



# HARTFORD HERITAGE PROJECT

“Live Performance Written Response”

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Suggested Partners: TheaterWorks, Hartford Stage, or any live theater

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## ENG 102

No course-design choice has paid more dividends than my integration of live local theater into the ENG 102 syllabus. TheaterWorks has been my locale of choice because of the modernity and timeliness of their shows, but what follows would obviously work with Hartford Stage, etc. Even with the current pandemic keeping us out of cramped quarters, I’m STILL using the last play on their docket from the Fall of 2019 – Christopher Demos Brown’s polarizing work *American Son*, which many students are familiar with because of Netflix’s film adaptation of it, released the same week as our class visit to TheaterWorks for the live production of the play.

Please note that assuming the Fall of 2021 will see a return to normalcy (with a modicum of good sense and caution), that Tuesday nights are often the BEST time to bring your class to TheaterWorks because of the Q & A with cast that follows. Plays usually run around 90 minutes and it’s 10-minute walk from the college for those who’d rather not pay the \$5 parking fee behind TheaterWorks.

The theater “unit” generally runs for four weeks in my ENG 102 course. It should be noted that I teach a once-a-week class, so my assignments are designed accordingly. The following is my layout for *American Son*.

Week 1: Attend the live performance of *American Son* at TheaterWorks, stay for Q&A.

Week 2: Read the FIRST HALF of *American Son* for the second week. **Class begins with the first of two activities – Written Response 1 (*American Son*)**. The first questions are factual and designed to ensure consciousness and (relative) sobriety at the time of viewing. The last question is an open-ended essayistic question that then fuels our class discussion (for M/W or T/R course, this discussion will take the ENTIRE period. Trust me on this one.). I leave it open ended so that multiple paths may be pursued, and students might seize upon the ONE idea that harbor the seeds of their future essay. **The second activity is a Blackboard Discussion Thread, which students must partake in PRIOR to class.** Its instructions are as simple and open-ended as can be. They are to pick one scene from the first half of *American Son* that resonated with them most and tell us why. They are also asked to comment on TWO of their peers’ selections. This not only fosters a sense of community amongst them (paramount in these bizarre, isolated times) but it steers our discussion of *American Son* as well. The scenes and moments we

discuss as a class are of their choosing, not mine, which allows them to take partial ownership of the course and have a strong say in its organic development.

Week 3: Rinse and repeat from Week 2. Students are asked to finish reading *American Son*. **The 1<sup>st</sup> class activity is Written Response 2 (*American Son*)**. Once again, the last question in the Written Response is an open-ended essayistic question that will drive our class discussion. **The second activity is, again, a Blackboard Discussion Thread, which students must partake in PRIOR to class**. The instructions are as straightforward as the previous week's. Students are asked to select a scene from the second half of *American Son* that resonated with them AND respond to TWO of their classmates' posts.

Week 4: I conclude Week 3 by assigning an essay in cahoots with *American Son*. I've attached it here for others to use or tweak accordingly. But the thought process here is to provide students with several fallback options while encouraging them to come up with their projects.

\*\*\*Important Note for Daytime Instructors\*\*\*

Because my ENG 102 course is a Tuesday night affair, the cast of the play obviously can't visit with us during regular class hours (they're performing). HOWEVER, I also integrate TheaterWorks into my Writing Seminars at UConn-Hartford – which are daytime classes – and TheaterWorks has made it a point to arrange for a class visit EACH TIME, which is often attended by all of the cast members of the current production. Discussion is free flowing during these class visits and covers everything from the play's thematic concerns to the life of the modern thespian itself.