**CTWR 404**

**Section 19311R**

**Foundations of Comedy**

**Fall 2017**

**(2.0 Units)**

**Monday 7pm—10pm**

**SCI 106**

**Instructor: David Isaacs**

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**Office Hours: By Appointment**

**DA—Anna Israel**

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“The Practical Foundations of Comedy” is designed as a gateway course to a specific academic pathway through the program of the School of Cinematic Arts known as USC Comedy.

**Course Objective**—Comedy, popular though it is, has never held the status of pure Drama as an art form. Perhaps the very nature of Comedy belies it’s serious study, e.g., how to break down the campfire scene from *Blazing Saddles* or the “Master of my Own Domain” episode from *Seinfeld.* That said, it is built on the same foundation of human conflict and irony as Drama, but veers off to expose and exploit the cosmic absurdity present. It’s time to give the study of comedy its due.

It is the premise of this course that learning the genealogy (bloodlines), theory and applications of comedy is, in fact, directly applicable to the making of comedy, which is the practical goal.

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

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 explored by anyone serious about comedy.

**Course Description and Goals:**

This course will be lecture and discussion based. Films, television shows, standup acts and other materials will be used as illustration. Readings relevant to the subject will be recommended.

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

Our goal will be to understand why something is funny. We will consider comedy in all its forms, physical, verbal, visual, written, and transformational. We will study the nature and purpose of laughter…and if all goes as planned we will laugh.

**COURSE SCHEDULE—WEEKS OF CLASS**

**WEEK ONE – AUG. 21** -- INTRODUCTION: COMEDY IS CHARACTERS

Introduction, course objectives. Overviews: The historical significance of comedy. The importance of characters in creating comedy. Will screen: LOVE AND DEATH

**Assignment—**Comedic Influences---Facebook entry including favorite comedy movie, TV series, stand up artist.

**WEEK TWO – AUG. 28** –INCONGRUITY

The Macro Lecture---Comedy Axioms, Context and Structure. Breakdown of Comedic Character. The funny in Fear.

**Assignment:** Create a comic character using the Character Breakdown demonstrated in class. (Due in Week 3 class. Sept. 11—Hard copy requested.)

**LABOR DAY HOLIDAY—SEPT. 4**

**WEEK THREE – SEPT. 11** **---**THE OUTSIDER— DIVERSITY AND THE PERSONAL ROOTS OF COMIC EXPRESSION

Exploring Comedy as created in reaction to the established society. How various groups and cultures, traditionally outside the mainstream, stamped their mark on American humor.

Guest Speaker: Tim Story. Will screen: Clips from BARBERSHOP, DAVE CHAPELE.

**WEEK FOUR** **-- SEPT. 18**--- THE ART OF PHYSICAL COMEDY

Silent movies. Slapstick. The physical expression of comedy. Will screen: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel & Hardy.

**WEEK FIVE – SEPT. 25**--- LOVE AND LAUGHS -- ROMANTIC COMEDY

Sex, misunderstanding, chemistry. Romcoms as a reflection of contemporary society. Screwball comedies. How the romantic dynamics between men and women have changed with the times. Romcom conventions. Will screen: THE LADY EVE.

**WEEK SIX---OCT. 2**-- RELATIONSHIP COMEDY – COMING OF AGE AND GOING ON TRIPS

The dynamics`of buddy relationships. Conventions of buddy movies. Coming of age movies. Issues that are explored. The rise of R-rated comedies. Will screen:

PLANES, TRAINS and AUTOMOBILES.

**Assignment**: Mid-Term Essay. Due in Week 7 class. Oct. 9 (Details to follow)

**WEEK SEVEN – OCT. 9** -- THE ANATOMY OF COMEDY – PROVEN THEORIES AND FAWLTY LOGIC

Analysis of comic expression. Joke Writing. Timing. **Guest Speaker**: John Bowman (SNL, In Living Color, Martin). British comedy. Monty Python, The Goon Show, Peter Sellers, Cook & Moore. Will screen: BLACK ADDER.

(**NOTE**: Mid –Term Essay **due** in class. Hard copy needed)

**WEEK EIGHT – OCT. 16** -- FROM LUCY TO LAURA – EARLY SITUATION COMEDY

Transition from radio to TV. The rise and fall and rise of Multi-camera comedies. Dynamics in families and marriages. Teen comedies introduced. Contrast between ‘50s and ‘60s. Will show: THE HONEYMOONERS, BILKO, DICK VAN DYKE SHOW.

**WEEK NINE – OCT. 23**-- THE GOLDEN AGE OF SITUATION COMEDY –FROM MEATHEAD TO KRAMER.

The maturation of the Form. So phisticated comedy. Social issues, i.e. Race, Women, War. Escapism. Various comedy camps: i.e. Norman Lear, MTM, Garry Marshall, Larry Gelbart. Pushing the envelope. The sitcom landscape today. **Guest Speakers**: Phil Rosenthal (Writer/Creator: Everybody Loves Raymond) Will screen: ALL IN THE FAMILY, CHEERS, EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND, THE OFFICE.

**WEEK TEN – OCT. 30** -- BLACK COMEDY – IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

Anarchy, dark themes, political themes, subversive themes, pushing the bounds of good taste, challenging society and political correctness. Will screen: DR. STRANGELOVE

**WEEK ELEVEN – NOV. 6** -- STAND UP COMEDY – YOU’VE BEEN A WONDERFUL AUDIENCE

Vaudeville, club comics, the evolution of stand-up. Different styles. Political comedians. Groundbreaking comedians. Female Artists. Guest: TBA. Will screen: RICHARD PRYOR concert film, clips from various comedians.

**WEEK TWELVE – NOV. 13** -- SKETCH COMEDY – WITH OR WITHOUT A SCRIPT

Telling comic story in only a few minutes. Sketch comedy as it’s served Broadway, TV variety shows, late night variety shows and now the Web. **Guest Speaker:** Chase Winton (Groundlings). Will screen: clips from SNL, CAROL BURNETT SHOW, SCTV, IN LIVING COLOR. Improvisation: writing sketch comedy on your feet. Rules of improvisation. Class exercises.

**WEEK THIRTEEN – NOV. 20** – ANIMATION

The many comedic styles and functions of Animation. The practice of an animated Comedy series. **Guest Speaker**: David Goodman. (Executive Producer of Family Guy)

**WEEK FOURTEEN – NOV. 27**—COMIC AUTEURS AND COURSE REVIEW

Their objectives, comic styles, and differences. Billy Wilder, John Hughes, Judd Apatow, Albert Brooks, Blake Edwards, Jerry Lewis, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Ferrelly Brothers, Coen Brothers, Christopher Guest. Course Review. Will screen: WAITING FOR

GUFFMAN

**FINALS WEEK—TBD** ---FINAL EXAM

**NOTE:** The weekly schedule is subject to change depending on availability of the guests and the instructor’s discretion. Items to be screened may also change.

**Grading---**

Two unexcused absences automatically lower your grade one full point. Three unexcused absences will lower grade two full points. Tardiness will be noted and two late arrivals will count as one full absence. There is important ground to cover in each session and tardiness will not be tolerated. This is a large lecture style class so we will be taking roll each week.

Grading breakdown:

Participation: 10% (in class responses, in class participatory exercises, Facebook submissions.)

Character Breakdown: 10%

Mid-Term: 30% take home essay exam

Final Exam: 50% in class exam

**Participation Breakdown--**

As mentioned above this class is jumbo sized. There are more than a hundred of you and only two at the lectern. We really want to hear from you, and we also have a ton of great material we want to get to. Some weeks we might not get to hear every comment or show every clip we’d like to.

That’s why we’re going to continue the conversation on Facebook.

We have registered on Facebook and will be posting lots of material relevant to each week’s course material as we find it. Any clip we show from online sources will be available for you to view, comment on, and share. We’ll also try to post “deep cuts”-- material to help you dig deeper into a topic, if it interests you.

As soon as you’re able-- but **no later than by the end of the first week of class**—August 26, create a Facebook username that will be *exclusive to this class.* Send a message from that account to DA. that includes your real name, email address, and USC ID number.

Once you’ve made your account, it’s time to start submitting content. Content can be anything relevant in the aftermath of our discussion; use your judgment. Sniff out interesting primary sources: reviews of the films, commentary from critics, more work from an artist we discussed. Or just speak your mind in a text post.

Practice good Facebook etiquette, comment freely, and uplink comments and posts that are especially helpful.

**Your course participation grade-- 10% of your final average-- will be mainly determined by your participation in the conversation on Facebook. (Although your participation in the lecture discussion will always be duly noted.)**

At the Midterm, you’ll submit a printed summary of your Facebook submissions. A printed summary with five or more original submissions gets you five points. Four or fewer get you two points. An excuse as to why you forgot to print it gets you no points (and may God have mercy on your soul).

On the last day of class, you’ll do the same thing: five or more new posts gets you the remaining five points, four or fewer is worth two, and “sorry, I forgot...” is worth zilch.

If we do this right, we’ll end this course with more than a thousand pieces of content to look over, share, and discuss. (That’s probably an inflated figure, but an impressive one.)

**Recommended Reading --**

John Vorhaus – *The Comic Toolbox*

Dan O’Shannon – *What Are You Laughing At?*

Ken Levine – Blog: KenLevine.blogspot.com

Woody Allen – *Getting Even*

Sigmund Freud-*Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious*

Dick Gregory--*Autobiography*

Henri Bergson – *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*

Anna Fields—*The Girl in the Show*

Tina Fey – *Bossypants*

Marc Maron – *Attempting Normal*

Andy Goldberg – *Improv Comedy*

(**NOTE:** If there are books or articles about Comedy that you would like to suggest please mention them in class or on the Facebook page)

**Office Hours**

By appointment.

**LAPTOP POLICY:** Once again, this is a large lecture style class. That is why we require laptops(and phones) to be turned off and put away while the lecture and/or discussion is in progress. To turn your attention to anything but the work at hand is disrespectful, not to mention un-professional. A warning will be given for the first such infraction. The next will result in a loss of one grade level. Please take notes on paper. The highlights of each class will be posted on Blackboard during the week after the session.

**STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEM**

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 Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards.* [https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/](https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/" \t "_blank).  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/](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/" \t "_blank).

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Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* [http://equity.usc.edu/](http://equity.usc.edu/" \t "_blank) or to the *Department of Public Safety* [http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us](http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us" \t "_blank). This is important for the safety whole USC community.  Another member of the university community – such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member – can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men*[http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/" \t "_blank) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage [sarc@usc.edu](mailto:sarc@usc.edu) describes reporting options and other resources.

**Support Systems**

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing.  Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more.  Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute*[http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali](http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali" \t "_blank), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.  *The Office of Disability Services and Programs*[http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home\_index.html](http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html" \t "_blank)provides c ertification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.  If an officially  declared emergency makes travel to campus *infeasible*, *USC Emergency Information [http://emergency.usc.edu/](http://emergency.usc.edu/" \t "_blank)*will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

**Disruptive Student Behavior**

Behavior that persistently or grossly interferes with classroom activities is considered disruptive behavior and may be subject to disciplinary action. Such behavior inhibits other students’ ability to learn and an instructor’s ability to teach. A student responsible for disruptive behavior may be required to leave class pending discussion and resolution of the problem and may be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs for disciplinary action.

**PLEASE NOTE:** **FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX**