



LEARNING ABROAD CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

# The Playwright in Practice: Writing for the Stage in 21st Century Ireland

## Course Details

**Course Designator & Number: DBLN 3010**

**Number of Credits: 3**

**Language of Instruction: English**

**Contact Hours: 45**

**Instructor: Jesse Weaver – Literary Reader at the Abbey Theatre, Ireland’s national theatre**

## Course Description

Irish playwrights have contributed disproportionately to the output of English-language drama over the course of the 20th century, creating some of the most memorable dramatic literature of the last hundred years. With that in mind, this practical playwriting course will interrogate the tradition of theatrical writing in the Irish capital of Dublin at a time when that tradition is undergoing radical changes in terms of form, experimentation and the shifting role of the playwright in the process of theatre-making. Contemporary Dublin has undergone an unprecedented process of modernization rarely seen in the developed world, with the city becoming in just twenty years a multicultural, cosmopolitan space that is embracing provocative ways of seeing and creating work meant for theatrical performance. Questions about the playwright’s relevancy in creating performance, how authorship of a play is determined, and the slipperiness of language are now at the heart of Irish theatre’s drive to redefine itself. Challenged by a wide range of individual and group exercises, students will be exposed to a host of methodologies for writing and creating work for the stage specific to this unique moment in Irish theatrical history, and in the process gain an appreciation for the important role writers still play in making theatrical performance.

## Course Objectives

- The production of an extensive playwriting portfolio, including draft scenes of varied lengths, monologues between 500 and 1,000 words, a 'tiny play' of 600 words, and a twenty-minute one act play of approximately 4,000 words.
- The writing and completion of a logbook containing a detailed and in-depth analysis of an individual student's development over the duration of the course.
- The ability to articulate a familiarity with contemporary Irish writing for the stage, as well as the range of influences that drive dramatic writing in the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century Ireland.
- An in-depth understanding of the problematic relationship between the written text and theatrical performance as seen through the lens of contemporary Irish writing for the stage.

## Methodology

Through a combination of low-stakes writing exercises, the reading and analysis of theoretical texts on playwriting, and writing and revising a final project in the form of a twenty minute one act play of approximately 4,000 words, the class will offer an opportunity to experiment with the process of playwriting in an Irish context. Additionally, students will, through various exercises both in and out of class, experiment with the fruitful tension that exists between the act of writing a playscript and the process of how that script might be staged in performance. Students will also engage with rhetorical strategies underpinning various approaches to writing for the Irish stage by reading and analysing various Irish plays that exemplify a wide range approaches to dramatic writing. The dramaturgical strategies employed by some of Ireland's most influential playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel and Marina Carr will serve as a foundation for many of the writing exercises that are conducted. Writing exercises will involve working independently and collaboratively within PAGE 2 groups. Students will also be tasked with keeping and maintaining a logbook detailing and analysing their artistic development during the course. Most importantly, students will have the unique opportunity to learn first-hand from Irish playwrights and theatre-makers from different stages of career-development, including the internationally acclaimed playwright Marina Carr. Assignments and exercises will include:

- *The 'Bad Play' exercise* – A playfully transgressive exercise that explores what elements make a play a play. Students will be asked to write a 'bad' play, offering the opportunity to discuss and debate the subjective categories of 'good' and 'bad' in terms of writing for the stage
- *Dialogues* – Students will explore how to write brief dialogues between two characters/voices through the introduction of dramatic conflict.
- *Monologues* – Using the prevalence of the 'monologue play' within contemporary Irish theatre tradition, students will embark on an exploration on how to generate compelling dramatic writing using a singular body, voice and perspective.

- *Tiny Plays* – Reacting to a perceived paucity of thematically large and ambitious Irish plays, Fishamble Theatre Company called for short 600 word plays about Ireland in 2011 with the idea that Ireland had become too fractured a nation to be summed up in one play. Students will write their own ‘Tiny Play’ working from themes explored in the work of the Irish playwrights discussed in class.
- *Devising and writing in an ensemble* – Using models of theatre making that build around specific sites or through ensemble collaboration (such as Dublin theatre companies Corn Exchange and ANU), students will be tasked with creating a short piece of theatre that is then recorded as text.
- *Playwriting Logbook* – students will be asked to keep a logbook that details informal analyses of work they’ve read and seen, exercises they’ve participated in and their own individual development as writers.
- *One Act Play* – as a final project, students will be tasked with outlining, writing and revising a one act play, on subjects and themes of their own choosing, of approximately 20 minutes in length.

## Required Reading / Materials

### Plays

- Translations by Brian Friel
- Krapp’s Last Tape by Samuel Beckett
- *Footfalls* by Samuel Beckett ● *Conversations on a Homecoming* by Tom Murphy
- *By the Bog of Cats* by Marina Carr
- *Portia Coughlan* by Marina Carr
- *Tiny Plays*, by Fishamble Theatre Company
- *Terminus* by Mark O’Rowe

### Theoretical texts

- *Three Uses of the Knife* by David Mamet
- *Impro* by Keith Johnstone
- *Into the Woods* by John Yorke
- *The Secret Life of Plays* by Steve Waters
- *That Was Us: Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance* edited by Fintan Walsh
- *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners* edited by Lillian Chambers and Ger Fitzgibbon
- Unpublished interviews with contemporary Irish playwrights edited by Jesse Weaver

# Grading

## Grading Rubric

Letter Grade	Score or Percentage	Description
A	93–100	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
A-	90–92	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.
B+	87–89	
B	83–86	
B-	80–82	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C+	77–79	
C	73–76	
C-	70–72	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to fully meet the course requirements.
D+	67–69	
D	60–66	
F	0–59	Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an I.

## Summary of How Grades Are Weighted

<b>Assignments</b>	<b>Percentage of Grade</b>
Attendance and participation	20%
Written assignments	20%
Playwriting logbook	20%
One Act Play (showcase draft)	30%
One Act Play (post-showcase rewrite/final draft)	10%
Overall grade	100%

# Course Content

## Unit 1

- Introduction to course.
- Discussion of the basics of dramaturgy: character, structure and language
- Discussion of the Irish playwriting tradition, 'literary' theatre
- In-class assignment: 'Bad Play' Exercise.
- Read: *Translations* by Brian Friel; *Conversations on a Homecoming* by Tom Murphy

## Unit 2

- Function of language in theatre; status, power, wants, needs.
- In-class assignment: rough dialogue, distilling character from language.
- Assignment: write down dialogue overheard in everyday life.
- Read: *Faith Healer* by Brian Friel; *Impro* by Keith Johnstone (selections)

## Unit 3

### Theme

- Workshop on language, structure and character led by guest playwright Marina Carr
- Read *That Was Us* (selections)
- Read *Theatre Talk* (selections)

## Unit 4

### Theme

- Relationship between language, character, perspectives.
- Read aloud dialogue assignments, discuss use of language in them
- Assignment: character profiles.
- Read: *Three Uses of the Knife* by David Mamet; *Into the Woods* by John Yorke (selections)

## Unit 5

- Discussion of differing approaches to structure.
- The performance of 'tenses' (past/present/future) in activating drama in monologues.
- In-class assignment: fleshing out character biographies.
- Assignment: A Tiny Monologue Play.
- Read: *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Footfalls* by Samuel Beckett.

## Unit 6

- Workshop led by guest director Jim Culleton, artistic director of Fishamble Theatre Company, Ireland's new play company.
- Read: Fishamble's *Tiny Plays* (selections)
- Read: *By the Bog of Cats* by Marina Carr.

## Unit 7

- Share tiny monologue plays.
- Discussion: what is dramatic conflict? How does it arise?
- In-class assignment: first lines exercise.
- Assignment: Tiny Play first draft.
- Read: *Portia Coughlan* by Marina Carr.

## Unit 8

- The challenges and necessities of rewriting.
- Sharing Tiny Plays, feedback; discussion of exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, denouement.
- In-class assignment: individual check-in on first stirrings of one act play.
- Assignment: observations of space and proximity on dialogue, physical relationships

## Unit 9

- Workshop of the role of the writer and text in devising (guest lecturer TBD)
- Assignment: final draft of Tiny Play.

## Unit 10

- Sharing of Tiny Plays.
- Working definition of devising
- In-class assignment: devising/collaborative writing exercise.
- Assignment: rough outline of one act.
- Read *Terminus* by Mark O'Rowe

## Unit 11

### Theme

- Discuss *Terminus*: the city of Dublin transfigured and theatricalized by language and image.
- Workshop on writing space: how the cityscape can be explored to generate text.

- Field trip: explore various sites in city centre Dublin to use as prompts for writing in terms of tone, rhythm and setting

## Unit 12

- Workshop on the role of the dramaturg (guest lecturers TBD)
- Assignment: first draft of one acts.

## Unit 13

- Sharing extracts from one acts; feedback on character, use of language.
- In-class assignment: individual check-in on first drafts of one act.
- Assignment: second draft of one act.

## Unit 14

- Showcase of one act plays for fellow students and staff.

## Unit 15

- Debrief on writing process during the course.
- Final draft of one acts due.
- Playwriting logbooks due.

# Policies

## Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and attend all classes while abroad. Many instructors assess both attendance and participation when assigning a final course grade. Attendance alone does not guarantee a positive participation grade; the student should be prepared for class and engage in class discussion. See the on-site syllabus for specific class requirements.

## University of Minnesota Policies & Procedures

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. The University Student Conduct Code defines scholastic dishonesty as follows:

### Scholastic Dishonesty

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials



without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis.

Within this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an “F” or “N” for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask.

## **Student Conduct**

The University of Minnesota has specific policies concerning student conduct. This information can be found [on the Learning Abroad Center website](#).