What underlies this project is my long experience of teaching drama in a university and department where I am the sole designated lecturer in drama. This experience has led me to try to develop a method of teaching that goes beyond the mere reading of plays while not relying on expensive - and in St Andrews unavailable - performance resources. For at least ten years I have done this via a Production Diary Project, which has worked well but which, with the passage of time, has become hackneyed and is in need of replacement. My new idea, which has run for two years, is to introduce some carefully monitored creative writing into what is otherwise an essay-based teaching regime.

What prompted it is a dilemma that occurs in EN2004 (Drama and Performance) in teaching Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979). This is a play of violently contrasting halves, in which the sexual mores of past and present are compared. But how these halves interrelate in 2013 is not immediately obvious, despite (or rather because of) a technical device that is the play's distinctive signature. Act 2 [the play's present day] is set in the year of the play's composition [1979]. This is one hundred years on from Act 1 [which is set in 1879], though characters who appear in both halves have aged just 25 years. But the play's present is not allowed to shift from one performance to the next and is now more than thirty years behind a current audience's present-day. Students find this additional perspectival shift, which is implicit but not scripted, problematic. One way of making it less problematic is to ask my students to write a third act, set in the year of their composition of it. This new structure – 1879, 1979, 2013 – forces them to think freshly about the play's second act. But EN2004 is too big a class with too many contributing markers to make it a convenient testing-ground for this experiment. Hence I run the project in each of the three modules that I offer at Honours level.

What follows is the explanation of the project given in the 2013-14 edition of the Handbook to EN3207 (Twentieth-Century British and Irish Drama: Shaw, Beckett and Martin McDonagh):

1. **Write a play (not a monologue) of not more than thirty minutes performance time in the manner of Bernard Shaw or Samuel Beckett or Martin McDonagh.**
2. There is a choice of topic: (a) “On Being Irish” or (b) “On not being Oscar Wilde”

3. You are free to tackle this exercise in whatever way you think appropriate – it does not have to be a pastiche -- but you must include a 2,000 word introductory essay in which you explain the relationship between your play and your understanding of your chosen playwright’s dramaturgy. This essay, rather than the play itself, is the principal object of assessment.

Here is the playwriting exercise for EN3210: Twentieth Century American Drama:

(A) Write a play (not a monologue) of not more than thirty minutes performance time in the manner of Eugene O’Neill or Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams.
(B) If you are a man your principal character should be female; if you are a woman your principal character should be male. And the topic is children.
(C) This clause is identical to EN3207 (3).

Playwriting projects must be word processed and should conform to the School of English Essay Style Sheet and Guidelines. It is an additional requirement of this module that your project must be submitted in a semi-permanent binding. You must not use staples or paper clips. The green cover-sheet should be the first item in your submission. It should be followed by (a) a title-page, (b) a List of Characters, (c) your playscript, and (d) your essay. Please paginate submissions in a single sequence that begins with your title-page. Submissions that do not conform to these requirements will not be marked until they do.

Title-pages should be printed thus:

| EN3207  
| Twentieth-Century British and Irish Drama  
|  
| Dermot's Revenge  
|  
| A Play written with reference to Martin McDonagh  
| Together with an Explanatory Essay  
|  
| ID Number  

The plays themselves should be printed out single-space in 12-point fount, with a one-line gap between speeches. Speech-headings should be bold
NAOMI (speaking softly but with growing menace): You’ve always ignored me. I’ve never truly been there for you, despite my constant attendance upon your every whim. (Breaking down in tears.) My mother always told me to avoid men!

DERMOT (with alacrity): How wise mother has always been! (Dreamily) The source of wisdom and of unendurably sweet consolation. (Awakening from his dream.) But what a pity that she never takes her own advice!

NAOMI (dawningly): Please don’t mention Mama. She is a bone of contention wherever she travels.

Impact on Students:-

The major benefit of this exercise is that it encourages students to recognise that thinking about drama involves thinking about plays dramatically. This obvious point is very easily forgotten where the principal art-form studied is the novel and the principal means of testing a student’s response to novels is the discursive essay. It is also an exercise that emphasises a vital but occasionally inconvenient truth: that the art that depends upon presentation is also the art of making things present. Rather than forcing students to place themselves in an unoccupiable space (as though they could ever be truly present in someone else’s past) writing or performing plays allows them to see how on a stage past and present are brought into an imaginative correspondence. For example, Twentieth-Century British and Irish Drama: Shaw, Beckett and Martin McDonagh is a module with a political problem in its very title. Shaw and Beckett were born in a united Ireland when that united Ireland was in turn part of a United Kingdom; McDonagh, more ostentatiously Irish than either, was born in London long after the Republic of Ireland had left the UK. Choosing either topic -- On Being Irish, or On Not Being Oscar Wilde -- requires students to respond to something that is still relevant and controversial: the cultural appropriation of politicially and culturally ambiguous figures. The task set students of Twentieth-Century American Drama: O’Neill, Williams and Miller deals with a different kind of cultural or imaginative appropriation or occupancy. We expect dramatists to be able to make present to us characters of either sex. Moreover, granted the strict laws that govern the employment of child actors (not a problem that a novelist ever faces), children under the age of fourteen are the hardest of all human presences to make present onstage. O’Neill, Williams and Miller largely fail to bring father/mother/small children families to life. Shakespeare largely avoids the problem. The project-topic insists that it not be avoided.
Exceptions

I make two exceptions. EN3207 and EN3210 may be taken in the same semester, but students who are in both modules at the same time must choose the Play Project in one of them and write a Module Essay in the other. Additionally, students who really do not want to display themselves as authors are allowed to negotiate a different kind of project. Interestingly, however, only two out of what is now nearly fifty students have opted out of the Play Project. And even more interesting, even though it is the accompanying essay rather than the play that is graded, the quality of the plays is often very high. It is a demanding task which my students enjoy doing and which they do well in.

Student Feedback

Here are some comments kindly supplied by a student who graduated in June 2013 and who did the EN3207 project last year. He is referring to a play, titled Confetti, which he submitted as his project-work, and which has already gone on to achieve semi-professional success outside St Andrews:

“The task set students of EN3207 in my year was to write a short play in the manner of George Bernard Shaw that would be “a comedy involving a suicide.” The task was deliberately paradoxical, since suicide is both non-comic and distinctly non-Shavian. (Very few of his characters die, or are killed, or kill; and none, I think, kills himself.) However, this dislocation prevents the student from producing a simple pastiche of Shaw’s work and instead forces him or her to think outside the box.

We recognized that the task set is un-Shavian but at the same time we were forced to consider what ‘Shavian’ meant. In all of his plays Shaw is reacting to developments that were contemporary at the time of his writing. For example, Antony and Cleopatra may be unashamedly a historical play with grandiose performances and expensive costumes, but Shaw is directly addressing, as his Preface makes clear, a late-Victorian and Edwardian debate about Shakespeare’s engagement with, and presentation of, supposedly heroic characters. In other plays -- such as Mrs. Warren’s Profession -- he is examining, through re-imagining prostitution, then current views about women and work. The module project therefore allows us to historicize Shaw while treating him as a innovative playwright. An extract from my accompanying essay best sums up this in my approach to Confetti:

What I have intended to do with this project is not to replicate a work by Shaw but to apply his reasoning to its writing and thus take his work in a new direction. Sometimes I have allowed modern tastes and tendencies to dominate. Like Shaw, I am aware that I am writing for an audience. Unlike Shaw, I am happy to neglect my reader.

Having studied Samuel Beckett and Martin McDonagh alongside Shaw, it is intriguing to trace the lineage of influence and to imagine oneself as
part of this line. Therefore my “Shaw play” is equally influenced by the absurdity of Beckett and the comic-book naturalism of McDonagh. One cannot look at one playwright in isolation. The very nature of the stage means there is not one voice, but many voices, that make a performance.

Thanks to this task, I had a new play by the end of the module. My classmates had similarly become new playwrights, and we were discussing and debating not just the pros and cons of the texts we had studied but of the texts we had created. We were producing arguments that were alive and fresh precisely because they grew out of, while not being constrained by, the practice of our three dramatists.

I later developed and expanded Confetti for a script-in-hand performance in Bedford, and later a full production on the London stage. There is no better way to study dramatists than to become one.”

Contact: Philip Parry, School of English
Date submitted: June 2013