

## **Theatre 307 – Theatre History and Drama, Modern-Contemporary Playwrights – Beginning, Middle, Now**

**THE PROJECT:** You will be randomly assigned to a group that will work together to research a living playwright and her/his career. Each group will read multiple plays from the writer's oeuvre and develop an understanding of the ways in which the playwright's work has changed over time. In a paper, each group will detail their findings and articulate a series of principles that theatre artists should keep in mind in approaching productions of this playwright's work.

Completing the project successfully will require that you obtain at least 4-6 of your playwright's most significant and important plays that cover the span of her/his entire career to date. I recommend the use of interlibrary loan, but plays can also be purchased on-line through bookstores, as well as from Dramatists Play Service, Samuel French, and/or Playscripts.com. One of the latter three organizations is likely to exclusively control the performance rights for the plays and therefore publish acting editions that you can purchase. You may need to search all three in order to find the source for the play. Tip: Work for the project (and relevant costs, for that matter) should be divided up equally among group members. To complete a good project not everyone in the group needs to read all the plays, so divide up the reading as you would divide up any other form of research for the project.

As you complete your research, there are a number of questions you should be asking yourselves: How might the playwright's career be divided up into three different segments – beginning, middle, and now? What seminal works or historical moments may have triggered shifts in the playwright's writing and career? Are there parallels you can draw between this playwright's work and that of others we have read in class? Are there theorists or playwrights we have read or read about who seem to have particularly influenced your playwright's work? Are there particular historical events which have directly impacted the development of her/his plays? What principles might be articulated that can guide theatre artists as they approach productions of her/his work? Considering these kinds of questions as you gather materials for your research will help you form a thesis for your paper.

Note: You are responsible for finding the information necessary to complete the project. There are no excuses for a lack of materials. Part of doing research amounts to journalistic work – asking people for help and asking a lot of questions, and part of it amounts to detective work – using your imagination and creativity to figure out where and how to dig for information. All of this is part of the assignment, and your success will depend in part on how well you are able to complete these tasks.

**THE WORK TO HAND IN:** You must hand in a paper that outlines your group's analysis and delivers your conclusions. Work on the writing of the paper should also be divided equally among group members, but the final paper that your group hands in should be put together as one document that flows naturally as if written by a single voice. ***All sources for your information must be thoroughly documented. Information from un reputable or non-authoritative sources will not be considered valid. Please use MLA style for citing and documenting sources and follow all MLA style rules in writing the paper.*** There is no

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specific length requirement, but it is difficult to imagine someone completing the paper in less than 10 pages.

**THE PRESENTATION:** Your presentation to the class should be well-organized and should last no longer than 15 minutes. In your presentation you are responsible for sharing your findings, particularly noting what your research has shown you about important techniques, methodologies, and/or approaches to productions of your playwright's plays. To earn a good grade on the presentation, it should be obvious that your group has prepared and practiced the presentation, not that you are making it up as you go along. Your presentation should NOT involve anyone reading from your paper. ***Time your presentation to ensure that it does not go over the 15 minute time limit! You will be cut off if you go over!***

**THE GRADE:** The project is worth 200 possible points and the grade will be based on the amount of information you are able to uncover in your research and the extent of your analysis of your findings. It will also be based on the effectiveness of your written work and class presentation in communicating your findings.

**THE TIME FRAME:** All projects are due in the final exam period (Thursday, May 12, 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM) or another day/time agreed upon by the class. Accordingly, you have approximately seven weeks for the research, preparation, and completion of this project.

<b>Get started early and have fun!!!</b>
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## **Project Playwrights and Groups:**

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### **Ten Simple Steps to Writing a Good Playwright Project Paper:**

1. Find plays. Get copies of at least four to six of her/his plays and read them.
2. Get background information. Use keyword searches in library databases and look at any book that has anything in it on your playwright. Look for reviews of productions. Try to find interviews with the playwright. You can also look for scholarly analysis of the playwright's work by utilizing a number of databases. Be certain that the sources for your materials are reputable and authoritative and that they are considered so by reputable and authoritative individuals. **See a librarian for assistance!!!**
3. Once you've reviewed the material you have been able to gather, try to interview the playwright either through e-mail or over the phone. Make sure you are prepared before conducting the interview. Ask questions that help to fill in blanks in your research rather than wasting her/his time by asking for information available elsewhere. If you are prepared and if it looks like you are serious about the project, the playwright will be more willing to help you. Generally, playwrights hate questions like "Who do you write like?" and "Are you a 'postmodern' playwright?" and "What does this part of the play mean?" Instead, ask informed questions about their work, and act like you like it, even if you have to pretend. For ideas about how to ask questions and/or sample questions to ask, look at some of the interviews that can be found in the Worthen anthology or other sources.
4. Now you can start to look at the information you've gathered from the perspective of the big picture. For instance, use the questions above. Meet with the rest of your group to discuss a research question, debate your findings, and to figure out a way to focus the paper. The idea is to think about all the materials you have and decide what this information tells you about the playwright and the evolution of her/his writing and career.
5. **This will allow you to be able to formulate a thesis!!** Make sure that the thesis is *really* a thesis. The thesis must have a predicate that makes an assertion about the playwright. (There is a sample thesis on the back.)
6. Since you will have formulated a thesis from your research materials, the evidence which you will use to support your thesis will be self-evident. But remember the important rules about effective support for a thesis: Use evidence from plays; define important terms and concepts so that your argument is clear; be sure to defend your thesis against plausible counter-arguments. If you do your research correctly, you will find scholars and writers who have differing points of view about your playwright, so counter-arguments to your thesis may be easy to discover.
7. Create an outline. Since this paper is long and involves organizing a large amount of research materials from all group members into one cohesive essay, creating an outline is essential. Plan out exactly how you'll present the support for your thesis in a clear and analytical fashion. (Sample on the back.)

8. Write the paper!! And do it early. DO NOT include lengthy plot synopses of plays. Keep your descriptions brief and relevant to the issues at hand.
9. Proofread the paper at least twice, and at least one time aloud. It's amazing how reading aloud can help you catch things that just don't make sense.
10. Have a friend (preferably a friend who is *both* honest and kind) read the paper and see if it makes sense to her/him. If it doesn't make sense to her/him, it won't make sense to me. Re-write sections that need further explanation.

That's it... then hand it in on time!!

### **Sample Outline:**

#### I. Introduction:

Thesis: August Wilson's best-known plays are largely conventional in structure/form and are designed to reach a broad audience. However, through the various phases of his career in which he experimented with different forms and styles, Wilson has aimed to develop a more artful and poetic drama. By specifically focusing on *Fences* (1985), *The Piano Lesson* (1989), *Seven Guitars* (1995), and *Radio Golf* (2005), I will demonstrate how this is evident in a broad range of Wilson's work.

#### II. Body

- A. Brief biography on Wilson's life, overview of his career/plays/awards.
- B. *Fences* background and critical reception
- C. *Fences* relationship to the "beginning" and his overall career
- D. *The Piano Lesson* background and critical reception
- E. *The Piano Lesson* relationship to the "beginning" and his overall career
- F. *Seven Guitars* background and critical reception
- G. *Seven Guitars* relationship to the "middle" and his overall career
- H. *Radio Golf* background and critical reception
- I. *Radio Golf* relationship to the "now" and his overall career
- J. Counter-argument: Wilson's work is said by some to be too conventional to be "artful" or "poetic." Our research says otherwise.
- K. What can be learned from this?: Principles to guide productions of Wilson's plays

#### III. Conclusion

(Note: When creating your own outline, under each Body topic, list the specific evidence and points that you will use to support the thesis.)