**Feminism and Theatre**
THEA-UT.623.1.001 Spring 2013
Theatre Studies “B”: Department of Drama, NYU
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30-10:45am
Instructor: Gwendolyn Alker

**Contact Information:**
gwendolyn.alker@nyu.edu (preferred)

**Office Hours:**
By appointment—let me know, we’ll make it work.

“If you're a member of a disenfranchised group, then your self-respect is given a label.”
— Deb Margolin

**Course Description:**
This class will question if feminism is still relevant for theatre studies, demonstrate how feminist theory has shaped the theatre, and investigate possible points of connection in the past and present moments. Within these endeavors, we will interrogate the shift between theatre and performance, between textuality and embodiment, and between theory and practice. We will focus on key issues such as the historical prostitutionalization of women performers, the complex definitions of various types of feminisms, challenges posed by feminists of color such as the relevance of the body, and being in a “post feminist moment.” The class will dialectically engage the perils of performance for women, as well as the potential for empowerment through feminist theatre.

Please note that this is a theory laden class. Students should enter with an interest in reading rich and challenging theoretical texts. Elaine Aston’s *Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* is optional and available on reserve at Bobst (enter THEA-UT623 into Bobcat search) or used on-line in order to make this seminar more accessible. You may want to track down a copy if you are having any difficulties understanding the readings or the lectures. Also note that this is a class focused on feminist theory; as such, gender studies will be relevant but will not be the central epistemology.

*The following texts are available at the NYU Bookstore. Used editions may be ordered more cheaply on-line. Additional materials will also be placed on NYU Classes. Please speak to me if you cannot access the class site.*

Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*
Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*
Sarah Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*
Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*
Eve Ensler, *The Vagina Monologues*
Anna Deveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*
Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*
All photocopies are in the course packet available at Unique Copy, Greene 252 Greene Street (212) 420-9198.

**Introduction: Why Feminism, Why Now?**

**January 29** Introduction.


**February 7** Read “Cultural Feminism: The Essence of Difference” from *Radical Gestures* (in packet). Note that we will be taking a class field trip to see Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum. If you cannot attend with the class you will be required to attend on your own before this class period.

**Feminist Playwrights**

**February 12** Begin Wendy Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles* and read Wasserstein’s Obituary on-line at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/31/theater/31wasserstein.html
Optional Aston, 64-65.

**February 14** Finish *The Heidi Chronicles* and read Charlotte Canning’s “Feminists Perform Their Past” (packet). **PRECIS #1 DUE.**

**February 18** University Holiday!

February 21 Begin Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*. Also watch the theatre talk segment on YouTube at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhK6PT0nK2k
Optional Aston, pages 73-77.


February 28 Read Irene Fornes’ *Fefu and Her Friends* (available on-line).

*Destroying the Canon*

March 5 Read ‘Night Mother (on-line) and Jill Dolan’s “Feminism and the Canon: The Question of Universality” (packet).

March 7 Read “Mimesis, Mimicry and the ‘True-Real’” by Elin Diamond (packet). PRECIS #2 DUE.

March 12 Read Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

March 14 Read Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love*.
Optional http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/2007/03/why_are_experiments_in_form_a_female_trait.html

*Happy Spring Break!*

*Theory and Practice*


April 2 Read Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (selections) also read the forward by Gloria Steinham and visit www.vday.com.

April 4 Read “Introduction” and selections from *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deveare Smith.


April 11 Reserved for visit by Deb Margolin, reading TBA.
April 16  STUDENT PERFORMANCES.
Optional Aston pages 57-64.

April 18  STUDENT PERFORMANCES.

The Body and Its Challenges
April 23  Read selections from Suzan Lori Park’s *Venus*.

April 25  Read Cherrie Moraga’s *Giving Up the Ghost*, and “La Güera” from *This Bridge Called My Back* (packet).

April 30  Read “Binary terror and the body made explicit” from Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body* (packet).

Performance, Performativity and Performance Art
Optional Aston pages 92-101.

May 7  Reserved for visit by outside artist, or discussion of show, reading TBA.

May 9  Last Class.

CRITICAL ESSAY DUE (TBA)

PERFORMANCES
• We will try to attend one performance during the course of the semester. Once this trip has been scheduled it will become a required trip—an absence from this performance will count as a regular class absence. If you cannot attend the show for any reason, please let me know ahead of time. Once we have attended our first show, all assignments (including essays and performances) will be pushed back by one class date.

ASSIGNMENTS
Please note that all assignments will be discussed in greater length in advance of the due date and that handouts will be provided on each of the following. Handouts and other course materials will be placed on NYU Classes and will not be printed in order to save trees. It is your responsibility to read these documents online before they are discussed in class. Please let me know if you are unable to access the class site.

All papers are due at the beginning of the class period or (if you have printer problems), via e-mail attachment, and in the body of the email, before class begins. The grade for late essays will automatically be lowered by a half mark (from B to B-) for every class period that they are late. Other brief in-class writing assignments may be assigned during the course of the semester.
• **Précis:** Students will be required to write two précis or short summaries (approximately 2-3 pages in length). Graded précis are due as indicated on the syllabus. Other brief writing assignments may be assigned during the course of the semester.

• **Group Performance:** Students will be assigned groups at the beginning of the semester, and will be performing at midterms. Members should collectively select a passage(s) from the course from which they will investigate and perform one ten-minute piece. Each student will turn in a 3-4 page essay containing the following elements: a description of their individual role in the larger project (1 page), and a discussion of how the theoretical readings that we have done in this class influenced your performance (2-3 pages). The papers (unlike the performance) are not collaborative.

• **Essay:** Students will be required to write one critical essay, 8-10 pages, due on the last day of class or during the final exam period (TBA). The essay may be responses to the questions below, or to other central questions that arise during the course of the semester. You may also build your own question provided that you discuss it with me ahead of time:

  - How and why have practitioners and theorists of feminist performance recreated and/or deconstructed the notion of the canon? What are the perils and potential successes of this process?
  - Defining gender as a social construct (centrally stated by Judith Butler) creates an interesting affinity with the performance of any gender role on stage. How and why does theatre become complicit in Butler’s theories and what are the implications both for theatre as a genre and for gender as a construct?
  - During the course of the semester we have read and viewed performances that used mainstream as well as alternative forms and techniques. How and why has feminist theatre included a move away from realist forms of drama?
  - Is Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* and/or Anna Deveare Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* effective as political performance? Does the phenomenon of V-Day demonstrate that performance is an effective tool for the empowerment of women, or is performance still a problematic area for feminist praxis?

Please note that with all papers you should err on the side of caution when quoting the ideas (and specific words) of others. When in doubt, use footnotes to reference any thoughts that were inspired by another source. Plagiarism is a serious offense that will result, at minimum, in your re-doing the assignment and, at maximum, failing the course. Please see the “Statement on Academic Integrity” at the end of this syllabus.

• **Class Participation:** Please come to class ready to discuss the readings. You are not allowed more than two absences during the course of the semester. More than two absences will be grounds for lowering your final grade. Please also note that three late arrivals to class will count as one class absence. Chronic lateness will also be grounds for lowering your grade—it is disrespectful to your classmates and disrupts the flow of the class.
Note that while you are allowed to use computers to take notes, you are not allowed to check the internet for any purpose during class, except to pull up relevant readings. If caught checking email (or cell phones) during class, your participation grade will be affected.

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Any qualifying student who needs special arrangements during the semester to effectively complete this course should notify me as soon as possible with your requirements. Students with disabilities must register with the Moses Center for Disability Services, located at 726 Broadway, 2nd floor (http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html, or 212-998-4980).

Your Final Grade will be based on the following:
Performance 25%
Critical Essay 25%
Précis 30% (15% each)
Class Participation 20%

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
(From the New York University Expository Writing Program)

Students are expected and indeed often required to build their work on that of other people, just as professional researchers and writers do. Giving credit to someone whose work has helped you is expected; in fact, not to give such credit is a crime. Plagiarism is the severest form of academic fraud. Plagiarism is intellectual theft. More specifically, plagiarism is presenting as your own:

• a phrase, sentence, or passage from another writer’s work without using quotation marks;
• a paraphrased passage from another writer’s work;
• facts, ideas, or written text gathered or downloaded from the Internet;
• another student’s work with your name on it;
• a purchased paper or “research” from a term paper mill.

Other forms of academic fraud include:
• “collaborating” with one or more other students who then submit the same paper under their individual names.
• submitting the same paper for two or more courses without the knowledge and the expressed permission of all teachers involved.
• giving permission to another student to use your work for a class.

Term paper mills (web sites and businesses set up to sell papers to students) often claim they are merely offering “information” or “research” to students and that this service is acceptable and allowed throughout the university. THIS IS ABSOLUTELY UNTRUE. If you buy and submit “research,” drafts, summaries, abstracts, or final versions of a paper, you are committing plagiarism and are subject to stringent disciplinary action. Since plagiarism is a matter of fact and not intention, it is crucial that you acknowledge every source accurately and completely. If you quote anything from a source, use quotation marks and take down the page number of the quotation to use in your footnote.

Consult The Modern Language Association (MLA) Style Guide for accepted forms of documentation, and the course handbook for information on using electronic sources. When in doubt about whether your acknowledgment is proper and adequate, consult your teacher. Show the teacher your sources and a draft of
the paper in which you are using them. The obligation to demonstrate that work is your own rests with you, the student. You are responsible for providing sources, copies of your work, or verification of the date work was completed.

The academic community takes plagiarism very seriously. Teachers in our writing courses must report to the Director of the Expository Writing Program any instance of academic dishonesty in student writing, whether it occurs in an exercise, draft, or final essay. Students will be asked to explain the circumstances of work called into question. When plagiarism is confirmed, whether accidental or deliberate, students must be reported to the Dean of their School, and penalties will follow. This can result in failure of the essay, failure in the course, a hearing with the Dean, and/or expulsion from the university. This has happened to students at New York University.

For more information on avoiding plagiarism and proper use of internet citation, we recommend visiting these websites:

http://www.education.indiana.edu/~frick/plagiarism/item1.html
http://www.virtualsalt.com/mla.htm
http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/plagiar.html