

Daniel Smith  
IAH 241D: Theater and Society in the West

I am very pleased to be nominated for the Fintz Award for IAH 241D, which has represented a significant part of my teaching load for the past seven years. I have taught this hybrid course a total of eight times since first teaching it in Spring 2013 as part of a team. With enrollment caps ranging from 100 to 325 per semester, I have now taught this material to more than two thousand students (2016 to be exact). During these eight semesters, I have collaborated with nine faculty colleagues from the Department of Theatre and have mentored a total of sixteen graduate student teaching assistants. This course has been central to my experience at MSU, and I believe it exemplifies the mission of CISAH as well as the university's land-grant and world-grant ideals.

This is my first nomination for the Fintz Award. I would attribute improved student response to the course to two factors. First, a recent change in management of this course has led to smaller enrollments and allowed me to take more ownership of course content and logistics. Specifically, I have worked to improve integration of the face-to-face and online portions of the course, using some class time to clarify expectations and offer strategies for online assignments. Second, I have taken advantage of numerous workshops offered by CISAH during my time at MSU, leading to a stronger understanding of the goals of IAH that I have put to use in the course. My work on this course in collaboration with CISAH staff including Kate Sonka, Ellen Moll, Brian Holcomb, and Nicola Imbrascio has made me a better teacher and an advocate for accessibility.

Theater and Society in the West is structured to analyze the art of theatre as both craft and culture, combining historical and literary approaches with creative activities in a way that models multiple "ways of knowing" from Arts and Humanities disciplines, a hallmark of Integrative Arts and Humanities at MSU. The course begins by giving students tools for critical and creative analysis of plays: definitions of theatre; drama as action; dramatic history; and dramatic structure. Based on the Dramatic History lecture and Terrence McNally's play *And Away We Go*, students write a reflective essay on their performance of citizenship. Students also make an effort at playwriting, revising dialogue based on a "bad dialogue" prompt. The middle section exposes students to various areas of theatre design: Scenic Design, Costume Design, Lighting Design, Sound Design, and Media Design. This unit includes creative assignments where students use computer animation software to design a simple set, costumes, and lighting for a play. The course concludes with modules on Acting, Directing, Dance, and Musical Theatre. Throughout the course, students have opportunities for experiential learning by attending theatre productions staged by the Department of Theatre. Students regularly comment on seeing and responding to productions as a valuable aspect of the course.

After two semesters as a team member under the supervision of Alison Dobbins, I took on the task of managing the course when her responsibilities shifted. My time as manager of the course led to a number of innovations, including expanded essay prompts and the development of rubrics for grading assignments. In collaboration with Jason Price, I helped to institute in-class writing assignments that employ active learning techniques while serving to take attendance. I also established a "What Is Theatre?" lecture in the first week of the course, introducing definitions of theatre in relation to ritual. This more explicit incorporation of Performance Studies elements encourages students to see a connection between theatre and everyday life.

Because of the large number of students served by this course, CISAH provided assistance for bringing the course into accessibility compliance. This experience opened my eyes to accessibility concerns, and eventually converted me into an accessibility advocate. The “Fan Language” quiz is a good example of an assignment where taking accessibility measures has benefited all students. Writing transcripts of the videos led me to identify ways in which questions on the quiz needed to be clarified, in turn explicating the connections between this assignment and learning objectives.

The “Performing Citizenship” essay is an assignment I developed in direct response to CISAH workshops that noted a lack of emphasis on citizenship as a course objective in most IAH syllabi, and identified student desire to make stronger connections between their IAH courses and their major. I also felt that this assignment allowed me to get to know students better.

Teaching a hybrid course means handling a large volume of student email, and I have learned to be patient with students who expect me to solve tech support problems. Student evaluations regularly cite my availability via email and my responsiveness to inevitable technical glitches.

The shift from a team of eight instructors to two (one instructor and a TA) has made the course much more manageable. Crucially, this change has empowered me to innovate further by shaping lectures and essay prompts to better contextualize the plays students see, making more connections to online content in lecture, and providing a review session for the midterm exam. Previously some colleagues had resisted this kind of integration as “spoon-feeding.” Teaching a smaller section has thus allowed me to better align this course with my own teaching philosophy.

Having taught a large course for a number of years grants me a kind of celebrity status in East Lansing, which I tend to enjoy. I have had students come up to me in the Dairy Store, Leo’s, and the Peanut Barrel to tell me that they appreciated my class. I attended graduation in December 2018 and posed for pictures with a Packaging major and an Engineering major who were enrolled in the class that semester. Despite the size of the class, I do get to know some students and have written a handful of recommendation letters for study abroad programs for students I taught only in IAH. I have also supervised a number of Honors Options for this course.

### Peer Evaluation

A peer reviewer from the Adams Academy cohort attended one of my lectures in Fall 2018 and shared the following comments:

Instructor: Dan Smith  
Class: IAH 241D: Theater & Society in the West (I)  
Time of class: Monday, 9:10am  
Lecture topic: Dance  
Observer: Bree Holtz  
Observation Date: 11/26/18

I thoroughly enjoyed the class and the topic. This is a difficult class to engage with, Mondays at 9:10 and students are probably signing up mostly based on location.

Dr. Smith was very engaging and while it might not seem like it from the instructor's point of view the students (that I could see), the majority of them were doing course work and taking notes (really!). Additionally, when Dr. Smith showed videos to demonstrate, even the students who were not doing course work, watched those. There was a great mix of pictures, slides, and I like that you demonstrated a dance (Brave!) I thought that the in-class assignment was a very clever way to take attendance. You had good movement in lecture.

#### IAH 241D Enrollments and Teaching Assistants:

SP 2013: 323	TAs: Zev Steinberg/Jacqueline Wheeler
SP 2014: 297	TAs: Sarah Goeke/Andy Head
FS 2014: 320	TAs: Carolyn Conover/Kirill Sheynerman/Matt Imhoff
SP 2015: 322	TAs: Carolyn Conover/Kirill Sheynerman/Matt Imhoff
SP 2016: 271	TAs: Heather Brown/Greg Hunter/Karen Vance/Peter Verhaeghe
SP 2017: 288	TAs: Kathryn Stahl/Curran Jacobs/Meredith Wagner
FS 2017: 98	TAs: Kristy Allen
FS 2018: 97	TAs: Eloy Gomez-Orfila

Total: 2016 students 16 TAs

#### Sample Essay Assignments

#### **IAH 241D: Performing Citizenship Critical Reflection essay [Fall 2018]**

Write a 500-800 word essay in which you reflect on how you perform citizenship in your everyday life. This should include citizenship as a member of the Michigan State University community. You may also consider your role as a citizen in larger communities (your home state; your home country) or in smaller communities (your major/department; your fraternity/sorority; membership in a club or on a team).

Before you start writing: Think about how you are a citizen of the MSU community. What does citizenship mean to you? How do you participate in campus life? What aspects of your identity affect your citizenship? What things are important to know in order to be a successful citizen of this community? Are there items of clothing that you wear to indicate your citizenship? Are there specific phrases you say or songs you sing that mark you as a citizen? What constitutes good citizenship, and how is this related to performance? You may wish to consider how the characters in *And Away We Go* express citizenship in the theatre community and in their political communities.

Your introductory paragraph should include a thesis statement that identifies the community or communities you will analyze in the paper. A good strategy for this essay might be to write two or three body paragraphs about communities of which you are a citizen, or to write two or three body paragraphs about different ways you demonstrate citizenship in one community. Another possibility is to write a narrative that suggests ways in which your role as a citizen of a community has developed over time. Your essay should also have a conclusion, perhaps gesturing toward larger implications of citizenship.

## IAH 241D: Critical Response Essay #3 [Spring 2015]

*Hair*: Directing, Design, and Acting

The director's premise for *Hair* has to do with envisioning the future of America; many characters in the play would like to see a future filled with peace, love, freedom, and happiness. The most daunting obstacle standing in their way is the Vietnam War, and particularly the possibility of being drafted to fight in a war. For this paper, identify the production's point-of-view on the theme of envisioning the future, or on some other theme that you understood from the production (possibilities include social class conflict, gender, or race). You should be able to analyze acting, directing, and design; focus on these theatrical elements rather than on the plot.

While watching the show: Think about how the characters engage in conflicting visions of the future (or other conflict). How does their use of drugs enhance this vision? How do their interactions with one another suggest a desire for a future of love and peace? How do design elements suggest the idea of envisioning the future in the 1960s? How do they suggest the historical period? What do the color choices in scenery and costume suggest about the tone of the play? How do actors' objectives, tactics, and obstacles contribute to the story that is being told?

After the show: Write a cogent essay in which you make an argument about the director's premise in *Hair*. Use evidence from the show to support your ideas. Be sure to link your evidence to your overall thesis; the best way to do this is to write a strong topic sentence for each paragraph that reiterates the premise you are discussing.

Possible outline for your paper:

Paragraph 1: Introduction. State that you attended *Hair* and indicate the location and date of the show. End this paragraph with a thesis statement that articulates your understanding of the director's premise.

Paragraph 2: Discuss how two or three actors played characters in the play and describe how their objectives influence the story.

Paragraphs 3-4: Analyze how design elements support the theme, mood, and historical period. You might write about any design area we have covered: Scenic, Lighting, Costume, Sound, Media.

Conclusion: Think about larger implications of the director's premise. You may also wish to reflect on your experience seeing this production, and on how it was different from other productions you saw this semester.

Your essay should be AT LEAST 500 words and no more than 1000 words.

PLEASE NOTE: You will receive a program when you go to the show. Keep the program and use it as a resource for the names of characters when you write your paper. Your writing will be much clearer if you use the characters' names (Claude, Berger, Sheila, etc.).

## Teaching Philosophy

My earliest formal reflections on teaching occurred in a course on foreign language pedagogy. The most important thing this course taught me is that students learn in different ways; as teachers we must use a variety of strategies to help our students learn. Language pedagogy focuses on developing discrete but connected skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Though I now teach different skill sets in Theatre Studies courses, I carry with me the lessons I learned in studying and teaching French language and culture. Crucially, the time I spent studying abroad showed me the immeasurable value of experiential learning.

Incorporating active learning and cooperative learning strategies allows for a taste of experiential learning without necessarily traveling to another country. As part of my MFA program at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, I served as a TA for a large Introduction to Theatre course. Part of my role was to facilitate student creation of their own short plays during Friday discussion sections. Applying lessons learned from this experience, I currently teach a large Integrative Arts and Humanities course that guides students to think critically and creatively about theatre, and about the role of performance in their own lives. Each lecture includes a short in-class writing assignment encouraging students to reflect on course material: taking steps toward designing a set for a play; drawing a diagram to represent the dramatic structure of a favorite film; choosing three songs to write a short jukebox musical about how their day is going. Essay assignments require students to think about their own performance of citizenship, and to engage critically with the experience of seeing theatre productions.

Combining critical thinking and creative activity is a hallmark of my approach. A recent unit in my upper-level undergraduate Theatre History course exemplifies my commitment to designing meaningful learning experiences and giving students the tools to succeed in real-world situations. Each student chose one Greek tragedy and pitched that play for possible inclusion in the Department of Theatre's next Season. These pitch presentations were the culmination of several weeks of work based on Simon Goldhill's *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*. After reading each chapter of Goldhill's book, students completed worksheets demonstrating their comprehension of the content and of the author's rhetorical strategies. Then they wrote a paragraph applying each of Goldhill's six major analytical frameworks (Space, Acting, Chorus, Politics, Translation, Representations of the gods) to a play they had selected. By the time they made their pitch presentations, each student had developed enough expertise in the chosen play to speak with authority about a potential production. They also turned in papers that had already undergone a guided revision process, leading to stronger writing.

In teaching graduate students, the same general principles of experiential learning apply, but I tend to offer more flexibility in terms of process and product. I want graduate students to be able to take away something tangible from my class, whether that leads to a document for an artistic portfolio, a teaching portfolio, or a conference presentation. In one graduate course we study issues in the pedagogy of play analysis: multiple proposed methods for reading plays; dramatic canon; problems of choosing plays in translation. Students then synthesize this knowledge by developing their own syllabus for an intro-level Play Analysis course.

Finally, as a theatre artist, I find my interactions with students outside the classroom to be particularly important, whether I am with them in rehearsals and production meetings as a dramaturg or director, or supporting their work as a spectator at their productions. In teaching artistic skills, I believe in the importance of learning by doing and in creating a safe space for students to experiment with their artistic abilities. My theatre practice, my teaching, and my research are interdependent. My students teach me how to be a better teacher, and these lessons make me a better scholar, translator, and dramaturg.