

Hampshire College Theatre Program

PLAY READING STUDY GUIDE

Brought to you by the Hampshire College Theatre faculty and staff.

Knowing how to read a play--learning how to read one--is not a complex or daunting matter. When you read a novel and the novelist describes a sunset to you, you do not merely read the words; you "see" what the words describe, and when the novelist puts down conversation, you silently "hear" what you read . . . automatically, without thinking about it. Why, then, should it be assumed that a play text presents problems far more difficult for the reader? Beyond the peculiar typesetting particular to a play, the procedures are the same; the acrobatics the mind performs are identical; the results need be no different. -Edward Albee

In reading plays, however, it should always be remembered that any play, however great, loses much when not seen in action. — George P. Baker

WHY READ PLAYS?

During your Division II you will be watching, producing, experiencing, and studying theatre. In addition to the work you will do in courses and the practical learning experiences in which you will engage, we would like you to consider a broad range of playscripts in conjunction with your concentration. Whether you're a playwright, designer, performance artist, actor, director, theatre educator or dramaturg, developing a familiarity with plays and playwrights is important for numerous reasons. One of the primary reasons for expanding your awareness of plays and playwrights is the common language or vocabulary used amongst theatre artists – professionals often make references to plays and playwrights in conversation.

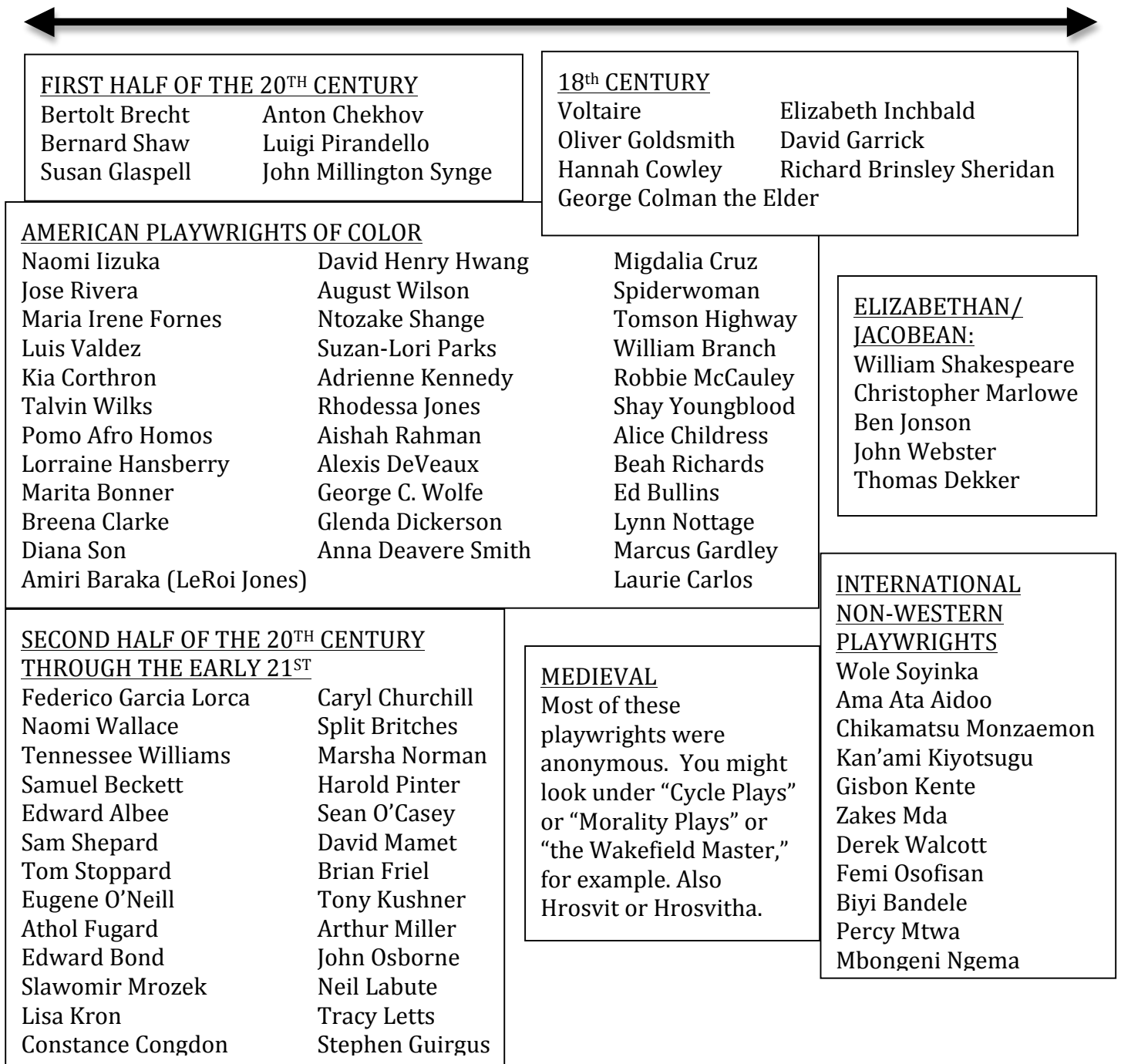
There are a multitude of other more personal reasons for reading and becoming familiar with plays. For example, some theatre artists strive to push against the constraints of traditional theatre – but in order to do this, you must first know what traditional theatre's constraints are. Some artists find inspiration in the creative visions of particular playwrights, eras, or theatrical modes therefore exploration in search of this inspiration is necessary. We invite you to use this opportunity to begin or continue the discovery process of figuring out why you read plays. Hopefully you'll be reading plays for the rest of your life – here's your chance to move forward in a meaningful reflexive manner.

WE BELIEVE theatre is rooted in ritual – purposeful communal storytelling. No written script, no designated director, no proscenium stage – just people intentionally sharing a story with others. Theatre as we are most familiar with it (in a Western context) is a sociocultural entity which has emerged from these roots and has transformed many times over throughout the centuries for a multitude of reasons. Because theatre is a social construct, it must be placed in context historically, politically, culturally, etc. Considering these factors helps readers of plays to understand the relevance and potential of dramatic literature whether the plays be contemporary, time-honored or somewhere in between.

THE JUMPING OFF POINT

On pages 2 and 3, you'll find categories containing a number of playwrights. Your job is to peruse this list, choose familiar and unfamiliar names (If you don't see a name, category or area (i.e. performance art) you wish to explore, negotiate substitutions with your committee*) and consider these works via a critical lens. Pages 3 and 4 include questions and ideas to help guide you through your reading and analysis of the plays you've selected. For each play, write a response answering one of the questions posed or posing questions raised during your reading. In the end, you should have responses for 10 different plays representing at least 7 different categories to include in your Division II portfolio.

*We highly recommend your play reading be a part of an ongoing conversation with your committee. They may offer suggestions for particular plays or playwrights to read or they may direct you to related resources.



<u>17th / EARLY 18th CENTURY</u> Aphra Behn Pierre Corneille Willam Congreve George Lillo William Wycherley George Villiers Moliere Lope de Vega George Etheredge Jean Racine Pedro Calderon (de la Barca)	<u>GREEKS</u> <u>ROMANS</u> Euripides Plautus Aeschylus Terence Sophicles Seneca Aristophanes	<u>THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES</u> James Still Suzan Zeder David Saar Aurand Harris Laurie Brooks Pamela Sterling Max Bush Jose Cruz Gonzales David Wood Paper Bag Players Joanna Halpert-Kraus
<u>19th CENTURY</u> Henrik Ibsen August Srinberg Oscar Wilde Edmond Rostand Georg Buchner Nicolai Gogol Dion Boucicault Franz Wedekind Dumas Pixerecourt Victor Hugo		



SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

THEMATIC INVESTIGATION

Look thematically at the plays you select in a way that compliments your area of study (for example, you could look at plays about “real” characters from all of the suggested groups listed, or how children are portrayed on stage, or look at comedies across time/place through the reading list).

ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

The time during which a playwright works greatly impacts the plays written. Consider the context of the play – historical, political, social, religious, etc. How are these factors reflected in the play? Can you ascertain the playwright’s affiliations by reading the play?

-ISMS AND ERAS

The American Heritage Dictionary defines an –ism as a ‘distinctive system of beliefs, myth, doctrine or theory that guides a social movement, institution, class or group.’ The -isms that have shaped and influenced theatre are many. What –ism(s) does the play you read reflect – romanticism, absurdism, realism, postmodernism, etc.? How is the philosophy of this idea manifested in the play? Is this philosophy or style the primary mode of this playwright or did they shift their beliefs and work according to societal changes occurring during their writing? What social factors influenced this playwright? How does the play mirror other art (music, dance, visual art) of the time?

IS IT RELEVANT?

Did you find the play to be dated or could it speak to an audience today? How has the meaning of the play changed over time? Were there any moments/characters in the play that you think would offend a contemporary audience?

A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

Discuss the language utilized in the play. How are the allusions, metaphors, ---- in the play utilized and to what aim?

A VISUAL PERSPECTIVE

Look at the play through the lens of your particular theatrical discipline. How would you direct/design/etc. this play? Think about the various elements of the play – i.e. exposition, mood, dramatic action, character relationships, etc. and consider how you would imagine staging this play in order to enhance these elements.

DEVICES AND STAGING CLUES

It is essential for the following questions that you locate a description of the kind of staging that was available at the time the play was written. Was theatre typically produced indoors or outdoors? Did it depend on natural lighting or some other source? Was the background a wall, or a painted drop, or a vista of mountains and sky? After you figure some of this out, consider the theatrical devices used in the play.

Give a couple of SPECIFIC examples of theatrical devices that this play make use of (lighting, props, costumes, makeup or masks, scenery, sound/music, or special effects). What do these devices reveal or suggest? [For example, in Shakespeare there are instantaneous changes of setting, because for all intents and purposes, there was no set and no lighting per se, but a lot of language to indicate where we are now and what's around us. There may have been a handful of props to indicate a setting, but little else. So how does this kind of "deficit" in one sense create possibilities in another?]

Transitions: How does the play handle the change from one scene to another (or if there are no transitions, how does that contribute to the impact of the show?) Is it by having a change of scenery? A musical interlude? New characters walk on stage? Characters enter stage through a different door? Change of lighting? Do you notice anything of interest about scene beginnings and endings?

ART AND SOCIAL ACTION

Look at the plays you read through a social justice lens (i.e. gender, cultural diversity, or socioeconomic/class concerns). What do you think these plays might have been trying to accomplish in terms of social consciousness and what are the tools or devices that the play makes use of in order to make that happen? How does the play handle the idea of the "stranger"? Does the playwright challenge cultural norms and/or moral beliefs? How does the playwright suggest casting the play? Is the play intended to be multicultural, postcolonial, or intercultural (extracultural or transcultural) and how did you determine this?

JUXTAPOSE

Locate two plays by two different playwrights with similar styles, themes, structures, characters, etc. and discuss the similarities and differences between the two plays. To make this more interesting, consider two plays from different cultures or eras.

A CONVERSATION

If two characters (from different plays), two plays, or two playwrights could talk to one another about themselves, or another relevant topic what would they say? Write a fictional conversation illuminating points of interest to you.

TEACH IT

How would you introduce this play to a class of middle school students? What prompts would you utilize to get young people engaged in the process of playscript analysis?