Mysteries and thrillers written expressly for the theatre provide edge-of-the-seat entertainment while enriching our understanding of human nature. They can be filled with twists and turns, clues and conflicts, but can also speak to larger issues involving the body politic. In this class we will examine eight plays of suspense that have enthralled audiences around the world including work by J.B. Priestly, Agatha Christie, Harold Pinter, Anthony Shaffer, Ira Levin, David Hare, Charles Fuller and Mary Shelley.

Required books:


*The History Plays* (including *Knuckle, Licking Hitler & Plenty*) by David Hare (Faber & Faber, 1986, ISBN-13: 978-0571131327)


Week-by-week assignments:

**September 27** – Read and discuss *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestly. The Birling family is in the midst of celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft, when they are visited by a
mysterious figure named Inspector Goole. He reveals that a girl called Eva Smith, has taken her own life by drinking disinfectant, and the family members are horrified but initially confused as to why the Inspector has come to see them. What follows is a soul-stirring investigation in which the Birlings discover that they are all caught up in this poor woman's death. The play was first performed in the Soviet Union in 1945 and then in London the following year. It is considered to be one of the classics of the mid-20th-century English theatre and is a mystery that contains a fierce cry for social change.

**October 4** – Read and discuss *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie. This play began life as a short radio play written as a birthday present for Queen Mary, the consort of King George V, and was broadcast on May 30, 1947 under the title *Three Blind Mice*. The story drew from the real-life case of Dennis O'Neill, who died after he and his brother Terence suffered extreme abuse while in the foster care of a Shropshire farmer and his wife in 1945. It opened as *The Mousetrap* on London’s West End in 1952 and ran continuously until March 16, 2020. It is scheduled to be the first play to reopen in the U.K. after lockdown this coming October.

**October 11** – Read and discuss *The Dumb Waiter* by Harold Pinter. In the basement of a dilapidated house, two hit men called Ben and Gus wait for instructions regarding their next assignment. When a dumbwaiter starts to deliver orders for food, the men are perplexed and not sure how to proceed. But a final order coming at them through a speaking tube ends up pitting one man against the other. This extremely clever one-act serves as both a comic thriller and a statement on the human condition. It takes elements of *Waiting for Godot* and places them in a common room where uncommon things happen.

**October 18** – Read and discuss *Sleuth* by Anthony Shaffer. This winner of the Tony Award for Best Play is set in the manor house of Andrew Wyke, a successful writer of mysteries, who lures his wife’s lover into the ultimate game of cat and mouse. But who is the cat and who is the mouse? The power dynamic between the older man and the younger lover constantly shifts until the final curtain. The play is a tour-de-force for two accomplished actors and has been performed around the world.

**October 25** – Read and discuss *Veronica’s Room* by Ira Levin. This thriller explores the thin line between fantasy and reality, and the lengths one is willing to go to find absolution. Students Susan and Larry find themselves invited to an old New England mansion by its elderly caretakers in order to meet Cissie, the sole surviving member of the mansion’s family. The caretakers insist that Susan bears a striking resemblance to Cissie’s long-dead sister, Veronica. If Susan will agree to briefly impersonate Veronica, they believe it will comfort the dementia-afflicted Cissie and allow her to die in peace. But what begins as a simple errand of mercy turns into a nightmarish cycle of guilt, sacrifice and murder.

**November 1** – Read and discuss *Knuckle* by David Hare. Largely inspired by the detective fiction of Ross Macdonald, Hare has said that he intended this play, which is set in an affluent community outside of London, to act as an exhibition of capitalism’s strengths and a guide to its intense emotional appeal. “Underlying *Knuckle*,” states Hare, “Is the feeling that there will no
longer be any need for public life to be decked out in morality.” The play is an excellent example of someone using the form of the mystery and subverting it to his own serious ends.

**November 8** – Read and discuss *A Soldier’s Play* by Charles Fuller. The playwright take us back to 1944 and America in the midst of war. Sergeant Vernon Waters, the Black leader of an all-Black platoon, is mysteriously killed at an Army post in Louisiana. An investigation into his murder reveals the contradictions faced by a Black man trying to make his way in a White world. Fuller received the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for this exploration of race, resentment and hate.

**November 15** – Read and discuss Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* by Patrick Sandford. Part mystery, part thriller, and part science-fiction saga, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* is a novel that tells the story of Victor Frankenstein, a young scientist who creates a hideous creature in an unorthodox experiment. Mary Shelley started writing this book when she was 18 and the first edition was published anonymously when she was 20. In adapting this tale for the stage, Sandford explains, “I wanted to do the piece as she wrote it, to be rigorously loyal to her, so I consciously decided to use only her words, shaping and structuring, but adding nothing, changing nothing. That way I would be telling her story not re-interpreting it. Of course in my selecting and shaping I was unavoidably interpreting, but I hoped as little as possible.”

All readings are subject to change.