German Comedy from Page to Stage

Melissa Kagen
1 semester (14 weeks)
Designed for 8–16 students and 2 class periods/week, each 90 minutes long.
Students should start at Intermediate High (ACTFL level) and end Advanced Low–Advanced Mid.

Overview

In this course, students will study four seminal comedies by German authors: *Der Zerbrochene Krug* by Heinrich von Kleist, *Der Gestiefelte Kater* by Ludwig Tieck, *Die Dreigroschenoper* by Bertolt Brecht, and *Die Physiker* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. These works, written between 1797 and 1962, critiqued contemporary German culture through dark humor, absurdity, and the reinvention of theatre conventions. In *Der Zerbrochene Krug* (written 1803–1806), Judge Adam questions who might have "broken the jug" in Eve's room, in a comedic parable of wordplay, deceptive appearances, and the physical manifestation of chastity. *Der Gestiefelte Kater* (1797, premiered 1844) tells the well-known fairy-tale Puss-in-Boots with a metatheatrical twist far ahead of its time, in which characters play audience members and make satirical political commentaries about the unrealistic nature of theater. *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), a play (by Bertolt Brecht) with music (by Kurt Weill) concerns the darkly humorous story of dangerous criminal Mackie Messer, his wife Polly Peachum, a corrupt police force, and a background of professional beggars in 18th Century London. And in *Die Physiker*, three men in an insane asylum claim to be Sir Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and Johann Wilhelm Möbius respectively, but they are in many ways not what they claim, as the tyrannical Doktor Mathilde von Zahnd observes.

After reading and discussing each work over the first 9 weeks of the course, we will pick one of the four to perform and spend the final 5-week period adapting and rehearsing. The performance will be in lieu of a final exam or essay. There will also be a midterm exam, 6 short writing assessments, and short presentations/active participation required in 5 roundtable discussions.

Course Structure and Logistics

This course is divided into two segments, with the first segment subdivided into four 2-week units. In the first half of the course, we will have 2-week units on each of the four plays. Each unit will include reading and discussing the work, writing a 1-page response, and participating in a roundtable discussion (including a short presentation). In the second half of the course, we will work together to produce and perform scenes from one of the four plays we've read. In between the two segments will be a midterm (week 9).

Writing assignments
In short writing responses, due weeks 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, and 13, students will write 1 page on some aspect of the play we're reading that week. These assignments could involve:

- Describing what has been read so far and giving your initial responses to it
- Responding analytically to the discussion questions offered in each unit, or to other questions you find interesting
- Responding creatively: rewrite a monologue or scene in a different tone or style, make up an alternate ending, explain a situation from one character's perspective in a way that makes us see the work differently
- Responding to your onstage or backstage role and how it has developed your sense of the work

These writing assignments are meant to help you respond to the work, start to develop the ideas you will present in roundtables, and get individual feedback on your writing. The final two assignments, written during the practical portion of the class, will help you reflect on the staging process and come out of performance with a clear idea of what you've done and learned. The writing assignments will be due at 5 pm Friday by email and returned with comments before the first class the following week.

Roundtable discussions
At four roundtable discussions, in weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, and 14, students will have the opportunity to investigate and present an aspect of the work we are studying more closely. These presentations are meant to be short (5–7 minutes), concise and well articulated. The goal is to articulate one or two interesting insights well. You should speak from notes rather than from a pre-written essay. Options for this short presentation include:

- Staging projects: describe your set, lighting, or costume design for a scene or act, present staging or interpretation ideas
- Analytical projects: put the work into historical or ideological context, delve further into an argument that particularly interested you in class, discuss another work this piece reminded you of, compare a scene in two different productions
- Descriptive/Imaginative projects: character analysis of one figure, plot summary from the perspective of one character,
- Review of or response to a filmed version of the work
- If you have another idea, feel free to ask me about it!

Each student will serve as a designated respondent for at least one roundtable. When you are a respondent, your job will be to listen to all the presentations and

come up with one questions that connects or questions two of your peers' projects. Example questions:

- Student A and Student B presented contradictory interpretations, in X way. Which do you find more convincing?
- Student A and Student B seem to agree on X. Do the rest of you also think that's true?
- Which of the other students' presentations makes you think of the work differently? How so?

Midterm Exam

In week 9, there will be a midterm exam covering the material that has been presented in the course thus far. It will consist of reading, listening, and multiple choice sections.

Multiple choice: 20-30 text-based questions culled from our class discussions and roundtables. Includes biographical, thematic, and historical questions.

Reading: You will receive a short text from a German comedy we haven't read in class. There will be a series of interpretive questions you will answer **in English**.

Writing: You will be asked two questions (one analytical, one creative) and be asked to respond to each with a paragraph of writing **in German**.

Language and Interpretive Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able

1) To comfortably discuss theatre in German, in writing and speaking, at the paragraph level.
2) To engage both creatively and analytically with a piece of theatre.
3) To read, interpret, discuss, and bring a short piece of theater to performance-readiness.
4) To state their own opinions about a work and support those opinions with specific examples from the piece.

Tasks and Grading

1) Before each class period, have completed the reading and participate fully in class activities (10%)
2) Writing assignments 1–6 (20%)
3) Roundtable discussions 1–5 (20%)
4) Midterm (20%)
5) Final Production (30%)

Schedule

Class session 1: Introduction, syllabus, begin *Der Zerbrochene Krug*

Unit 1: Der Zerbrochene Krug
Heinrich von Kleist

N.B. By the end of each unit, you should have read either 2 secondary sources or watched a filmed version of the work (there are often many filmed versions and many secondary sources, feel free to pick a different one than those offered here).

Pages to have read before each session	Class session 2: up to p. 33 in Reklam edition Session 3: p. 66 Session 4: p.98 & Roundtable 1
Secondary sources	Milfull, John. "Oedipus and Adam—Greek Tragedy and Christian Comedy in Kleist's Der zerbrochene Krug." *German Life and Letters* 27.1 (1973): 7-17. Fischer, Bernd, and Timothy J. Mehigan. *Heinrich von Kleist and modernity*. Camden House, 2011. (introduction) Calhoon, Kenneth Scott. *Affecting Grace: Theatre, Subject, and the Shakespearean Paradox in German Literature from Lessing to Kleist*. University of Toronto Press, 2013. Pp. 44–64. "Judging Adam: Theatre and the Fall into History"
Film	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHZSkQAlCec
Discussion questions	1) Was symbolisiert der zerbrochene Krug? Wie weißt man das? Deute auf drei anzeigende Momente hin. 2) Erkläre drei Anspielungen auf dem Bibel und verdeutliche die Wichtigkeit diesen Hindeutungen. 3) Analysiere die Bedeutsamkeit jedem Name. Warum sind Namen in diesem Stück so wichtig?

Unit 2: Der Gestiefelte Kater
Ludwig Tieck

Pages to have read before each session	Session 5: p. 30 in Reklam edition Session 6: p. 60 Session 7: p. 87 Session 8: Roundtable 2
Secondary sources	Gillespie, Gerald. *Ludwig Tieck's Puss-in-Boots and Theater of the Absurd*. Peter Lang AG: 2013. Available online at: http://site.ebrary.com/lib/stanford/detail.action?docID=10722917 "Dramaturgie einer gestörten Beziehung von Drama, Theater und Publikum : der Gestiefelte Kater und die Verkehrte Welt von Ludwig Tieck" in Pauli,Manfred. *Theater in Stücken.* VAT: Mainz am Rhein, 2013.

	Martin, Laura. "THE GERMAN ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTIC MÄRCHEN AS ANTI-MÄRCHEN." *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment* (2011): 18.
Film links	To my knowledge, there is no available film version. If you can find one, let me know! There is a radio play, but it isn't readily available through the Stanford library.
Discussion questions	1) Beschreibe drei selbstbewusste Momente und erkläre die Auswirkungen des Selbstbewussteins auf dem Publikum oder einer besonderen Rolle. 2) Wenn du die Handlung in politischer Hinsicht betrachtest, wie ändert sich das Theaterstück? In welchem politischen Kontext wurde es geschrieben und uraufgeführt? 3) Inwieweit ist das Spiel "märchenhaft"? Vergleich es mit der Fassung des Brüder Grimms.

Unit 3: Die Dreigroschenoper
Bertolt Brecht

Pages to have read before each session	Session 9: p. 35 in Suhrkamp edition Session 10: p. 70 Session 11: p. 100 Session 12: p. 128
Secondary sources	Brecht, Bertolt. "Das moderne Theater ist das epische Theater," pp. 13-28 of *Schriften zum Theater*. Silberman, Marc. "Bertolt Brecht, Politics, and Comedy." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79.1 (2012): 1-32. Hinton, Stephen. *Kurt Weill: the threepenny opera*. CUP Archive, 1990. (introduction or 1 chapter)
Film links	Original 1931 film https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUgkrlL8GkE Or a recent production: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLFwsc8AxgI (but again, many versions to choose from)
Discussion questions	1) Wie erklärst du die Parabel "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral"? 2) Was fügt die Musik Kurt Weills dem Stück hinzu? Ist der Kunstwerk besser mit oder ohne Musik? Warum? 3) Was für ein Held ist Mackie Messer? Gibt es andere "heldenhafte" Figuren im Stück?

Unit 4: Die Physiker
Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Pages to have read before each session	Session 13: p. 33 in Diogenes edition Session 14: p. 66 Session 15: p. 95 Session 16: Roundtable 4
Secondary sources	Tiusanen, Timo. "Doctoring a Hopeless Patient." In *Durrenmatt: A Study in Plays, Prose, Theory*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Johnson, Katie N. "The Physicists by Friedrich Dürrenmatt (review)." *Theatre Journal* 65.1 (2013): 107-109. Morley, Michael. "Dürrenmatt's Dialogue With Brecht: A Thematic Analysis Of Die Physiker." *Modern Drama* 14.2 (1971): 232-242.
Film links	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZhFC11uB3Q
Discussion questions	1) Warum geben die Physiker ihren Wahnsinn vor? Stimmst du dir zu mit diesen Gründen? Warum oder Warum nicht? 2) Vergleiche den Humor in diesem Stück mit dem in einem anderen Stück, das wir gelesen haben. Wie erklärst du "deutsche Komödie"? 3) Wie beschreibt Dürrenmatt die folgende Elemente der Gesellschaft: die Polizei, Ärztinnen und Krankenpflegern, Wissenschaftler, die Familie, die Kleinstadt, die Frauengestalten?

Midterm: Session 17 & 18
Session 17 will be a review session, session 18 will be the midterm.

Unit 5: Page to Stage

More information about unit 5 (including a complete schedule and time breakdowns) will be made available at session 19. In the meantime, start to consider which backstage and onstage roles you might find interesting. See the following page for a list of backstage roles and their corresponding responsibilities, and page 8 for an introduction to scoring a script and blocking a scene.

Session	Activity
19	Decide on a play. Learn about backstage roles; assign backstage and onstage roles, discuss initial ideas, write checklists and due dates. Read secondary literature on the chosen play and discuss which sections to perform.
20	Director, Stage Manager, Actors block; Offstage roles work together when not onstage (Designers (set, lights, props, costumes), Producer)
21	Block and work on offstage roles

22	Block and work on offstage roles; Writing assignment 5 due Friday
23	Block and work on offstage roles
24	Block and work on offstage roles; Writing assignment 6 due Friday
25	Tech run
26	Dress rehearsal
27	Performance
28	Post-mortem, discussion and final reflections, final roundtable

Backstage Roles

Director

- Work with actors to block scenes (See „Drehbuch Analyse“)
- Work with stage manager to keep movements and blocking consistent throughout the show
- Consult with designers about the look/feel of the show
- Give notes during tech run and dress rehearsal

Stage Manager

- Make notes of all diretor instructions to actors in a script
- „Call“ the show; tell actors when to enter and exit, think ahead during runs
- Organize, practice, and run scene transitions until they work smoothly
- Be responsible for everything being pre-set before each run

Set Designer

- Consult with other designers and directors about look/feel of show
- Brainstorm and draw out set ideas
- Construct the desired set within budget
- Shop for/rent/acquire materials needed
- Have set ready for tech, dress, and performance
- Strike set after performance

Costume designer

- Consult with other designers and directors about look/feel of show
- Decide on costumes for each character
- Acquire or make costume pieces, working within budget and using classmates’ wardrobes
- Have costumes ready and organized for tech, dress, and performance
- Clean and return costumes to classmates or storage at strike

Props Manager

- Consult with other designers and directors about look/feel of show
- Make an ongoing props list
- Acquire/make props, working within budget

- Make a props table
- Have props ready and organized for tech, dress, and performance
- Clean and return props or put them in storage at strike

Producer

- Be responsible; work with other backstage roles to stay within budget
- Design posters, get them printed, and hang up around campus
- Advertise show information on local websites
- Make a facebook group/event and invite people
- Brainstorm and arrange publicity blitzes around campus (performing scenes outside or inside dorms, performing in classes, passing out flyers, etc.)

Drehbuch Analyse

1) Zuerst lies das Drehbuch durch. Welche Figur spielst du? Erkläre die Ziele, Konflikte, und Themen dieser Figur.

2) Schreib 3 Adjektive, die deine Figur gut beschreiben. Was ist der Leistungswille jeder Figur?

3) Eine "Hebung" bezeichnet die Stelle in einer Zeile, an der das Gefühl sich ändert. Markiere die Hebungen jeder Zeile mit einem Schrägstrich ("/").

4) Bezeichne jede Hebung mit einem Verb oder einer Adjektive, um die Gefühle zu erklären. Du sollst mehr als eine Interpretation vorschlagen.

z.B. **Ich dachte, hier wäre was.**

(schuldbewusst) (erklären) (hoffnungslos)
- Ich / dachte, hier wäre/ was.

(zweifeln) (fragen)
- Ich dachte,/ hier wäre was.

(denken) (stark betonen) (entscheiden)
- Ich dachte,/ hier /wäre was.

5) Wie bewegst du dich in jeder Hebung? Welche Bewegungen könnte den Leistungswille der Figur besser erklären? Verbinde jede Zeile mit einer Bewegung.

6) Besprich deine Inszenierung und mach eine Stellprobe, bei der die Gänge, Stellungen, und Haltungen der Personen auf der Bühne festgelegt werden.

7) Probe deine Interpretation mit ihrem/r Partner(in). Was funktioniert nicht? Was könnte verbessert werden?