

Eight Plays By and About Chicago

Syllabus

Instructor

Douglas Post

Quarter: Autumn

Start – end date: September 28 – November 16

Session day/time: Wednesday, 1:30 pm – 4 pm

Course Code and Section: HUAS 80032, 22A1

Email

douglaspost@mac.com

Course Overview

What do the playwrights Tracy Letts, Lorraine Hansberry, Bertolt Brecht, David Auburn, Rohina Malik, Keith Huff, August Wilson and Joe Mantegna have in common? They have all written plays set in Chicago and many of these writers are also native to the Midwest. In examining *Superior Donuts*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *Proof*, *Yasmina’s Necklace*, *A Steady Rain*, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* and *Bleacher Bums*, we will also be examining our windy city and why it has inspired so much extraordinary talent

Modality

Remote learning

Required texts

- *Superior Donuts* by Tracy Letts (Theatre Communications Group, 2010, ISBN978-1559363617)
- *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (Vintage, 2004, ISBN-13 978- 0679755333)
- *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertolt Brecht, translated by Alistair Beaton (Methuen Drama, 2013, ISBN-13 978-1472566577)
- *Proof* by David Auburn (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, ISBN-13 978-0571199976)
- *Yasmina’s Necklace* by Rohina Malik (Dramatic Publishing Company, 2018, ISBN-13 9781619592070)
- *A Steady Rain* by Keith Huff (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010, ISBN-13 978- 0865479364)
- *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* by August Wilson (Plume, 1985, ISBN-13 978- 0452261136)
- *Bleacher Bums* by Joe Mantegna (Concord Theatricals & Samuel French, 1999, ISBN-13 978-0573605765)

Books can be purchased online through the [University of Chicago Bookstore](#).

Course readings

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 1	Tracy Letts	<p><i>Superior Donuts</i></p> <p>First produced at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, this 2008 work focuses on the relationship between a former 1960s radical, who owns a rundown donut shop in Uptown, and his energetic but troubled young African American assistant. The scenes of dialogue are separated by direct address to the audience in which the older man discusses his past and reminisces about the city he knew in his youth. The Chicago Tribune hailed this play as “a meditation on Chicago’s old soul...a witty, seductive, livewire and greatly entertaining dark comedy.”</p>
Week 2	Lorraine Hansberry	<p><i>A Raisin in the Sun</i></p> <p>This landmark play from 1959 was awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and hailed as a watershed in American drama. Not only a pioneering work by an African American playwright, Ms. Hansberry’s drama was also a radically new representation of Black life, unflinching in its vision of what happens to people whose dreams are deferred. With her portrait of an embattled Chicago family, she anticipated issues that range from generational clashes to the civil rights movement to the empowerment of women.</p>
Week 3	Bertolt Brecht	<p><i>The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui</i></p> <p>Described by Brecht as “a gangster play that would recall certain events familiar to us all,” The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui is a witty and savage satire of the rise of Hitler as recast into a small-time Chicago gangster's takeover of the city's greengrocery trade. Using a wide range of parody and pastiche – from Al Capone to Shakespeare's Richard III and Goethe's Faust – Brecht's compelling parable continues to have relevance wherever totalitarianism appears today. Written during the Second World War in 1941, the play was one of the Berliner Ensemble's most outstanding box-office successes.</p>

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 4	David Auburn	<p data-bbox="740 260 813 289"><i>Proof</i></p> <p data-bbox="740 306 1430 604">Set on the back porch of a house near the campus of the University of Chicago, this winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Drama centers on a young woman who has spent years caring for her brilliant but unstable father. She now must deal not only with his death but also with the arrival of her estranged sister. In the midst of this, she struggles to determine how much of her father’s madness, and perhaps his genius, she will inherit.</p>
Week 5	Rohina Malik	<p data-bbox="740 680 976 709"><i>Yasmina’s Necklace</i></p> <p data-bbox="740 726 1430 1213">Abdul Samee’s father is Iraqi and his mother is Puerto Rican, but if you ask him, he’ll say he’s Italian. Longing to shed his cultural identity, he changes his name to Sam, marries an American and does everything in his power to turn his back on his heritage. But when Sam meets Yasmina, a beautiful woman from his father’s homeland, he begins to learn that a tree without roots cannot stand for long. Set in Chicago, Malik’s play from 2016 premiered at the 16th Street Theater in Berwyn before transferring to the Goodman Theater where the Chicago Sun-Times found it to be “a poignant meditation on the psychic scars left by shattered love, horrific wars, cultural displacement and the refugee life.”</p>
Week 6	Keith Huff	<p data-bbox="740 1289 906 1318"><i>A Steady Rain</i></p> <p data-bbox="740 1335 1430 1789">When Keith Huff’s poetic thriller opened on Broadway in 2009, it starred Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig, but the play had received its world premiere two years earlier at a small off-Loop theatre called Chicago Dramatists. It received Joseph Jefferson Awards for Best New Work, Best Actor and Best Production, and took Huff’s career onto a new level. When the play opened in New York, Time magazine commented that the two Broadway stars “were wonderfully served by Huff’s taut, tough-minded script, which takes potentially cliched material – the moral challenges faced by cops on the urban mean streets – and makes it fresh and compelling.”</p>

Week	Author	Reading Assignment
Week 7	August Wilson	<p><i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i></p> <p>August Wilson wrote this play in 1982, but set it in a Chicago recording studio in the 1920s. It concerns Ma Rainey and her band's attempt to record a new album of songs while fighting among themselves as well as with the powers that be. This work, which is the only part of Wilson's ten-play cycle to take place outside of his native Pittsburgh, deals with issues of race, art, religion and the historic exploitation of Black recording artists by White producers.</p>
Week 8	Joe Mantegna and Organic Theater Company	<p><i>Bleacher Buns</i></p> <p>In the bleachers at Chicago's Wrigley Field, diehard Cub fans root for their team. The group includes a rabid cheerleader, a blind man who follows the game by transistor radio and does his own play by play, a bathing beauty, a nerd, and various other bleacher denizens. As the game proceeds, they bet among themselves on every conceivable event, go out for frosty malts or beers, try to pick up the bathing beauty and, occasionally, watch the game. First produced by the Organic Theater Company in 1977, this play was a huge hit for Stuart Gordon and his band of merry pranksters, and has been produced all across the U.S.A., taped for PBS, and made into a film.</p>

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Questions? Contact Zoë Eisenman at zme1@uchicago.edu.