Dear Colleague,

Thank you for expressing interest in my 2009 NEH summer seminar, "Theatricality and Reality in Modern French Drama." The four-week seminar will be held in Avignon, France, from June 29–July 24 and will be conducted in French. Participants should plan to arrive Sunday, June 28 for an opening reception. In the seminar, we will discuss some of the major classic texts of twentieth-century French theater as well as take advantage of the Avignon theater festival to discover new theater and new productions.

Central to twentieth-century Western theater in the wake of innovators such as Antonin Artaud and Luigi Pirandello is a radical questioning of the illusionist stage. Denying that the realist conventions of the nineteenth-century stage are capable of representing reality but at the same time convinced that the task of theater is to attempt to uncover what is real, modern playwrights arrive at a paradox: it is through the very "theatricality" of theater that a portrayal of reality is possible. Put in another way, an emphasis on convention in the theater permits a revelation of the masks and roles we wear and act in daily life. For the mid-twentieth century dramatist, an investigation of the theatricality of politics seems particularly urgent. It is the various ways in which the theatricality-reality paradox is realized in some of the classics of modern French drama that we will explore in the seminar.

I directed versions of this seminar using translated texts by Brecht, Pirandello, Sartre, and Genet in NEH seminars at North Carolina State University in 1988 and 1990 and in a similar one, with more emphasis on the political context, at Duke University in 1993. In 1995 and again in 2003 and 2007, I was able to offer seminars in French, using only French texts, in Avignon. The success of those experiences made me eager to offer the seminar again, so I am delighted to have the opportunity this summer. As a teacher of French, I know how important it is for teachers to immerse themselves in the language from time to time. As a teacher of dramatic literature, I know that being surrounded by active theater production makes a difference in one's approach to the text. Avignon, with its famous July theater festival, provides both of these possibilities.
We will begin by reading some texts by Artaud and some material on early twentieth-century theater, but we will focus on six mid-century plays: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches* and *Huis Clos*; Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes* and *Les Negres*; Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinocéros*; and Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot*. These not only illustrate the use of theatricality to express a vision of reality, but also raise ethical, philosophical, and often political questions central to the modern human dilemma. Each text will offer plenty of material for discussion from a literary approach but will also lend itself to interpretation from a director's or actor's point of view. The seminar syllabus follows this letter.

The program for the 2009 festival will not be known until the spring, and I may modify the syllabus somewhat once it appears. For example, in 2007 I substituted Genet’s *Les Paravents* for *Les Bonnes* because it was being produced that summer. In any case, at some point during the seminar, we will read, attend, and discuss at least one play at the festival together. I would like to do something contemporary, but that will depend on what is being produced. I am sure that it will not be difficult to find a play that suits the theme of the seminar.

Our approach to the six plays will be technical, in that we will examine specific techniques of breaking with the illusionist stage, of role-playing and of theatricality in each case. It will also be thematic, in that we will discuss the larger intellectual issues raised by each text, both individually and comparatively. Participants will be provided with a packet of traditional and up-to-date criticism on the plays to illustrate various approaches. One of the methods that I will use will be a modification of the French method of *explication de texte*: a close and rigorous reading of a short passage to serve as an approach to the author's style and the play's central concerns. Another will be presentations of scenes from the plays, directed and acted by participants. Each participant will be required either to present an oral explication to the class or to participate in a scene. Everyone will also be required to do an oral presentation and write a short paper, which may be based on the oral presentation. In addition, each participant will be asked to do an oral and a written review of a play seen at the festival, an exercise which will be useful to all. Oral work must be done in French, but writing may be done in either French or English. The seminar will meet four mornings a week, Mondays through Thursdays, for 2 ½ hours. I will schedule individual consultations with everyone during the first week of the seminar and as needed thereafter in the afternoons. Although there is no official credit given for an NEH seminar, I have in the past written letters which enabled participants to receive three hours of graduate credit.

Although my own emphasis in the seminar will be a literary approach to the reading, analyzing, and discussing of dramatic texts, we will all have ample opportunity to take advantage of the festival and to think about theater from the point of view of production. The theater people in Avignon are eager and willing to address anyone interested. There are usually numerous free lectures and discussion groups to attend. We may go to some as a group, but participants will also be free to make their own choices.

The topic of this seminar is directly related to my scholarly and teaching interests. My PhD is in Comparative Literature, with a major concentration in French. Until I retired in
December 2007, I regularly taught courses on classical and modern French drama in French as well as seminars in modern European drama in translation. This fall, I am teaching a course on classics of French theater. I also taught Italian language and literature. My first book, *Existential Prisons* (Duke University Press, 1985), contains a chapter on Sartre as well as a chapter on Genet and deals with all of their major dramas. I have published articles on the dramatic and narrative works of Sartre, Camus, Ionesco, Genet, Pirandello, and D’Annunzio, as well as on dramatic theory. My 2001 book, *The Search for Modern Tragedy: Aesthetic Fascism in Italy and France* (Cornell University Press), explores the relation of drama and theater to fascism in Italy and France. The 2007 collection of essays which I edited and to which I contributed, *Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press) deals with the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche on the theory and practice of modern tragedy in Europe. I am currently working on a book with the working title “Metatheater and Modernity.”

Another of my interests is the question of "core" education in the humanities. The textbook of which I am controlling author (*The Humanities: Cultural Roots and Continuities*, Houghton-Mifflin, 2005), now in its seventh edition, is used in many high schools as well as colleges. Discussions on interdisciplinary humanities teaching with the colleagues in my NEH seminars have helped to shape my thinking on the ongoing questions involved in such teaching, and I look forward to more such discussions.

Lodging for the seminar will be in a “Residence” located within the walls of Avignon but a little out of the center. Normally occupied by students, in July the rooms—actually small studio apartments—are usually rented to actors and theater workers as well as festival goers, so the company should be interesting. Our classroom will be in the Residence as well. Each accommodation includes a bedroom with a double bed, dresser and desk, a kitchenette, toilet, sink, and shower. Sheets and towels will be provided and the rooms will be cleaned and linen changed once a week. I was able to negotiate a group rate for 750 Euros per room for the four weeks. While this may seem expensive, it is a bargain when compared to the extraordinarily high rates charged for lodging everywhere in Avignon during the theater festival. You will be able to find more information about the Residence at the following site:

http://www.sunvalley.fr/residences-services-locations-appartements-cordeliers-avignon-84-svavignon3-etrudiants.html

Please note that none of the accommodations are air-conditioned.

While the living conditions should be enjoyable for the adventurous and those willing to "go with the flow," they are not well suited to those who need a lot of creature comforts. Temperatures in Avignon in July can hover around 100 degrees Fahrenheit, although there is little humidity and it cools off some at night. There is no air conditioning anywhere in the Residence and little in the city, except in luxury hotels, some apartments, some restaurants, and some theaters. Avignon has quite a few mosquitoes in July, and the rooms have no screens. Fans, which the Residence should be able to provide, will help with this problem, but repellents will be needed too. There is a lovely outdoor swimming pool at a 20 minute walk and a (non air-conditioned) gym that features a cold jacuzzi. Walking--lots of it--is the best and sometimes
the only form of transportation in the city. The crowds of people that fill the town during the festival make the atmosphere exciting but sometimes tiring as well.

Internet connections can be provided in individual rooms for a cost of 30 Euros for the four weeks. There is free internet access in one of the common rooms in the Residence and there are internet cafes throughout the city. It would be useful, but not at all necessary to bring your own laptop. Participants will also have access to the Avignon town library and to the Bibliothèque Jean Vilar, which specializes in theater studies. I will prepare a packet of photocopies of secondary materials on the plays we will be studying. I will also indicate to you which editions of the plays you should purchase. These can be purchased in advance, from bookstores or from Amazon.fr. They may or may not be available in Avignon, but if you are passing through Paris you could probably buy them there.

Travel arrangements and passports will be the individual responsibility of participants, although I will be happy to offer advice. Participants will receive the stipend of $3200 prior to leaving the U.S. I will, however, ask that you allow me to deduct the deposit for your room from the stipend. The stipend should cover basic expenses such as airfare and lodging, but with excursions and theater tickets, meals in restaurants, and the low value of the dollar, participants will undoubtedly spend more than they are allotted. Non-covered expenses should be tax-deductible and the tickets to the required play will be covered.

My gracious and very experienced assistant in Avignon is Marguérite Cassar. Mme Cassar is knowledgeable about and willing to organize optional excursions for us in Avignon and its region. In the city, there are museums and churches to visit, the palace of the popes, and countless exhibits having to do with arts of the theater. Many consider Provence to be the most beautiful part of France. We will probably feel the occasional need to escape the hustle and bustle of the festival town for the quiet of the nearby countryside. In addition to walking in the hills amidst the smells of thyme and lavender, climbing in the southern Alps, swimming under the Pont du Gard, or basking on the Mediterranean beaches, one can visit Roman ruins, medieval villages, Romanesque churches, and contemporary art museums within an hour or two of Avignon. We will do a wine-tasting with Beckett’s former wine supplier in Roussillon and visit Beckett’s house there. Participants will be free to explore on their own on weekends. Paris is only four hours away by the fast train (TGV); Italy and Spain are not too far away. The four-week seminar will also allow for travel time before and after. I have deliberately scheduled the seminar to begin about a week before the festival begins in order to give participants a little "quiet time" to get used to our site and also to avoid some of the late summer heat.

Although I imagine that most applicants will be teachers of French, I hope to attract people in fields such as theater, English, and modern European history as well. A good command of spoken and written French is a pre-requisite, and participants should expect to practice and improve their French. It has been my experience that the high level of collegial discussions and exchange of ideas in NEH seminars stimulates all involved to add new dimensions to their teaching. Approaches to the teaching of any play, as well as the understanding of "theatricality and reality," should be enhanced by the festival experience and by
the seminar. To be in Avignon in July, where almost every indoor and outdoor space has become a stage, is to live and breathe theater.

If you are interested in applying, you will find an application form and guidelines linked to the seminar web site. Your completed application should be postmarked no later than March 2, 2009. Perhaps the most important part of the seminar application is the three-page "Description of Objectives" that must be submitted as part of the complete application. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant; the reasons that you are interested in this seminar; your qualifications to do the work of the seminar and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish in the seminar; and the relation of the seminar to your teaching.

My very able and friendly assistant in North Carolina, Marjorie McNamara, will probably be able to answer most of your questions, but she will forward any she cannot answer to me. If you have any questions, please send an email to: nehmcnamara@triad.rr.com or telephone her at 336-227-0077. Your completed application should also be mailed to Marjorie McNamara at 320 Trail 1, Burlington, NC 27215. Be sure to check the seminar web site, http://www.chass.ncsu.edu/nehwitt2009/, if you have not already done so. You may also email me at Maryannfrese@aol.com or call me at home, 919-493-6317, or on my cell phone, 919-641-5103. I will be in Italy and France December 6-20 and will be making some other short trips, but otherwise should be available. I look forward to hearing from you.

Cordialement,

Mary Ann Frese Witt
Professor of French Emerita

(See seminar syllabus on following page.)
SEMINAR SYLLABUS

The seminar will meet for four weeks, Monday through Thursday, from 9:30-12:00 am, June 29 - July 23, 2009. Some afternoons and evenings will be reserved for festival lectures, exhibits, or group theater attendance. The seminar will be conducted entirely in French. Each participant will give at least one 5-10 minute oral theater review, followed by a 1-2 page written review, over the course of the seminar. A 5- page paper due as indicated. Each participant will also be expected to take part in the presentation of a scene from one of the plays or to give one oral explication de texte.

Monday, June 29. Discussion on traditional forms of Western theater, of revolution in the arts in the early twentieth century and of changes in theater.

Tuesday, June 30. Discussion of Antonin Artaud, Le Théâtre et son double. Introduction to the explication de texte technique.

Wednesday, July 1. Introduction to Sartre, discussion of Huis Clos.

Thursday, July 2. Huis Clos, cont. Discussion of Sartre's theories of theater. Explication and/or scene.


