

University of California, Berkeley OLLI

Winter 2019

Staging Science: Faustian Bargains

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Thursday from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. between January 24 and February 28, 2019.

University Hall

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Introduction:

The exhilaration of scientific discovery comes with enormous risks and costs, not just to pioneering thinkers, but to those around them, to their societies, and to the survival of the world itself. These dramatic characters gamble their selves, souls, and sanity in pursuit of knowledge and power. We have come to refer to this as The Faustian Bargain. Starting with the infamous Dr. John Faustus himself, in this course we will read and discuss five brilliant plays on this theme, spanning the history of modern Western theater. The plays themselves are bold theatrical experiments. By exploring them, you will make discoveries of your own that will deepen your appreciation for and understanding of how dramatic writing makes new worlds in your mind.

Schedule of Lectures:

WEEK 1: January 24. Introduction: Theater in Your Mind's Eye

WEEK 2: January 31. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

WEEK 3: February 7. Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*

WEEK 4: February 14. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Physicists*

WEEK 5: February 21. Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney*

WEEK 6: February 28. Complicite, *A Disappearing Number*

Readings:

I strongly suggest that you read each play before the class in which we discuss it. While the drama sections in brick and mortar bookstores are notoriously lacking, used copies of all of these may be found in Moe's, Pegasus, or Half-Price Books. All are in print and readily available via Amazon.

Reading plays is different from reading prose. This is language meant to be spoken, as the basis for a highly physical public event. Take your time. Move your lips. Don't be afraid to read interesting bits aloud. Try doing this with a partner. It will immensely enrich your appreciation for the plays and for the art of acting. Don't ignore the stage directions; those paragraphs of description will help you imagine vividly the world of the play.

Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

There have been many retellings of the Faust legend. Marlowe's is the greatest in English by far, and a landmark of world theater. The script is available for free as a Kindle e-book, but be warned: like many of the plays of his contemporary Shakespeare, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* survives in several very different versions. Editors have made their own decisions about which material to include and in what order. The Norton Critical Edition (David Scott Kastan, ed., W. W. Norton & Co., 2005) does their usual excellent job, in this case by including the two major versions in full and noting additional interesting variants. Used copies are readily available.

Recommended reading: The Norton volume also includes excerpts from Marlowe's probable source for the play, *The Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*, and much more.

Susan Glaspell, *The Verge*

Susan Glaspell, a groundbreaking American playwright, won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 1930; her best-known play, *Trifles*, is a major work of feminist art and often anthologized; but she is at least as well-known as one of the early champions and producers of Eugene O'Neill. *The Verge* is unjustly little-known; it is a wild, funny, passionate and intellectually challenging play about the exhilarations and frustrations of a pioneering woman scientist who is also a wife, mother, and lover. The script is in the public domain, available for free as a Kindle e-book, in the collection *Plays* by Susan Glaspell, or inexpensively from various publishers.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Physicists*, Joel Agee, trans., Grove Press, 2010

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, born in Switzerland, was one of the major European playwrights of the later 20th Century, best known for *The Visit*. *The Physicists* is highly theatrical, darkly comic, and thoroughly absurd. Nothing is at it seems. Used copies are readily available.

Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney*, Plume (Penguin Books), 1994

Brian Friel, from Northern Ireland, was called perhaps the greatest living poet of the stage in English. *Molly Sweeney* is remarkable in its contrast to the rest of the plays we are reading: seemingly simple, quiet, and still, yet devastating and theatrically daring. Used copies are readily available.

Recommended reading: Friel acknowledges the inspiration of Dr. Oliver Sacks's essay "To See and Not See," first published in *The New Yorker* (May 10, 1993) and then in his collection *An Anthropologist on Mars*. The *New Yorker* version is available online:

<http://www.willamette.edu/~mstewart/whatdoesitmean2see.pdf>

Complicite, *A Disappearing Number*, Oberon Books Ltd., 2009.

Complicite is a brilliant theatrical company that devises its work collectively under the direction of Simon McBurney. *A Disappearing Number* is widely considered their masterpiece, winning the Laurence Olivier and Evening Standard Awards for Best New Play. Used copies of the script are readily available. More than any other play we'll discuss, however, *A Disappearing Number* is a multi-media theatrical event. It was filmed for the National Theatre Live series; full production and supporting materials are available with a subscription to Digital Theatre at <https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/collections/complicite%20-%20a-disappearing-number>; excerpts can be found on YouTube and on Complicite's website.

Recommended reading: Complicite acknowledges the inspiration of G.H. Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*, which is available in various editions. I recommend a reprint of the Cambridge University Press edition, reissued by Canto Classics in 1992.

Supplemental Viewing:

On YouTube you can find excerpts and advertisements (with snippets of scenes) from a number of productions of these plays. These will give you a sense of how different groups of designers and directors have created the world of the play.

P.S. in response to a student email question:

I encourage people to read the plays, as I almost always find film and video versions disappointing. They can be an aid to help you imagine the world of the play as you might see it in a live theater production, however, so I refer to them when possible, but with a grain of salt.

Theaters will often post excerpts and previews from their productions and I find these brief glimpses at the look and sound of a play to be at least as illuminating as a lot of full-length versions. I mostly look for these via online search and/or on YouTube.

With those caveats in mind, these are available at the moment:

Doctor Faustus: the Richard Burton film adaptation is available to stream (rent or buy) from Amazon Prime Video.

The Verge: there is a video of the Provincetown stage production:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rt5wUzM4yfM> (Act 1)

and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpx6qWbl-H4> (Act 2) and an audio play

version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-VHVh8raAs>

The Physicists: there is a film version in the original German. Skip the first 8 minutes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZhFC11uB3Q>

Molly Sweeny: there is no full version, but there is an excellent two-minute preview to the Irish Repertory production: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcYp7I574hY>

A Disappearing Number: this was filmed for the National Theatre Live series; full production and supporting materials are available with a subscription to Digital Theatre at <https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/collections/complicit%C3%A9/a-disappearing-number>; excerpts can be found on YouTube and on Complicite's website. This one I do recommend.