HONR218T “Political Theater” On Stage and in Washington
Nelson Pressley, critic/arts reporter, Washington Post

How do pressing issues get reflected on the American stage? Are there times when the theater helps drive public debate? How have playwrights responded to 9/11, and to early 21st century economic calamities? Can playwrights still attack through fiction, as Arthur Miller confronted McCarthyism via The Crucible? Is the new wave of documentary plays the most effective way to dramatize political and social schisms? Or is the American theater leaving the job of political commentary to Jon Stewart, and to sizzling tabloid TV series like House of Cards and Scandal?

This seminar will examine the tradition of political theater and take a close look at the treatment of politics in contemporary art. The focus will eventually tighten onto how today’s stages in Washington D.C. are – or are not – thoughtfully addressing hot topics and promoting public understanding. Students will attend 2-4 live productions in the Washington area; they will also hear from guest speakers drawn from Washington’s thriving professional theatrical scene.

No previous experience with theater is required.

Course goals:

- To understand the tradition and the current position of political theater, particularly in the U.S.
- To understand and analyze the role culture plays in articulating issues, particularly as this dynamic plays out over a semester in Washington, D.C.
- To draw distinctions between conventional playwriting and the increasingly popular “devised” and documentary methods, and to analyze the capabilities and limitations of these different approaches
- To formulate a thesis about the potential of political theater, and to support the thesis with evidence and argumentation

Assignments may include quizzes, 2-3 page written responses to each performance, a collaborative presentation, and an individual project on politics and culture

Readings will include keeping abreast of the headlines, and may also include:

Tony Kushner: Homebody/Kabul
Theresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros: Omnium Gatherum
Anna Deavere Smith: Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992
Athol Fugard: “Master Harold” . . . and the Boys
Lucy Prebble: Enron
David Hare: The Power of Yes: A Dramatist Seeks to Understand the Financial Crisis
Amy Herzog: After the Revolution