

“PRACTICAL FOUNDATIONS OF COMEDY”

CTW499 – Section19311R – Fall 2012

SCA 110; Tuesdays 7-9:50 PM; 2 Units
Lecturer: David Misch (david.misch@gmail.com)
Office hours: Before class by appointment
DA: Caitlin Parrish (caitlinparrish@gmail.com)

Goals and Objectives

“Practical Foundations of Comedy” is designed to be the gateway course to a planned “Comedy Concentration” at the School of Cinematic Arts.

What is there about the nature of comedy that can be studied?

Aristotle, Horace, Juvenal, Hobbes, Kant, Freud and Bergson, to name a few, have examined this question. Their insights are largely unknown or have been ignored by those who seek to make comedy.

The eminent writer, E.B. White, in his essay “Some Remarks on Humor” said:

“Analysts have had their go at humor and I have read some of this interpretative literature, but without being greatly instructed. Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.”

This statement suggests that, for the aspiring comedian, the study of humor might be interesting but is, ultimately, pointless.

It is the premise of this course that learning the history and theory of comedy is, in fact, directly applicable to the making of comedy.

It’s true that there are many great “natural” musicians who cannot read music and have no schooling in music theory. Still, it’s widely accepted that learning music theory broadens a musician’s range. The same is true of comedy.

This course is designed to teach Comedy Theory in a way that applies directly to comedy practice. Likewise, an examination of the history of comedy will deepen the mastery of the “born” comedy professional.

Our studies will demonstrate that the timeless targets and concerns of comedy are alive in our most contemporary expressions of humor and need to be addressed by anyone serious about the comedy profession.

Theory and Practice

The analogy between comedy and music is appropriate; music is governed by mathematics and comedy is governed by logic. Mathematics and logic are different languages that describe patterns. Logic, Premise, Pattern, Inference – this is the stuff of comedy. If that doesn't sound funny to you, please keep reading.

Course Description

This course will be lecture-based. Films, television shows, standup acts and other materials will be used as illustration. There will be a course reader, made up of excerpted writings relevant to the subject. We will make a dialectical spiral journey around man's relationship to the comic, drawing examples from its earliest human expression in rite and ritual to the latest viral posting on YouTube.

An effort will be made to define comedy. We'll also talk about the fundamental similarity between comedy and tragedy, and the nature of their differences.

Our goal will be to understand why something is funny. We will consider comedy in all its forms: physical, verbal, visual, auditory and transformational. We'll also study the nature and purpose of laughter and examine what Science has to say on the subject.

We'll discuss why something is taken to be funny. We'll explore where jesters, writers, actors, clowns and stand-ups throughout history have looked to find humor. We'll examine the techniques they've employed to capture the funny and conjure the laugh.

We will examine many subjects through the comedy lens, including the nature of logic and belief as it applies to comedy, the uses of misdirection and anticipation, and the place pain plays humor. We will explore the social nature and uses of comedy and how they determine the selection of and approach to subject matter.

These foundational elements will be studied with relation to their practical application for students in media.

“A laugh is involuntary. It is a reflexive recognition of a truth or contradiction. It acknowledges life's imperfection. It signifies the acceptance of a compromise between what is, and what ought to be. The ability to negotiate, and make peace with existence through laughter is a uniquely human gift. The job of the comedic artist is to conjure that laugh. A study of the underlying principles of comedy can be practically applied to the creation and execution of comedy.”

– Barnet Kellman

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Prerequisites: None

Required Texts: Course Reader

Assigned Readings: Readings will be assigned most weeks and discussed in class; exams will include these readings.

### Grading

ACTIVE participation on the part of students is essential. Grading will be based upon attendance, class participation and performance on examinations.

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|-----------------------------|-----|
| Attendance .....            | 10% |
| Class participation .....   | 20% |
| In-class Midterm Exam ..... | 30% |
| Final Exam .....            | 40% |

### Attendance/Absence

By University policy, credit towards your grade cannot be given for simply being present; it is expected that you will attend class. If your absence is unavoidable, your S.A. and instructor must be given written notice in advance by e-mail. All justifications must be verifiable.

You will be permitted 1 unexcused absence. Beyond that, you will receive a reduction of 1/3 overall course grade per unexcused absence. Your SA will keep track of attendance.

### Late Arrival

I will not set specific penalties but in cases where tardiness becomes chronic, I will give one warning and then assign penalties. Our SA will keep track of late arrivals.

### Other Class Rules

No texting, no surfing. If the privilege of having laptops is abused, that privilege will be withdrawn.

## STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to the Instructor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30 am to 5:00 pm. The office is in Student Union 301; 213-740-0776.

Note: The following course outline should serve more as a guide; the subjects and related matter may change during the term.

### **Week 1 – Introduction**

1. Introduction
2. Course Overview
3. Comedy v. Drama
4. The History of Comedy 1 – Trickster

Media – “Animal House”; The Second City; Elvis Presley on “The Milton Berle Show”

### **Week 2 – The History of Comedy 2**

1. Trickster 2 / The Marx Brothers
2. The Ancient World
3. The Middle Ages
4. Music Hall
5. Early America

Media – “The 2000-Year-Old Man” (Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks); “Duck Soup” (The Marx Brothers); “Who’s On First” (Abbott & Costello)

Reading – Misch: “Funny: The Book”; Hyde: “Trickster Makes This World”; Spinks: “Semiosis, Marginal Signs and Trickster”

### **Week 3 – The Philosophy and Psychology of Comedy 1 (Historical)**

1. Plato & Aristotle
2. Hobbes – Superiority Theory
3. Kant – Incongruity Theory
4. Spencer, Freud – Relief Theory
5. Bergson – Mechanism / Animalism

Media – “The Absent-Minded Waiter” (Steve Martin); “The Gold Rush” (Charlie Chaplin); “A Shot in the Dark” (Peter Sellers)

Reading – Figueroa-Dorrego and Larkin-Galiñanes: “A Source Book of Literary and Philosophical Writings about Humour and Laughter”; Bergson: “Laughter”; Freud: “Wit and Its Relation to the Subconscious”

### **Week 4 – The Illogic of Comedy**

1. Rules
2. Logic v. Nonsense / Monty Python
3. Jokes

Media – “The General” (Buster Keaton); “Argument Clinic” (Monty Python); “The Sex Life of the Polyp” (Robert Benchley)

Reading – Carroll: “Alice In Wonderland”; Heller: “Catch-22”; Koestler: “The Act of Creation”

### **Week 5 – Comedy and the Body**

1. The Foreign Body
2. Affliction
3. Pain
4. The Keaton Arc

Media – “The Dick Van Dyke Show”; “There’s Something About Mary” (The Farrelly Brothers); “Dr. Strangelove” (Stanley Kubrick, Terry Southern)

### **Week 6 – Comedy and Society 1**

1. Satire
2. Taboos
3. Censorship
4. Morality

Media – “The Bank Dick” (W.C. Fields); “The Producers” (Mel Brooks); “The Vatican Rag” (Tom Lehrer)

Reading – Swift: “A Modest Proposal”; Hill, Weingrad: “Saturday Night”; Beatts, Franken: “You’ve Come A Long Way, Buddy”

### **Week 7 – The Tropes of Comedy**

1. Stock Characters
2. American Archetypes
3. Genres
4. Meta
5. Improv / Sketch

Media – “The Kid Brother” (Harold Lloyd); “A Little More Gauze” (Mike Nichols & Elaine May); “Matt Foley” (Chris Farley)

### **Week 8 – Midterm Exam**

### **Week 9 – Comedy and Society 2**

1. Racism
2. Jews
3. Women / Battle of the Sexes
4. Money
5. America

Media – “Adam’s Rib”; “Richard Pryor In Concert”; “When Harry Met Sally”

### **Week 10 – Special Problems of Comedy**

1. Language
2. Shock
3. Premise
4. Misunderstanding
5. Delusion
6. Suspension of Disbelief

Media – “The Graduate” (Mike Nichols, Buck Henry); “The Court Jester” (Danny Kaye); “Groundhog Day” (Harold Ramis)

Reading – Shakespeare: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”; Thurber: “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”

### **Week 11 – The Science of Comedy**

1. Humours
2. Laughter
3. Pattern Recognition
4. Dopamine

Media – “A Night at the Opera” (The Marx Brothers); “Monty Python’s Flying Circus”

Reading – Lehrer: “How We Decide”; Misch: “Funny: The Book”

### **Week 12 – Sitcoms**

1. TV vs. Evolution
2. Sitcom episode(s): “The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Chuckles Bites The Dust”; “Murphy Brown”; “MASH”; “The Office: The Injury”

### **Week 13 – The Philosophy and Psychology of Comedy 2 (Contemporary)**

1. Arthur Koestler
2. Robert Latta
3. John Morreall
4. Steve Martin
5. Defining Comedy

Media – “The Honeymooners” (Jackie Gleason, Art Carney); “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective” (Jim Carrey); “Saturday Night Live”

Reading – Morreall: “The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter”; Latta: “The Basic Humor Process”; Martin: “Born Standing Up”

### **Week 14 – The Theology of Comedy**

1. Respect / Imperfection
2. Comedy vs. Drama 2
3. Pain / Freedom
4. Transcendence / Truth
5. Death

Media – “The Music Box” (Laurel & Hardy); Vodka Ad (Woody Allen); “Waiting For Godot” (Samuel Beckett)

Reading – Kronenberger: “The Thread of Laughter”; Eco: “The Name of the Rose”

### **Week 15 – Conclusions and Special Screening**

“Annie Hall”