racism, the danger of gangs in our society, as well as a myriad of other world events. By creating a piece of art in this manner, students can develop an understanding of the function that art fulfills for us, in that it not only entertains, but also documents, analyzes and meditates upon how we live.

-Gather a group of people. Hand out five or six pieces of paper, folded. On two of them, write "Witch." Now have the rest of the group decide which of them are witches, without asking them any questions directly. Make all your decisions based on what you see, and how you interpret their behavior. All the persons selected should try to make the inquisitors believe they are the witch.

-Study the events surrounding the Joseph McCarthy hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and show how these are mirrored in "The Crucible". Was that a situation that could only have occurred during the "cold war" of the 1950's?

## **The Theatrical Work of the Actor**

### ***Objectives***

Nearly all of the plays we work on in class will, at the beginning of the course, concentrate on the performance or theatrical aspect of drama. We will attempt to understand what makes a play theatrical by focusing on the actor's work in play analysis and characterization. By exploring the role of the actor in a particular group of scenes, students may be able to interpret the written text as living dialogue. After careful analysis of the scene's meaning in terms of plot, a strategy for the student may include role playing and improvisation for clearer understanding of the characters' actions and motives. This section of scene work, while being mindful of the play's form and content, will emphasize the need to perform the play in the way it was intended to be expressed: through the body and voice of the actor.

### **Strategies for Theatrical Work**

As students actively rehearse and perform scenes in the classroom, the instructor should notice which scenes are of greater interest to the class than others. These scenes should be the material used for further literary and cinematic work. The course should not attempt to cover all three approaches (literary, theatrical and cinematic) for every play that the class works on. Students should be able to choose what plays, playwrights, styles, and time periods they want to research. At the conclusion of the course, credit should be based on achievement in classroom work, written journals and interview logs, as well as papers dealing with directing and film work as the course develops and students progress to higher learning levels. It is very important that the students develop independent work habits and can fulfill their own personal needs in the course. Some students will want to work on more plays than others, and a few may not even be excited about the prospect of acting in front of others. The instructor will have to make certain information known to the class about how much work is to be completed by the end of the course, but the actual quantity of work should not necessarily be the same for all students.

Along with scene work in the classroom, it will be very helpful and more interesting for the students to learn methods of acting from work done by other actors in professional and non-professional productions attended throughout the school year. This unit will provide a number of interviews with noteworthy actors to offer different approaches to script analysis and methods of characterization, supplementing rehearsal and performance done in the classroom.

As part of this curriculum, students will see numerous live theater performances and films throughout the weeks of the course. They will also be expected to assemble a collection of interviews from actors they have either seen perform in person, seen on television or read about. These interviews may come from books, magazines, newspapers, radio or television recordings, and will be useful in preparing the student to learn various methods of acting. After attending live performances, the student will interview a member of the production's company as part of this research. By communicating with working artists, students may develop a working vocabulary while gaining a better attitude towards the commitment it takes to become a theater artist.

The following material on Geraldine Page sheds light on how an actor prepares, and demonstrates how to interview. It illuminates the professional demands of the actor and stresses the work ethic and discipline necessary to persevere in a very difficult field.

## **A Sample Interview of Geraldine Page**

Geraldine Page offers her views on acting in an interview with Jeanmarie Kolter. She feels that script study is essential in promoting the development of any character. Through the on-going study of acting with a variety of teachers a respect for acting styles can be formed. It is often necessary for the actor to work with others who have learned acting from different schools and disciplines. Ms. Page has this to say about acting:

. . . People will assume that all you have to do is read something and then you can get up and act professionally. You can't. If you put down first that I am a graduate of a regular drama school, that I spent seven years in winter and summer stock, that I studied seven years with Uta Hagen and two years with Mira Rostova, and was at the Actors Studio for ten years, then if I say I read a script, put it away and don't think about it, it's not misleading. The training that I have is in my brain and it works on material in not-so-conscious ways. I have all sorts of complicated, computerized knowledge stored away in the back of mind. When I do wing it, a lot of work has been done that I wouldn't have time to sit down and explain to everybody. That sounds pretentious, but the only alternative is to be very cavalier. <sup>1</sup>

Respect for another acting philosophy can carry actors far when it comes to the theater profession. An actor may avoid needless conflict with colleagues over artistic matters when he or she understands different methods of doing things. Page believes that a good director will make use of actors' methods, blend them, and produce a unified piece of work that serves the play.

## **William Shakespeare**

Part of the acting work in the course will focus on the plays of William Shakespeare. His plays will be used in class to learn acting methods in the same way that other scenes are used, but with particular emphasis on the language of his great comedies and tragedies. The success of this scene study will depend on students' abilities to identify with dialogue that is over four hundred years old and make it understandable dialogue in their acting to a contemporary audience. Some of the work in class, while focusing mainly on acting scenes, will require some extra study, and some class time should be devoted to this area. If an expert on Shakespearean acting can be brought into the class, perhaps a workshop of some sort could be held. An excellent book entitled "Shakespeare and His Players", by Martin Holmes, is a good resource for studying this particular type of acting style. In it, students may learn about Shakespeare's methods and his relationship to the company of actors he wrote for.

## **Research for Acting Shakespeare**

It was Shakespeare's intention to write for the entertainment of Elizabethan audiences at the Globe Playhouse, and he could not afford to dwell too long on points that called for serious contemplation. His great speeches, while considered poetry by some, are drama. They are spoken and felt by actors who bring the words to life through the characters in the play. Words, lines or phrases have to create an immediate impression at the moment they are heard, and then the scene must go on. There is no time to go back and be thoughtful and analytical about what was just said. As Martin Holmes notes:

"Nowadays we can refresh our memories, or repeat our sensations, by studying the text upon the printed page, but Shakespeare's original audiences could not do anything of the sort, and he had no reason to suppose, when he wrote, that they would ever want to. He had to make his effects at the first hearing, or not at all." <sup>2</sup>

The many scholars who have written volumes dealing with the works of the Bard, do so after repeatedly going



over the written text, but the true wonder of his plays was the immediate impact that they had on a live audience. While creating a solid, well-made piece of literature, Shakespeare also wrote for particular actors in his company and was mindful of the variety of spectators in the audience that his company performed for from week to week. His work on the play continued after the writing stage, for he spent much time working with the actors. It was at this rehearsal stage of the productions that Shakespeare would see his work fully realized, and it was the work done by his actors—the unwritten work, that is—that gave his plays life.

Shakespeare, for instance, may refer to soldiers and maids and lords and messengers in his plays by simply stating “they fight” or “Enter a messenger,” etc. The actors portraying such minor roles must add a personal dimension to the role, and as soon as we see this in a performance, we see how one soldier or messenger may be different from another soldier or messenger not only in their natures, but in relation to the story and their effect upon it. As Holmes puts it:

“It is all very well to read a long speech, or a brisk passage of dialogue, and admire the poetry, the tenderness or the wit, but it is still more illuminating to consider such a passage occasionally from the transmitting rather than the receiving end. The speech takes on a different quality at once. Instead of being a piece of Shakespeare to be respected, it becomes the expression of somebody’s feelings—the characters’, primarily, not the author’s—and its object is to convey information, or to arouse an emotion of some sort, or possibly both at once. One finds oneself considering afresh what the words actually mean, what impression they are intended to convey, and how best one can convey that impression in the process of delivering them. In other words, the passage is coming to life.”<sup>3</sup>

## Research on a Shakespearean Actor

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### Laurence Olivier

Until his death in 1987, Laurence Olivier was one of the world’s finest stage and film actors. It would be wise indeed to study his methods to develop a respect for the acting craft. Olivier stressed the importance of hard work and individual determination to succeed in the cut-throat world of the theater. A set of standards and self-discipline is needed to withstand the pressures on the aspiring actor, and the need to make difficult decisions at pivotal moments is crucial to success.

“In the end we must decide for ourselves; but it is making the right decisions that counts, deciding and holding onto your beliefs, for it is you, and only you, at the end of the day, who can look after yourself, No one else really cares; you don’t need glasses to see that self-preservation is on the menu. You must have the strength, the will and the determination of an ox, and you must believe in your own beliefs. . . .

. . . We must in the end, look to ourselves. We can take counsel, we can take advice, but in the end we must decide; it must be our decision. This is not to say we mustn’t learn—we must. We must pick the brains of those who went before us; watch, learn and listen, research and discover; but above all, the final decision must be our own.”<sup>4</sup>

From his belief in hard work and determination, Olivier describes the preparation for his portrayal of Hamlet as an exploration into the human mind. While it isn’t necessary to research every aspect of each character discussed by the critics, it is important to know as much as possible about the person, so that proper choices

can be made towards a satisfactory performance of the role. By being familiar with many ways to play Hamlet and by knowing different parts of his nature, the actor is allowed to choose those elements of the character that are right for playing this complex figure.

“‘The man in black’ is always interesting; as an actor your job is to enable the audience to follow his journey from one characteristic to another, from mood to mood. The actor must be absolutely clear in his mind where he is going, whatever theories he has nursed (and over the years there have been many); in the end he must tell the story.”<sup>5</sup>

Olivier describes Hamlet as a man with a myriad of hidden problems, and while he could easily creep inside the roles of Othello or Richard, he is unable to really describe how he got inside Hamlet. He again stresses the importance of believing in personal choices, and (whether one’s performance is received well or not) to be committed to one’s own interpretation and performance.

### **Activities for Theatrical Work**

-Prepare questions based on a play that has been studied in class and which will be seen in a live production during the course. Prepare questions for one or more of the actors in the play that pertain to the performance. For example: how did the actor work on the piece, develop the character being portrayed, feel about working with other actors? What was the director’s vision of the play? Did the design of set, lights or costumes influence the actor in any way? Keep a log of interviews from theater artists throughout the course and refer to these responses during acting work in the classroom.

-It is recommended that, in addition to a notebook of collected interviews, an acting journal of some sort be kept. The student may record parts of interviews and notes or thoughts pertaining to acting. Such detailed accounts of other actors may inspire students to form their own methods of learning and think critically about future work. After taking this personal project on, students may save the journal and keep it for years. Enjoyment may come from this assignment as well: much of it will be an individual’s own viewpoints about acting. There is much to be said for new actors who learn independently than by someone else trying to teach them how to act at every step of the way. Perhaps a respect towards acting will give students the desire to read more, and the plays that once seemed dull and a waste of time may become important material for learning the acting craft. By developing a more professional attitude toward learning (through reading about and meeting professional actors) students may show more of a desire to read and respond critically in the classroom.

-It would be very constructive if the teacher could arrange for a visit from a member of a theater company, whether it be a couple of actors, the director or a designer, or any other representative of the company. Invite them to come into the class and talk about the play and the professional life of a theater artist. It would make for a very interesting class if the students prepare questions for the guests in the same manner that they were used to reading and watching the numerous interviews of actors on acting. The more opportunities students have to meet with artists (and these people don’t have to be Broadway stars, just talented folk who enjoy what they do) and develop away of approaching them, the more they will feel comfortable learning how to develop acting skills. A successful theater class is one that has a creative and comfortable climate, so the sooner students become oriented to the theater world outside the classroom, the better the students’ attitude toward class work will become.

-When working in the classroom, rehearse scenes privately with the students, but perform them for other classes in the school, or invite another teacher, a guest or even the principal. This will give the students a chance to show their work to others and gain a sense of what a performance is like. Also, let a student have the chance to watch someone else perform a scene, without any pressure to work on the play performed. If the student watching is not obligated to work on that particular play, it is possible that by a casual interest in what was seen, that play may be read at the student's leisure. (If students find interest in plays that they aren't required to work on, but read them anyway, consider the course to be a huge success and tell others about it.)

By using the theatrical approach to drama early in the course, interest in plays and a willingness to perform them can be generated. This strategy will benefit students that have good interpretive skills, for the focus of the cinematic approach to drama lies in their ability to see and hear things and create an opinion about them. By interpreting what they watch in a film, students may become interested in a directorial perspective towards theater and film.

## **The Cinematic Work of the Director**

### **Objectives**

The unit will teach students the observational skills needed to watch the images of a film, so that they can develop their own thoughts and ideas. By introducing the film version of the plays we cover in class, students will get an opportunity to develop a sense of imagery and become more keen about "reading" a play, a performance, or a film.

The cinematic approach to drama will include films taught in class that originated as famous pieces of literature. While plays will be the focus of the class, we will use other pieces of literature as well. It will be in this section of the class that the student will learn to read a play in a different manner than ever before. By teaching the student to develop observational skills, it may be possible for the student to understand the work at many new interesting levels.

The unit will teach students the visual, acoustic and kinetic elements of a work. By understanding a film through sensory approaches-seeing images, hearing sounds, interpreting movement-a student can comprehend the work in a much more compelling way than by reading the pages of a book. Though theater and film need to be thought of as separate forms of art, the two work together very well when it comes to introducing drama to young high school students. In his book, *The Divine Pastime*, Harold Clurman, a New York theater critic for over forty-five years, devotes a chapter of his book on the theater to the movies:

"While the theater for centuries has been taken as an adjunct of literature, its very name derives from the Greek 'theatron,' which connotes seeing. In our country at least, the theater has become visually impoverished as well as verbally depleted.

"Drama signifies action. In this respect also, the theater has become poor. It is generally deficient in movement. By their very nature, films, even if we think of them only in regard to editing, are all movement. . .

“. . . Movies work directly on our senses. Because of all this they ‘grab’ us more readily than any other art.”<sup>6</sup>

While film has become a more popular art form than theater, no one art can replace another, and both can exist together in the art world.

“Films are a new and exciting mode of expression. They do not, I repeat, render any medium, however ancient or neglected, obsolete. What we are called upon to enjoy and evaluate in all the arts is the weight and quality of what they express.”<sup>7</sup>

Film, while being an exciting mode of expression, also serves a very practical use. To study the performances of past theatrical events, a medium must be available to record them. The use of videotape is enormously helpful in aiding the student to comprehend a work in a variety of ways, and will be used in the course as an important learning tool during scene work. The study of acting, directing, and watching a film is also made easier with the repeating ability of tape.

In the classroom teaching of the films of great plays, the choice of the film director as the central figure of the work will incorporate the writer’s and actor’s work previously described, and take another approach: that of the interpretive work involved in the making of a film. The student will also learn that without the writer and actor there is no film, and that to create a piece of cinematic art, a collaborative effort on the part of many artists is necessary. The student will learn that the director’s interpretation is a very personal vision of the writer’s work. The director can fulfill his ideas by using the actors to animate the play to get images across to his audience.

### **Strategies On Cinematic Work**

We will study a variety of films that correlate with the previous work described in this unit (i.e., the writer’s and actor’s input), but much of the work in class will focus on the mark a director puts on a film. A student may be able to discern the director’s work by previously viewing other versions of the play, or by watching other films by that director. This may also allow the student to appreciate a director’s style or method of creating a film in a certain way. The following are samples of films that may be purchased and kept in the school’s library:

#### **Max Reinhardt’s “ A Midsummer Night’s Dream”**

The film is interesting not only as an original interpretation of a great play, but is also a sample of Reinhardt’s work, the work of a legendary man of the theater, who personified the modern view of the director as the one who conceives and controls the entire production,

#### **Orson Welles’ “Macbeth”**

His interpretation came from the stage version of the play for the Federal Theater’s Harlem company in 1936, using an all black cast and setting the play in the West Indies. In the later film version of the play, Welles turns the witches into practitioners of voodoo, and they lend a sense of magic and evil spirituality that other film versions do not have.

#### **Laurence Olivier’s’ “Hamlet”**

In this film the director has boldly interpreted the work as a psychological drama about a man who could not make up his mind. For modern audiences this may be a valid treatment, but the film was controversial in that it moved away from the playwright’s intent.

### Three Versions of “Romeo and Juliet”

-1936, George Cukor. The film is a lavish production based on what a nineteenth century stock company production might look like.

-1954, Renato Castellani. A color film that was an attempt to take a non historical play on location in a historical setting, Verona Italy.

-1954, Lev Arnstam. Presented “The Ballet of Romeo and Juliet,” using the Bolshoi Theater Ballet Company. It is a very useful film in that it shows how much of the play communicates itself without the use of dialogue.

#### *Other Films. . .*

“Antigone”, George Tzavellas; 1962.

“The Would be Gentleman”, Jean Meyer; 1960.

“Cyrano de Bergerac”, Michael Gordon; 1950.

“Oedipus Rex”, Tyrone Guthrie; 1957.

“Tartuffe”, F.W. Murnau; 1925.

### Activities for Cinematic Work

-Watch three films based on a single story, myth or legend. The teacher should attempt to come up with many examples for students to choose from. For instance, the Camelot legend: use the musical version, “ Camelot”, the film “Excalibur”, and the recently released “First Knight”. After viewing the films, write a list of the similarities that exist not only in the plot, but in other areas as well: the settings, dialogue, style, camera shots, colors, moods, etc. Then write a description of those elements that were different from film to film, mentioning plot, characters and design. Explain what made the films unique and what the director’s interpretation had to do with the result. Finally, give a review of each film the same way you would read a reviewer’s piece in a magazine or newspaper. Be sure to explain why you feel the way you do about certain things and cite references to what you have learned in class that influenced you to respond in such a manner.

-Watch three films that are based on a single theme. Again, the teacher should have offerings to choose from, and the films may range from drama to comedy at various time periods. Take the theme of “love conquers all,” for instance. Describe how each of the following films treat this theme: “Much Ado About Nothing”, “Wuthering Heights”, and “West Side Story”. Be specific when proving your comments. Quote the text as often as you like, and include how the theme was developed by the director. What images were used to clarify his interpretation? Review each film briefly and write about what you might have done to strengthen the thematic values of the piece.

-View a scene from a film in three unique ways before viewing the film in its entirety. The first time, turn the brightness of the screen down so that you can't see the film, only hear it. On a piece of paper, record the acoustic images you heard and try to make out what is happening in the scene. On viewing the scene the second time, turn off the volume and bring the brightness back to the screen. Now view the scene through visual images only. Try not to use your perceptions of the scene from the previous viewing and try to hypothesize about what is happening in the scene. Third, replay the scene at fast speed and try to record any patterns of movement. Record the movement of characters in the scene, the camera, lighting, or any other effects that appear during the scene. Compare your findings with other students and try to come up with questions about the film that you are about to see in its entirety.

## Conclusion

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Often students will remark on a production in class, but they do not explain what they mean. While an attempt to answer is a positive sign, a simple word or phrase does not clearly express what they really think. Many young people lack the imagery needed to create their own views. They lack the critical knowledge, vocabulary and imagination to communicate properly. The course described here will have a direct impact on a student's ability to observe, think and create both critically and imaginatively through the varied activities that have been included in these pages.

### **Materials**

The curriculum unit recommends that the school develop a play, video and film library as a resource for class material. Other than this library, few materials are required for the unit to succeed:

- Copies of scripts for scene work.
- A television and VCR to present videos of movies.

## Notes

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1. Kolter, Jeanmarie. "Actors on Acting". New York. Sterling Publishing Co.; 1979. 17-18.
2. Holmes, Martin. "Shakespeare and his Players". New York. Charles Scribner and Sons; 1972. 5
3. Holmes, 7.
4. Olivier, Sir Laurence. "Laurence Olivier On Acting". New York. Simon and Schuster; 1986. 63.
5. Olivier, 83.
6. Clurman, Harold. "Reflections on Movies" (Chapter 50), "The Divine Pastime; Theater Essays". New York. MacMillan Publishing Co. 1974. 273.
7. Clurman, 274.

## Teacher's Bibliography

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Clurman, Harold. "Reflections on Movies" (Chapter 50), "The Divine Pastime; Theater Essays" 273-281. New York. MacMillan Publishing Co. 1974.

The famous theater critic's essays on theater and its history concerning the New York scene.

Holmes, Martin. "Shakespeare and his Players" 5-7. New York. Charles Scribner and Sons; 1972.

An informative view of the Elizabethan actor and the theater company of Shakespeare's time.

Jacobus, Lee A. "The Bedford Introduction to Drama (2nd Edition)" Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martins Press; 1993.

A useful text that has an abundance of classical and modern plays with commentaries.

Kolter, Jeanmarie. "Actors on Acting" 9-39. New York. Sterling Publishing Co.; 1979.

An actor's guide through interviews of well-known professional actors.

Olivier, Sir Laurence. "Laurence Olivier On Acting" 35-89. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1986.

In the biography written about him, Olivier complained that not enough was written about his acting methods. This book corrects that situation.

## Students' Reading List for Curriculum Unit

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"The Bedford Edition of Drama", Lee A. Jacobus, 1993, Bedford Books of St. Martins Press, Boston MA. This book is an excellent text, and contains the following plays: "Oedipus Rex", Sophocles; "Hamlet" and "The Tempest", William Shakespeare; "A Doll House", Henrik Ibsen; "Miss Julie", August Strindberg; "The Importance of Being Earnest", Oscar Wilde; "Cat on A Hot Tin Roof", Tennessee Williams; " 'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys", Athol Fugard; "Fences", August Wilson; "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World", Suzan-Lori Parks

### *Other Plays:*

"A Hatful of Rain", Michael V. Gazzo, 1954; Samuel French Inc. NY.

"Whose Life Is It Anyway?", Brian Clark, 1978; Avon Books, NY.

"A Raisin in the Sun", Lorraine Hansberry, 1951; Signet Books, NY.

"You Can't Take It With You", Moss Hart and George S. Kauffman, 1961; Simon and Schuster, NY.

"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", Edward Albee, 1962; Atheneum House, NY.

"A Streetcar Named Desire", Tennessee Williams, 1947; Signet Books, NY.

"To Kill a Mockingbird", Harper Lee, 1960; JB Lippincott, NY.

"Splendor in the Grass", William Inge, 1961; Bantam Books Inc., NY.

"The Glass Menagerie", Tennessee Williams, 1945; New Directions Pub. Co.

"Night Mother", Marsha Norman, 1983; Hill and Wang, NY.

"The House of Blue Leaves", John Guare, 1968; Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, NY.

"Romeo and Juliet/ West Side Story" 1965; Dell Publishing Co., NY.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream", William Shakespeare, 1963; Signet Classics, NY . "Othello", William Shakespeare, 1963; Washington Square Press, NY

"The Merchant of Venice", William Shakespeare, Washington Square Press, NY.

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