THE DRAMA OF CAPITAL

Professor Alisa Sniderman
THEA-UT 801-001 - 4 Credits
Days and times – Tuesdays 2:00-4:45

Economist Joseph Schumpeter once said, “There is the capitalist art and the capitalist style of life.” “The Drama of Capital” asks how drama and theatre have captured the spirit of capitalism—whetting its appetite, tracing its effects, and making sense of its irresoluble contradictions. Capitalism is not only an economic system; it has also created a capitalist culture with its own habits, values, and artistic practice. From Shakespeare’s time to the present day, this course explores how theatre and performance art have responded to changes in production, industrialization, division of labor, financialization, and economic crises. Theatre’s enmeshment in commerce has elicited a range of ambivalent responses to capitalist culture that goes beyond apology or moral outrage.

Students will read a variety of dramatic forms that engage with capitalist culture such as the bourgeois tragedy, financial melodrama, and the comedy of capital, and will analyze how dramatic works represent such capitalist concepts as the work ethic, professionalization, “the laws of the jungle,” and “the invisible hand.” Some key plays include William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Henrik Ibsen’s *John Gabriel Borkman*, David Mamet’s *Glengarry Glenn Ross*, Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money*, and Lucy Prebble’s *Enron*. We will examine how the theatrical stage absorbs and reflects back changes in production such as mechanization, automation of labor, and financial speculation. While surveying the landscape of the drama of capital, students will pay close attention to the historical and legal context by consulting a range of economists and social theorists such as Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter, Georg Simmel, and Frederick Taylor. We will study significant developments in the
market economy and in the copyright law of the performing arts that transformed both dramatic writing and theatre practice. Students will become acquainted with the different methodologies available to scholars for bringing together theatre studies and economic theory such as New Historicism and New Economic Criticism.

This course explores such questions as: how does drama critique and or promote capitalist values? What is it about drama that allows it to represent the effects and crises of capitalism? Franco Moretti, for example, has recently noted that “drama captures better than the novel” the nature of financial speculation—“the bold shaping of the future which is typical of dramatic dialogue.” In what ways is the institution of theatre complicit with capitalism and how does it address this complicity? How do contemporary theatre and performance artists engage with the economic institutions and networks in which they participate such as the festival, the fair, and the biennale? How do they negotiate between the commercial reality of their practice and artistic integrity?