

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 486 63126 Playwriting I
Fall 2014 Wednesday 3 – 5:50 pm
Location: GFS 112

Instructor: Paula Cizmar

Office: Contact me for location at cizmar@usc.edu

Office Hours: Available: Thurs 10 am - 1 pm; Wed 6 – 8 pm; Tues 1 - 4 pm; please note that office hours are by appointment only; contact me via email or phone, at least 24 hours in advance. For appointments outside these hours, I am available by videoconference on SKYPE or Google Hangout.

Contact Info: cizmar@usc.edu; 323.376.1216 mobile
www.paulacizmar.com

Course Description and Overview

Catalogue description: THTR 486 Fa) A writing workshop devoted to the creation of living, breathing characters, exploring a range of techniques designed to develop authenticity.

In most good stories, it is the character's personality that creates the action of the story. If you start with a real personality, a real character, then something is bound to happen.

--Flannery O'Connor, *Writing Short Stories*

Learning Objectives

THTR 486 is a writing workshop devoted to the development of living, breathing characters; approaching the process from various perspectives and employing a range of techniques, the goal is to infuse authenticity and complexity into the characters of original written work. Primarily intended for creative writers of all genres (playwrights, screenwriters, prose writers, poets, and interactive media writers), the course is also useful to actors and other theatre makers with regard to developing characters for performance. Students will experience creative strategies including: writing exercises, brainstorming tools, character voice exploration, character banks, and analysis of characters from exceptional plays, films, and novels. This course augments other writing courses, which, due to time constraints, are frequently more focused on plot, theme, and structure; it provides an opportunity to explore a more character-driven approach to writing. A useful side benefit of character work is a resulting improvement in dialogue, the world of the piece, mood, and tone. Both the interior life of the character as well as external motivators will be explored by developing characters from various sources including: mythological archetypes, psychological profiles, and a real life/documentary perspective. Students will also gain experience in working with elements of human nature—habits, desires, lies, inner demons, attitudes, quirks, secrets, and fatal flaws. By introducing and investigating different models of the hero/heroine's journey, the course will provide insight into how characters may be employed as story generators and as the source of movement in a written work.

Emphasis is placed on *empathy* and *metaphor* as each person strives to:

- establish for each character a unique tone, rhythm, voice;
- experiment with diverse modes of character creation;
- discover how to use multidimensional characters as a point of origin for stories;

—explore the dark side of characters, their obstacles, and the resources available to them to overcome them.

Each week discussion and writing exercises will accompany a workshop session in which student writers present ideas/images/scenes/pages for exploration and critique as part of the process of writing, rewriting, expanding.

Objectives and Beyond...

We're also adopting key elements of USC's 21st-century vision as our own by:

- GOING GREEN
- CONNECTING
- TRANSFORMING

What does this mean?

GOING GREEN means that we will save on time, energy, and paper. You will no longer have to print your work; instead, we will project your scenes, brainstorming materials, revision plans, etc. onto a giant screen in GFS via laptop computer. You won't have to print your Final Project; instead, you'll turn in a PDF of the script electronically and I will give you feedback directly on your manuscript via electronic Sticky Notes. All handouts and course materials will be paperless, sent via email and available online via Blackboard.

CONNECTING means that we will make contact in several ways—with each other, with the creative community, with the world at large. We'll connect with each other to form a support network so that everyone feels secure taking artistic risks; plus we'll connect via text message and online to keep up to the minute on what's going on in class; you may even want to try connecting via the free teleconferencing tools available (Google Hangout, Skype). We'll also stay attuned to what's going on in American theatre, and we'll look at what's going on in the world—and explore how we can use art for growth and healing.

TRANSFORMING means that we will be looking at theatre writing as a way to effect transformation in our lives, and in the lives of others; we'll look at creating theatre from a place of empathy, from a place of heart-driven concern for humanity; we'll look at culture and trends and attempt to define and redefine playwriting for the 21st century.

Prerequisite(s): None

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

THE LANGUAGE ARCHIVE. Julia Cho.

FLYIN' WEST. Pearl Cleage.

WATER BY THE SPOONFUL. Quiara Alegria Hudes.

YELLOWFACE. David Henry Hwang.

BLOOD AND GIFTS. J.T. Rogers.

BABY TAJ. Tanya Shaffer.

STOP KISS. Diana Son.

CROOKED. Catherine Treischmann.

One unpublished play and RACHEL by Angela Weld Grimke (1916; for History Matters award)

PLAYWRITING – BRIEF & BRILLIANT. Julie Jensen.

THE SOUL'S CODE. James Hillman.

Optional: SIX MEMOS FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM. Italo Calvino.

Published texts available via the USC Bookstore or online at Amazon. RACHEL is available free of charge via Google books. BABY TAJ is on back order.

The School of Dramatic Arts' Dramatic Writing Program guidelines call for each student in Playwriting 1 to read at least seven plays as part of the course. The plays listed under "Required Texts" fulfill this requirement. You are also encouraged to read additional plays from the "Recommended Reading" handout (see Blackboard). The more you read, the more you will become aware of the diverse styles, voices, and structural forms open to you as a writer.

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Grading criteria: *The quality of work for the inspiration board, the reading and discussion segment, and the ongoing writing segment is determined by the thoroughness of the effort, the continuing process, and the imagination displayed. (More information below under the description of the inspiration board.) The rubric for determining the quality of work for the Final Project is described below in the detailed description of the project.*

Grading Scale for SDA: **A** indicates work of excellent quality; **B** of good quality; **C** of average quality; **D** of below average quality; and **F** indicates inadequate work.

Grading Breakdown

Your grade will be based on multiple components: the creation of a character inspiration presentation, the development of character banks/character recipes, completion of the reading assignments, participation in class exercises and discussion, ongoing writing, and completion of your Final Project.

Please bear in mind that you earn your grade based on the timely completion of your work, plus the quality of your work. Late assignments are marked down due to missed deadline. Assignments are accepted only within one week of due date. After that, they are considered a missed assignment, which counts as zero.

Components of the overall grade are weighted as follows (see below for details):

Character Inspiration Presentation	10 percent
Character Bank/character recipes/monologues	10 percent
Reading assignments (oral pres. & responses in journal)	10 percent
Participation	15 percent
Ongoing writing and revision	25 percent
Final Projects (Character, Deep Map, and History Matters projects) + Final Exam	30 percent
TOTAL	100 percent

The Character Inspiration Presentation is a creative project in which each writer presents the various sources that provide the background for the characters of the play and for the world of the play. This is partly a research component of writing—but more than that, it is a way to get in touch with your unconscious motivators. These presentations will be supported by video projection (available in GFS 112) and may include visual art, musical inspirations, charts, graphics, articles/news stories/essays, photographs, podcasts—any kind of source material. If desired, the presentations may be done in a specific format, such as Powerpoint, Keynote, Glogster, Pinterest, Prezi, etc. Be prepared to discuss your resources and inspirations for your characters/story both in a creative/metaphoric language, as well as pragmatically. Note that this presentation is a "vision board" and is useful whenever beginning a creative work; it may include items that inspire you in

general, or items that relate particularly to the characters you have in mind right now (even if you don't know what to do with them), or items that are even more specific and directly relate to a play you want to write. This a tool with which you can tap into your imagination; you can use it as an active and more multimedia form of brainstorming, as a way to start to explore ideas, as a way to begin to frame your thoughts, and as a way to promote discussion with other artists to enhance your vision. The “board” part of this vision board presentation is virtual—we'll project your inspirations onto the screen from a laptop.

What does participation entail?

Participation includes: Writing exercises, character exercises; discussion of reading assignments; and feedback provided to other writers' work.

Your Final Project consists of two parts: (1) The Character Final Project and (2) The Deep Map & History Matters Project. The Character Final Project is a creative work illustrating your understanding of multidimensional characters plus your ability to develop and use such characters. The Character Final Project may be a play, a screenplay, a short story, a section of a novel, or a game/interactive media project. Or, it may be a research paper that makes use of character-creation principles. Or, it may be an alternative project of your own devising. Please be advised: Your plans for your Final Project must be **approved** by me no later than the midterm. The project will be graded on artistic merit, comprehension of character principles, and progress, i.e., your growth from early exploratory work to final draft. Please bear in mind: Revision of the Final Project is a component of the grade. The Deep Map Project is a two- to three-minute play that addresses the environment or some issue of the American West and can be performed on the fly in a festival setting. (See Projects handout.) The History Matters Project is a play for a contest. This is optional for undergraduates and required for MFAs.

HINT: Keep a Creative Journal! This is an archive of your explorations for writing; it may include jottings off the top of your head, stuff from your Inspiration Board, research, ideas, resources for current and future writing, and exercises and raw material from class. NOTE: It's no longer necessary to keep an actual journal, on paper. Due to the proliferation of smart phone and tablet apps for storing notes, etc., the Creative Journal may now be electronic. But do keep one. It will make your writing so much easier!

Note: The SDA GUIDELINES on GRADING state that:

- *There shall be no unexcused absences.*
- *No late assignments, projects, exams, papers, or exercises shall be accepted unless advance extensions have been arranged between the student and the teacher or unless exceptional circumstances occur.*

Additional Policies

Participation is essential and figures into your grade. This course is modeled along the lines of a professional, artistic workshop; thus, as a member of such a workshop, your participation is necessary not only for the development of your own work, but for the development of your colleagues' work as well. Theatre is a highly collaborative, community-oriented medium and play development is a key part of the life of a playwright. Indeed, in this class, one of our projects depends upon collaboration. Please honor your obligation to your colleagues' work. Absences must be for reasons of illness or emergency and must be accompanied by a written explanation; in your absence, please prepare the assigned work that is due and turn it in immediately upon return to the workshop.

1. You are entering into a collaborative relationship with fellow writers and, thus, it is your responsibility to be available to your workshop colleagues for feedback, analysis, and support.
2. All workshop members must be treated with respect.
3. You are required to attend the workshop and to be on time. Tardiness is defined as being 15 minutes late or more. Excessive tardiness will affect your ongoing writing and participation grade. Only one (1) unexcused absence is allowed.
4. Other absences must be for reasons of illness or emergency, and you must notify me in writing (preferably in advance).
5. All assignments, written and/or otherwise, must be prepared on time and turned in (or presented) on the deadline date. Late assignments will be marked down due to the missed deadline. Assignments not turned in within a week of deadline count as missed assignments (zero credit).
6. IF YOU MISS CLASS: It is your responsibility—and SOLELY YOUR RESPONSIBILITY—to make up work you have missed and to obtain information about missed class discussions or missed assignments from your classmates or Blackboard, not from me. I will not be repeating lectures or class discussion; you will need to make arrangements to do independent research on whatever topics you have missed to keep up with the workshop. You will also need to keep in contact with your classmates to obtain notes and/or information re: what you missed. Again: Do not request notes or information from me. Most course materials can be found on the Blackboard site for this course. If you lose your syllabus or handouts, go to Blackboard.
7. Please check your e-mail regularly to see if there are any changes in class meeting place, etc. On rare occasions, it becomes necessary to schedule a new location for class meeting. If I am unable to provide you with this information in the preceding class, I will send you the information via e-mail and/or text message.
8. We're going green in this classroom, so you will be providing all workshop members with copies of your work by **projecting your documents onto the screen in the classroom from your computer**, thus eliminating the need for paper. Instructions on how to do this will be provided and we will create a schedule of volunteer scribes to assist in this area so that it will not be necessary for everyone to carry a laptop to all class meetings.
9. If you desire an appointment with me, you are required to contact me via e-mail or text message at least 24 hours in advance, otherwise there is no guarantee I will receive your message with sufficient time to make arrangements to meet with you. Please note that I have included multiple ways to contact me on the front page of this syllabus.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Weeks One - Three 8/27/14 to 9/10/14 Gathering & Preparing

Topics:

Introduction: Complex Characters and Deep Characterization. The Roles of Characters (in both the creative work and the writing process).

True Life Characters: Advantages and Disadvantages of “Documentary” Characters.

Heroes/Myths from the Millennia—Ancient to Contemporary: Archetypal Characters and the Stories They Unmask.

The Psychology of Characters – Psychological Profiles/Temperaments/Types. Plus: Values and Intentions.

Consider: Secrets, Quirks, Contradictions, Habits, Attitudes, Inconsistencies, Flaws. What is a character-driven script/story?

Assignments for weeks 1 - 3:

Write a 2-3 page “found character” monologue for week 2.

Create a Character Inspiration Presentation. (Presentations will occur weeks 2 and 3; if necessary we will go into week 4. Please note—character bank characters may be included in this presentation.)

Create a character bank with multiple characters including the following:

--at least one character from current events and/or history (with monologue);

--at least one character based on myth/archetype (with monologue);

--at least one character who is totally fictional (with monologue).

Begin: Exploration (including research) of Final Project play.

Read: Selections from *The Soul's Code*. Prepare to discuss.

Read: *Language Archive*, *Blood and Gifts*, *Water by the Spoonful*, and *Crooked*. Prepare to discuss. Read and compare *Flyin' West* and *Rachel*.

Introduction to the History Matters Project and the Judith Barlow Prize.

PLEASE NOTE: In this workshop, we will be doing many things at once. We will be exploring and developing characters, analyzing already existing characters, and writing/preparing the Final Project. Students from different disciplines and/or different levels (undergrad and grad) may be working on different types of projects or in different ways. Be prepared to be flexible, even with assignments. Some people in the workshop may be working on full-length scripts while others are working on monologues or scenarios. Don't worry. It will all get done. Above all, even if you are working on a play that you had planned to write in advance of the class, be prepared to expand your vision and try new approaches to the writing of the script.

Weeks Four - Six 9/17/14 to 10/1/14 Exploration & Experimentation

Topics:

Character Voice – Including: Rhythm, Diction, Slang, and Sensory World of the Character.

Active Characterization: Characters as Story Generators. Character Revelations.

Self and Shadow Self. The Inner Character: Inner Child, Inner Demon, Inner Life. An Exploration of the Characters Often-Invisible Motivators.

Assignments for weeks 4 -6:

Prepare a character-voice-exploration monologue to present. Pay particular attention to the character's rhythms and “shadow” elements.

Write experimental scenes/pages for proposed play.

Present: Ideas/proposals/refined or expanded thoughts for Final Project.

Read and discuss: *Playwriting – Brief & Brilliant*, *The Soul's Code*, and remaining required plays.

Note: Experimental scenes may be the early scenes of your Final Project—or later scenes. It's not necessary that you write in order at this point. These may also be simply scenes that don't make it into your Final Project, but rather serve as a springboard or inspiration point. If your Final Project will not be a script,

write a scene or short short story or a meditation on a character you wish to explore. (Hint: Look at writing exercises and journal entries for inspiration.)

Weeks Seven - Nine 10/8/14 to 10/22/14 Mission & Transformation

Topics:

Hero's (and Heroine's) Journey. The Mission, The Transformation, The Arc.

Putting It All Together—Structure.

The Dark Side: Villains, Antagonists, and Anti-Heroes. Working Beyond the One-Dimensional.

Supporting Players: Sidekicks, Mentors, Catalysts, and Clowns.

Assignments for weeks 7 – 9:

Write scenes/pages for your Final Project (both the Character & Deep Map Projects).

Prepare an oral presentation about your Final Project. (Progress report, problem/issues to be addressed, brainstorming needed, Q&A.)

Prepare to lead a discussion about one of the alternate plays you read.

Week 9: TURN IN raw draft of your Final Project.

Weeks Ten - Twelve 10/29/14 to 11/12/14 Insight & Evaluation

Topics:

Character Epiphanies and Revelations.

Charting/Tracking with Concrete Creative Tools.

Final Project Preparation. Self-assessment and Plans for Revision.

Assignments for weeks 10 – 12:

Discuss: The feedback on raw draft of your Final Project. Questions and answers; brainstorming.

Assess your character inspiration projects, character banks, and raw draft. Prepare pages/revision/revision plan/whatever is needed for your Final Project; discuss.

Rewrite.

Keep working on your Final Project.

Weeks Thirteen – Fourteen 11/19/14 – 12/3/14 Presentation, Post-Mortem, and Beyond

Presentation/Playreadings/Demonstrations of Final Projects (both Character Piece and Deep Map Project). Note: History Matters/Judith Barlow Prize deadline is 11/30/14.

Assignments for weeks 13 – 14:

Keep working on your Final Project components. Revise as needed.

Week 14 (last day of class): TURN IN your Final Project.

(Note: No class November 26. Thanksgiving break.)

REMINDER: Use Blackboard as a resource. Class materials, information, handouts, additional essays, source materials, etc., are posted on the class site on Blackboard.

We all have two heads and two memories. A head of clay, which will turn to dust; and another, forever invulnerable to the gnawings of time and of passion. One memory that death kills, a compass that expires with the journey, and another memory, the collective memory, which will live as long as the human adventure in the world lives. –Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: Faces and Masks*

Final Examination Date:

Monday December 15 2 – 4 pm

FINAL EXAM: Feedback & Critique of Scripts plus Presentation of Deep Map Projects.

Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is 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 me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website and contact information for DSP: http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html, (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *SCampus*, the Student Guidebook, (www.usc.edu/scampus or <http://scampus.usc.edu>) contains the University Student Conduct Code (see University Governance, Section 11.00), while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency if travel to campus is not feasible, USC executive leadership will announce an electronic way for instructors to teach students in their residence halls or homes using a combination of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technologies.