

CTWR 487
Staff Writing the Comedic Television Series
4 Units
Fall 2015
Wednesday 7:00PM--11:00PM
Instructor - Russ Woody
Cell: 818-448-2773
Office Hours: 4pm-6pm Mon-Fri
Aroma Café
4360 Tujunga Ave.
Studio City
Student Assistant-- **Osahon Tongo**
Email: osahon.tongo@gmail.com
Pre-Requisite--CTWR 434

Overview

In a medium where new stories are required each week, writing and re-writing skills become a most valuable asset. Moreover, the vision and adaptability of the Head Writer (aka the Showrunner) determines the course of any scripted series. Writing students in this course will get to experience first-hand what it is like to work as Showrunners and Staff Writers on a multi-camera half-hour comedy series. The class will not, however, include the “creative” input of real network executives... thereby opening the possibility that the final produced product might not suck ass.

Course Goal

---An opportunity for writing students to write and re-write a pilot episode of an SCA created TV series, pitch further episodes, in addition to collaborating with a corresponding Production Division class (CPTR 484, Advanced Multi-Camera Television Workshop) in producing a final product. Students will interact with other writers, producers, directors, editors, crew members and even actors, unfortunately. Students must all work together to take a show from the page to the stage and into the living room. In the process of dealing with other creative types, each student will hopefully have learned the essential skill of stifling the onset of a full and violent rage.

Course Objective

A pilot episode of a student-created TV series will be shot in front of a live audience on an SCA stage (in the past, this has been tried unsuccessfully with a dead audience) with DVD's of the finished product distributed at the end of the course.

Requirements

Students who apply for this course are expected to have completed CTWR 434, have written a spec script for a half hour comedy series and/or run a successful television sitcom for five or more years.

The course is recommended for students, both graduate and undergraduate who have a serious interest in writing comedy for television.

Attendance

All writing students are expected to attend regular class hours from 7p.m. to 11p.m. Wednesday evenings. Most re-writing, production meetings, table readings with actors, and rehearsal run-thrus will take place during regular class hours. In addition, writing students may be required to meet with the Showrunner for occasional rewrites outside of class. All students are encouraged as well to be present on stage for two weekends during the semester when episodes are blocked and shot on camera (See course schedule). Any students who fail to show up for classes, weekend assignments or rewrites will be considered nonexistent.

Students who take on Showrunner (Executive Producer) responsibilities are expected to be available for casting, additional re-write sessions as needed and post-production on their episodes.

Students with various Producer assignments (Casting, Pre-Production, Post-Production, Associate Producer) are expected to be available as needed for their individual assignments. Anyone who finds that they are unable to perform their duties should inform the instructor in due time and be prepared for social and professional ostracism.

Attendance is of Paramount importance, as well it's important at Universal and Warner Bros. This class is all about collaboration. If you are not present, you can't collaborate. In addition, you'll be considered un-present and absent. More important, if you can't collaborate you deprive your fellow

writers of your insights, ideas, support and your marginally cheerful personality.

Note: The Instructor understands that most students have multiple classes and responsibilities during the semester; so every effort is made to allow for real conflicts that arise. But don't push it.

Grading

Since this class is essentially a weekly writing workshop, students will be graded on their participation in the room writing process, their ability to give and especially to receive constructive criticism without resorting to threats of, or actual suicide. They will be graded on their initiative to bring new ideas and script fixes to class and the timely completion of any and all weekly homework assignments.

Breakdown of grade

Class Participation---10%

Individual assignments #1 and #2---20%

Team assignments #3 thru #7---50%

Final Review paper--Individual assignment #8--20%

Two unexcused absences automatically lower your grade one full point. Three unexcused absences will lower grade two full points, which, for grad students, will suck ass big time. 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.

"Eighty percent of success is showing up"
Woody Allen

Course Schedule

WEEK 1 **(August 26)** Introduction

Wednesday

Course overview. Meet with Production Class.

Exec Producers will describe pilot, it's intent, mood, look, etc.

Supply CAST BREAKDOWNS and copies of FIRST DRAFT.
Discussion on the production of a half hour comedy series.
Students choose jobs, divide responsibilities.
SCRIPT COORDINATOR – Hard Copies/Sides, etc.
PRE-PRODUCTION PRODUCER
POST-PRODUCTION PRODUCER
CASTING DIRECTORS
Discussion of protocol in the rewrite room – do's and don't's.
The highs and lows of collaborative writing. Is collaboration a four letter word? How a writing staff is like a volleyball team.
Rolling with someone else's pitch.
Object to the showrunner's choice 1½ times... if you feel strongly.
Letting go of your own pitches when they sink.
Room re-write begins on Pilot.

WEEK 2

(September 2)

Wednesday

Discussion of methods for finding story ideas.
Find 100 ideas, five will be good.
Where's your heart?
What makes a great character? How's it get you a story?
Rewrite script, as necessary.
Visit from professional TV Production Designer on the importance of production design in comedy.
Seminar with Professional Casting Director.

"I make at least a hundred decisions a day, and at least half of them are wrong. The important thing is to keep making decisions."

Peter Casey

Co-creator/Showrunner

Wings, Frasier

WEEK 3
(September 9)

Wednesday

Discussion of the importance of music and title sequence to a series.

Discussion of giving and getting notes.

How to get bad notes without doling out physical violence.

How to give notes without bringing a writer/actor to tears.

Room re-write continues on Pilot.

***** WEEKEND ONE *****
(September 13)

Sunday

Casting.

Room off the stage in classroom is set up and ready.

Producers prepare and organize:

SCRIPT SIDES

PARKING

SCHEDULE OPEN ROOM

WATER, etc.

Morning: Actors and Directors.

Afternoon: Preliminary call back for EPs and Directors and Actors.

Possible Re-write of Pilot script.

WEEK 4
(September 16)

Wednesday

6-8pm - Casting callbacks upstairs in classroom with
EPs/Directors/Crew.

Final casting decisions will be made.

Cast run-thru of Pilot.

7pm on Stage #4

Notes with Director and cast

Re-write of Pilot.

Assignment #3: Pairs of students will team up. Each pair will prepare
five new jokes for the re-write of Episode #2.

WEEK 5
(September 23)

Wednesday

Production Meeting on Stage 4.
Discussion of what makes a situation funny?
Start with something serious – how do you twist it?
Rewrite upstairs.

WEEK 6
(September 30)

Wednesday

Table read on Stage 4.
Producers must have:
 TABLES
 SCRIPTS
 CHAIRS
Upstairs – Discussion of rewriting your own material.
How to look at the whole of the piece, get rid of unnecessary stuff.
Re-write continues.

***** WEEKEND TWO *****
(October 4)

Sunday

Camera Blocking with full crew.
Tech run-thru.

WEEK 7
(October 7)

Wednesday

Dry blocking.
First full rehearsal.
Discussion of how to fix a script in BIG trouble.
Discussion of Gang Writing an episode

***** WEEKEND THREE *****
(October 10)

Saturday-- Camera Blocking

Sunday—

Noon - Full cast/crew refreshing.

3pm – Lunch.

4pm – Audience Arrives.

5pm - Shoot in front of live audience.

WEEK 8
(October 14)

Wednesday

Rewrite of script as necessary.

WEEK 9
(October 21)

Wednesday

Screening of Pilot rough cut.

Each team will prepare a set of notes for editing.

***** WEEKEND FOUR *****
(October 24/25)

Saturday

10 am: Full cast and crew call.

1-1:30 pm: Blocking

Sunday

12 pm: Full cast and crew (refreshing).

3 pm: Lunch.

4 pm: Audience Arrives.

5 pm: Filming.

WEEK 10
(October 28)

Wednesday

CLASS WILL BREAK/STRUCTURE A SERIES 2nd EPISODE.

Discussion of Sound sweetening, Scoring and Main Titles

Depending on other classes, we will work with them on an alt short project, assigning writers to acting positions, directors to writing, etc. Writers will be assigned to submit an old or problematic script, to be rewritten by the room.

WEEK 11
(November 4)

Wednesday

SAMPLE SCRIPT WILL BE REWRITTEN BY ROOM.
One writer will lead the room in a rewrite of their script.
Emphasis will be on room participation, criticism, leadership.

WEEK 12
(November 11)

Wednesday

SAMPLE SCRIPT WILL BE REWRITTEN BY ROOM.

WEEK 13
(November 18)

Wednesday

SAMPLE SCRIPT WILL BE REWRITTEN BY ROOM.
Final Cut notes

THANKSGIVING
WEEK 14
(November 25)

Thursday

Go home.
Eat.
Deal with relatives.

WEEK 15
(December 2)

Wednesday

Screen Final Cut for Class and Cast
Mini Party
Screening Room.

FINALS WEEK

A Wrap

Recommended Reading

The TV Writers Workbook by Ellen Sandler

The Screenwriter's Bible by David Trottier

Effed Up! Story of a Family by Russ Woody (just because)

Disabilities Accommodations

---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 this letter is returned to the instructor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open from 8:30 a.m.--5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The telephone number for DSP is (213) 740--0776.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principals 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 obligation both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by other as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. And though this course is designed to prepare the student for work in the television industry, where honesty and integrity are seldom evident, USC students will be held to a higher standard.

All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. SCAMPUS, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11:00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty, especially where plagiarism is confirmed. The Review process can be found at <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS>. (Though students should note that the instructor cut and pasted the above paragraph from someone else's syllabus.)