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Twenty plays you should know before your first college theatre class

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IF YOU'RE PLANNING to continue as a student of theatre in college—whether as a major or in elective classes—there is some homework you could be doing now. The best way to prep for your next life adventure is to get a solid foundation in the main topic: dramatic literature. And the best way to do that is to see and read key plays from theatre history *before* you arrive on campus.

Why? Because familiarity with plays will activate your creativity, boost your confidence, and impress your professors. That's what this list is for—to help you select which plays to read first from the thousands (millions?) that have been written. Individually, each work on the list demonstrates the power of dramatic storytelling through a playwright's unique voice and theatrical sensibil-

ity. Collectively, they outline a history of Western drama characterized by enduring classics and lively experimentation.

Seeing a production on stage is ideal, but even then you can stretch your mind by reading the script *after* you've seen it performed—just to see the choices made in the production that you might not have imagined. Video recordings are an option as well, though plays on film and TV are usually adapted significantly due to the different demands of live and recorded performances.

Whatever method you choose—read alone or aloud in groups, attend a live performance, view a video—the main point is this: the future of theatre belongs to those who pursue it. As Thornton Wilder explained, if you don't read, watch, and study in your

teens and twenties, you'll have nothing to say in your thirties, and those should be the prime years of your creative life and whatever career you choose.

Here's our list.

Ancient Greece

Oedipus Rex by Sophocles has provided a model for Western drama for more than two thousand years via Aristotle's *Poetics* as well as numerous productions. This classic tragedy also inspired landmark psychological theories for Sigmund Freud.

Antigone, also by Sophocles, introduces the theatre of protest and has been produced at pivotal moments in history by theatre companies around the world to make political statements about individual struggles against unjust governance.

The Renaissance

Tartuffe by Molière. Religious hypocrites, hypochondriacs, misers, insecure lovers, and more find themselves in the bullseye of Molière's satiric wit. In *Tartuffe*, a scoundrel disguised as a religious purist aims to dupe his benefactor, marry the man's daughter, and take all his worldly possessions... until the King of France steps in.

William Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays that are celebrated around the world. Scores of summer festivals are dedicated to his work, and he's been credited with inventing modern English and modern love. These four plays are a good place to start your lifelong relationship with the Bard.

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. This famous explora-

Recent productions of titles from our reading list, left to right: Nisi Sturgis and Gretchen Hall in A Doll's House at Old Globe, San Diego. Grace Gealey (Marianne), Elizabeth Ledo (Darine), and Travis Turner (Valere) in Tartuffe at Court Theatre, Chicago. Mike Hartman and Lauren Klein in Death of a Salesman at Denver Center Theatre Company. Celia Keenan-Bolger in The Glass Menagerie at American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nickolas Vaughan, Craig Wallace, and Alyssa Gagarin in Our Town at Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C.

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10 Good Reasons to Read Them...

(Alone or, better yet, aloud with friends or in class.)

1. Find fascinating roles you want to perform.
2. Exercise your theatrical imagination—expand your sense of what's possible on stage.
3. Contribute intelligently to conversations about theatre.
4. Make informed choices about plays to see.
5. Build a framework for understanding plays you read and see in the future.
6. Learn about other cultures, other times.
7. Confront the big questions in life vicariously before you confront them for real.
8. Revel in the pleasures of language, ideas, passion, and conflict.
9. Seek inspiration.
10. Be entertained.

tion of introspection, identity, and action features a handful of central roles that have attracted the best actors of their day and often defined their careers.

The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. Star-crossed lovers, street fights, elopement, and schemes of deception drive this tale of young love destroyed by feuding factions to its sad and bitter end. (Most these roles, by the way, are perfect for teenage actors.)

The Tragedy of Julius Caesar. Part history, part tragedy—this tale of conspiracy and assassination pits political power against patriotism, and honor against friendship.

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Six pairs of lovers, two worlds, and the fairy kingdom collide in a romantic romp that demonstrates love is guided by forces we know not of.

The Modern Era: Realism

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen's plays ushered in a new era of socially and politically minded drama, and because of his emphasis on character, these plays remain relevant today. In this work, Nora, her family, and the final door slam offered theatrical camaraderie for the burgeoning feminist movement, though Ibsen insisted he wrote a humanist play.

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry answers the question asked by poet Langston Hughes: "What happens to a dream deferred?" Read it to discover the power of hope and belief in the face of adversity as an African-American family confronts their doubts and rises above insidious schemes of racist neighbors.

Fences by August Wilson is part of his ten-play cycle focusing on the African-American experience in the twentieth century. The "Pittsburgh Cycle" features one play per decade, and *Fences* focuses on a dysfunctional family in the 1950s struggling with hope, duty, honor, and betrayal, Wilson's major themes.

The Modern Era: Experimentation

Our Town by Thornton Wilder has become one of the most-often produced plays in the world—in high schools and colleges, on Broadway, and on film. With minimal scenery and direct address from the Stage Manager, this play broke all the rules to break everyone's heart.

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams played with conventions of realism by having a middle-aged man reflect upon decisive moments in his younger days. The four characters in this lyrical drama have become icons in American culture: Tom, Amanda, Laura, and the Gentleman Caller.

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller mixes expressionist techniques—fantasy and memory—with explosive confrontations and the unfulfilled hopes of a family torn apart by their inability to transcend personal disappointments and forgive past indiscretions.

The Bald Soprano by Eugène Ionesco breaks the dramatic mold completely. With its silly mockery of the middle class, this Absurdist classic of the mid-twentieth century reads like a Monty Python script.

Vinegar Tom by Caryl Churchill uses "epic theatre" techniques of Bertolt Brecht—such as songs sung by characters in modern dress—to dramatize the struggles of seventeenth-century women (and one cat) accused of witchcraft.

Contemporary: Millennial

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes by Tony Kushner. No play made a greater splash in late-twentieth century American culture than this two-part marathon. *Part 1: Millennium Approaches* interweaves stories of seven characters, ghosts, fantasy figures, and an angel. *Part 2: Perestroika* continues the characters' defiant struggles to find a way forward in the age of AIDS.

How I Learned to Drive by Paula Vogel is a disturbing tale of a woman coming to terms with her childhood and teenage relationship—personal and sexual—with her Uncle Peck. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama the elder Li'l Bit looks back on her driving lessons as a way of dealing with the incestuous acts of her uncle.

Eurydice by Sarah Ruhl updates the classic Greek myth in which Orpheus travels to Hades to bring his deceased lover Eurydice back to the land of the living. On the way back, however, Orpheus turns around to see Eurydice, which seals her fate in the Underworld for the rest of eternity. Ruhl is a talented young writer you'll be hearing for decades.

Ruined by Lynn Nottage was

spired by stories the playwright collected from women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Set in Mama Nadi's bar, this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama depicts harrowing struggles to survive in a war-torn nation as divided loyalties threaten the women Mama Nadi has promised to protect.

Spring Awakening, music by Duncan Sheik, book and lyrics by Steven Sater. Yes, it's important to know musicals, too. Based on an 1891 German drama, this one explores the tumult of teenage sexuality. The original play was banned for decades in Germany, but the American rock musical won eight Tony Awards in 2007.

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YOU MAY WANT to argue that this list is arbitrary, and of course it is, in the sense that we could have substituted other plays for some of the titles

here, and another writer might have prepared an altogether different list. It doesn't matter. If the object is to give yourself a good grounding in the traditions and styles of Western theatre, this list or a similar one rec-

Last 5 Plays Out...

These plays were on our list of twenty-five but didn't make the cut to twenty. So we're sneaking them to you anyway.

Six Characters in Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello. Italian. Experimental. Weird. Mesmerizing.

Crimes of the Heart by Beth Henley. Pulitzer Prize winner. Quirky, Southern gothic humor. Great roles for women.

The Laramie Project by Moisés Kaufman and members of Tectonic Theatre Project. Docudrama. Political. Tragic. Hopeful.

Big Love by Charles L. Mee. Wild and woolly exploration of contemporary sexual politics. Explosively theatrical. Music, saw blades, and moon boots.

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks. Another Pulitzer Prize winner. Brothers named Lincoln and Booth. Will history repeat itself?

ommended by your theatre teacher will do that.

One hopes you will be reading and seeing plays for the rest of your life. These twenty are a good place to get started. ▼