

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Sketch Comedy for Theatre
THTR-470 (2 units)
Section 63081
Fall 2017
Mondays & Wednesdays 12-1:50pm
Location: MCC 107

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Course Description and Overview

“Laughter is the tonic, the release, the surcease for pain.” – Charlie Chaplin
“What is comedy? Comedy is the art of making people laugh without making them puke.” – Steve Martin
“The duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them.” – Molière

In this experiential writing and performance workshop course, we will explore and develop our comedic voices via the creation of comedic sketches, through the entire process — from idea generation, to writing, rewriting, rehearsal, and finally production and performance of a fully realized sketch comedy show, with an emphasis on comedic collaboration and ensemble building.

Learning Objectives

Throughout this course, we will work to develop our comedic voices through the medium of sketch — comedic explorations of concepts, characters and situations. We will learn sketch writing structure through the study of prominent existing sketches, and techniques for sketch performance and character creation. Students are expected to generate a high volume of comedic concepts and written material to serve their own creative exploration, and their own work ethic and writing practice. Students are also expected to serve the needs of the group, and work toward building a true comedy ensemble.

Although we will be working toward a final workshop presentation, this course is focused on process over product — you are not expected to be funny 100% of the time, or even 10% of the time. You are expected to be brave, be open-minded, and stretch out of your comfort zone to explore and strengthen your own unique comedic voice.

“I’m not funny. What I am is brave.” – Lucille Ball

Supplementary Materials

Required Viewing:

- Please watch *Saturday Night Live* weekly throughout the semester.
- You will also be called upon to watch and analyze existing produced sketches. Current/recent sketch shows include *Saturday Night Live*, *Key & Peele*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Portlandia*, *Kroll Show*, *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, *Baroness Von Sketch Show*, etc. Historical sketch shows include *The Carol Burnett*

Show, Chappelle's Show, The Kids In The Hall, various Tracey Ullman, MADtv, In Living Color, Monty Python's Flying Circus, etc.

Required Reading:

- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- You may also be given handouts and/or web links throughout the semester which you are expected to read and retain for discussion as needed.

Recommended Reading:

- *Live From New York: An Uncensored History of SNL* by Tom Shales & James Andrew Miller
- *Steal Like An Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative* by Austin Kleon
- *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow
- *I Must Say: My Life As a Humble Comedy Legend* by Martin Short

Recommended Viewing/Watching/Listening:

- Attend a live sketch comedy show — suggested comedy theaters include Groundlings, UCB, The Second City LA, among others.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Class attendance and participation is crucial for your success in this class. There may be no unexcused absences. No student may miss more than one class. This scheduling **MUST** be coordinated with the instructor, via email. **Failure to attend, being late, or leaving early will be reflected in your grade.** Penalty for an unexcused absence is a full letter grade. Penalty for three (3) unexcused tardies (or leaving early) is a full letter grade.

The only acceptable excuses for missing class or an assignment deadline are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Please refer to the USC Grades Handbook for information on taking an Incomplete.

This class demands a high volume of written material, and will include meeting with writing and performance partners outside of class. All written sketch material **MUST** be printed out ahead of time, with a copy for each cast member. If you have a sketch, but it is not printed, it will not be considered for the day, and will affect pitch presence points.

In writing sketches at the Pitch level, I recommend you work on a screenwriting program for your ease, but it is not necessary. Final Draft is the industry standard, and available for purchase, but Celtx also does the job and is a free download.

You will keep a Comedy Notebook throughout the course. This will be your personal notebook in which you will record observations and ideas, but will be reviewed periodically to confirm participation. Specific notebook assignments will be announced in class. You should have daily interaction with your notebook, and it should attend every class with you.

Our final workshop show will be Thursday, November 30 at 7:30pm. Tech rehearsal will be Wednesday, November 29 in the evening. Your attendance at both is required. You are also expected to take on additional production duties, such as tech coordination, music compilation, costuming and prop mastery, publicity, set-up and strike, etc. Specific production assignments will be determined later in the semester.

Additional Policies

When in class, you must be focused, and mentally, physically and emotionally present. Cell phones and other electronic devices often impede this. Cell phones should be put away completely unless you are called upon to use it (e.g. watching videos for reference). You should never have cell phones out during any lecture/lesson/rehearsal/feedback session, or when watching others perform in any way. For certain in-class work, you may use a laptop if you prefer to write on it.

Please wear clothing and shoes in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way, whether by unwanted exposure or physical limitations. Shoes should be closed-toed and stay on your feet— no flip-flops. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. If you must wear a hat, it must not obscure your face in any way.

Food or drink is not allowed in SDA classrooms, water excepted. Absolutely no gum.

USC SDA GRADING CRITERIA:

The final course grade is articulated as a Letter Grade. Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Below Average</u>	<u>Inadequate</u>
A = 95-100 pts	B+ = 87-89 pts	C+ = 77-79 pts	D+ = 67-69 pts	F = 59 or below
A- = 90-94 pts	B = 83-86 pts	C = 73-76 pts	D = 63-66 pts	
	B- = 80-82 pts	C- = 70-72 pts	D- = 60-62 pts	

- When the GPA falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students with excellent/good attendance & class participation, and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average/poor attendance & participation.
- If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W (November 10).
- I am happy to discuss your work with you at any time.

Grading Breakdown

Class Participation — Attendance, focus, attitude, willingness, ensemble support	15 points
Family Member Monologue	5 points
Stranger Monologue	5 points
Sketch Analysis	5 points
Comedy Notebook (inc. ideas)	5 points
Midterm — franchise character sketch co-write and presentation	15 points
Pitch Presence	25 points
Final Show — Professionalism, participation, attitude, competence	25 points
TOTAL	100 points

“To make comedy, maybe you just have to work hard and be funny.” — Tina Fey

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Please note: due to the fluid and creative nature of this course, weekly structure may change to accommodate the needs of individuals and the ensemble. You will be informed of any changes as much as possible.

Classes may begin with warm-ups, depending on the nature of the day's work.

- Week 1 –** **Aug 21** – Welcome/introductions/syllabus review. Intro to sketch via improv.
Intro to comedy notebook.
Aug 23 – DUE TODAY: Write a 1-2 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical or vocal tics, how they carry themselves – how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be big and yet truthful.

Present family monologues.
- Week 2 –** **Aug 28** – In-class monologue writing.
Aug 30 – DUE TODAY: Observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes (set your timer!). Get close and far. Write a 1-2 minute monologue playing that stranger – what is happening to them that day? Be specific. The funny is in the details.

Present stranger monologues.
- Week 3 –** **Sep 6** – DUE TODAY: Bring in links to 2 of your favorite sketches. Analyze and present the beats. In-class monologue writing. Begin sketch types.
- Week 4 –** **Sep 11** – In-class writing/improvising. Sketch types, continued.
Sep 13 – In-class writing/improvising. Sketch types, continued.
- Week 5 –** **Sep 18** – DUE TODAY: 30+ sketch ideas. Sketch idea speed dating. Sketch structure overview. Begin paired writing.
Sep 20 – Continue sketch idea speed dating. Continue paired writing.
- Week 6 –** **Sep 25** – DUE TODAY: Franchise character idea and presentation.
Begin supported co-writes for franchise characters.
Sep 27 – Supported co-writes for franchise characters, continued.
- Week 7 –** **Oct 2** – In-class writing/improvising.
Oct 4 – In-class writing/improvising.
- Week 8 –** **Oct 9** – MIDTERM: presentation of franchise character sketches, written/rehearsed outside of class.
Oct 11 – Midterm reflection. Review pitch formatting. Begin pitch.
- Week 9 –** **Oct 16** – Pitch. (Sketches written, copies printed and given to cast, presented for feedback.)
Oct 18 – Pitch.
- Week 10 –** **Oct 23** – Pitch.
Oct 25 – Pitch.

- Week 11** — **Oct 30** — Pitch.
Nov 1 — Pitch.
- Week 12** — **Nov 6** — Pitch. Begin to narrow down.
Nov 8 — Pitch/rehearse for show. Assign auxiliary roles.
- Week 13** — **Nov 13** — Pitch/rehearse for show.
Nov 15 — Pitch/rehearse for show.
- Week 14** — **Nov 20** — Rehearse for show.
Nov 22 — Rehearse for show.
- Week 15** — **Nov 27** — Rehearse for show. All tech final collection.
Nov 29 — Rehearse for show. Show order confirmed. All costumes and props final collection/approval.
- Nov 29** — **TECH REHEARSAL 6pm in Scene Dock Theatre**
Nov 30 — **FINAL SHOW 7:30PM in Scene Dock Theatre (calltime TBA)**
- FINAL** — **Fri Dec 8** — 11am-1pm — Post-Mortem

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct:

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance - (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety - 213-740-4321 (UPC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>