

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Improvisation and Theatre Games

THTR-122 (2 units)

Fall 2016

Thursdays 2-3:50pm

Location: MCC 107

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Office: MCC Adjunct Office (upstairs)

Office Hours: By appointment. Please schedule via email.

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Course Description and Overview

“In the long history of humankind (and animalkind, too)
those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively
have prevailed.” – Charles Darwin

In this experiential workshop course, we will learn and build upon the tenets and rules of theatrical improvisation, with ultimate emphasis on applying these to one’s own life. Through theatre games/exercises, and improvised experiences and performance, students will work toward freeing themselves physically, vocally, and emotionally, to stimulate creativity, imagination, and self-expression.

This course has no prerequisite(s), and may be taken for credit twice.

Learning Objectives

Through theatrical games and improvisational experiences,

We will learn and participate in effective storytelling, relationship-building and presentation,
We will strive to be present, and open to both our own and others’ creative impulses,
We will work to be confident, and yet exploratory, in our physicality, voice, emotions and words,
We will explore human nature through character work, both written and performed,
We will collaborate with our fellow actors, inviting their own sensibilities and additions,
We will consistently perform in front of an audience, and evaluate our own work, and
We will discuss how to frame our classwork to apply to a positive life perspective.

Supplementary Materials

Required Viewing:

You will be required to attend at least one live improv show of your choice, and turn in a written evaluation of the show.

On-campus, there are several student groups that perform regularly. Off-campus, notable improv theaters include UCB, The Groundlings, Impro Theatre, iOWest, The Second City, among others. I will email you a link early in the semester with links to suggested theaters and shows, and you are welcome to do your own research as well.

Recommended Reading:

- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin
- *Steal Like An Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative* by Austin Kleon
- *Impro* by Keith Johnstone

Recommended Viewing/Watching/Listening:

- *Who's Line Is It Anyway* episodes (available on cwseed.com)
- Improvised movies and television shows, such as Christopher Guest -directed movies, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Reno 911*, among others
- Improvised podcasts such as *Comedy Bang Bang*, *Spontaneanation*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Class attendance and participation is the most important part of your success in this class. Weekly attendance and punctuality is crucial for building an ensemble, understanding games and exercises, and respecting your fellow actor.

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 or being late will be reflected in your grade.** Penalty for unexcused absence is a full grade point. Penalty for three (3) unexcused tardies is a full grade point.

Missing a project, incomplete: The only acceptable excuses for missing an assignment deadline or taking an incomplete in the course are personal illness or a family emergency. Students must inform the professor before the assignment due date and present verifiable evidence in order for a make-up to be scheduled. Students who wish to take Incompletes must also present documentation of the problem to the instructor before final grades are due.

No cell phone or electronic devices of any kind may be used in class, unless specifically instructed. This is to encourage your focus, mindfulness, and respect to your peers.

Please wear clothing and shoes in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing/shoes should not inhibit you in any way. Shoes should be closed-toed.

There will be five (5) written assignments over the course of the semester. All written assignments must be typed, printed, and turned in on their due date. Emailed assignments will not be accepted unless previously arranged due to extenuating circumstances.

SDA GRADING CRITERIA:

Grading Scale A = 4; A- = 3.7; B+ = 3.3; B = 3; B- = 2.7; C+ = 2.3; C = 2; C- = 1.7; D = 1; F 0

Excellent

A = 96-100 points

A- = 91-95 points

Very Good

B+ = 88-90 points

B = 85-87 points

B- = 81-84 points

Good

C+ = 78-80 points

C = 75-77 points

C- = 71-74 points

Satisfactory / Threshold

D+ = 68-70 points

D = 65-67 points

D- = 61-64 points

Unsatisfactory to Poor

F = 60 or below

The final course grade is articulated as a Letter Grade. This grade is translated into a G.P.A using the following scale: **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

Class Participation — Attendance, focus, attitude, willingness to participate	15 points
Ensemble Work — Inclusion of fellow actors within a scene or exercise	10 points
Written Review of Live Improv Show	5 points
Character Monologues — written and performed (5 points each)	10 points
Self-evaluations — written and turned in (5 points each)	10 points
Midterm — Comprehension, willingness, application of learned techniques	20 points
Personal growth and improvement — personal and teacher assessment	10 points
Final “Jam” — Skill level, growth, willingness, application of learned techniques	20 points

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

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

Every class will begin with group warm-ups.

Week 1 — August 25 — Welcome/Introductions

Get out of our minds & bodies with extensive warm-up and theatre exercises. Begin ensemble work. Syllabus review.

Homework: read handout.

Week 2 — September 1 — Tenets/Basics of Improv

The Only Lecture. Please bring materials for taking notes. Followed by exercises focused on “YES, AND” — agreeing and adding information.

Week 3 — September 8 — Storytelling, Status, Space Work, Relationship

Exercises focused on space work (using the space/stage and “pantomime”), telling individual and group stories, beginning character work through Status, and learning to quickly establish relationship.

Homework: write Self-Evaluation, observing yourself in Weeks 1-3. Specific questions to come.

Week 4 — September 15 — Physicality/Voice Exploration

Assignment Due: Written Self-Evaluation

Beginning character work with voice and physicality, including gibberish and over-the-top work.

Homework: 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. You will be performing this next week.

Week 5 – September 22 – Specific Character Work

Assignment Due: Family Member Monologue

Presentation of family member monologues. Further character work, within scenes.

Homework: Bring an interesting item (or two) of clothing/costume piece.

Week 6 – September 29 – Character Work in Scenes

Continuation of character work in scenes. We will use the costume piece(s) you bring to class.

Homework: Observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes (set your timer!). Get close and far. You will write a 1-2 minute monologue playing that stranger – what is happening to them that day? Be specific.

Week 7 – October 6 – Practice Improv Basics

Assignment Due: Observation of Stranger Monologue

Perform Stranger Monologues. Practice open scenes, filling in the details of character, location, story, etc.

Week 8 – October 13 – Midterm Exam Performance

In-class performance of to-be-determined improv format, with ensemble as a whole.

Week 9 – October 20 – Games: Guessing/Timed/Energy

Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on guessing, timed and energy-driven games.

Week 10 – October 27 – Games: Character/Experts/Styles

Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on character, expert, and style games.

Homework: Last chance to attend a live improv show of your choice. You will evaluate and review, specific questions to come. You will receive an email earlier in the semester with links to suggested improv shows, both on and off campus.

Week 11 – November 3 – Rehearse for Final Improv Jam

Assignment Due: Written Review of Live Improv Show

Discuss shows we attended. Discuss format for Final Improv Jam. Learn and practice “calling” a show. Rehearse in small groups.

Week 12 – November 10 – Rehearse for Final Improv Jam

Rehearse in both small groups and large group.

Week 13 – November 17 – Final rehearsal for Final Improv Jam

Together, determine final Improv Jam format. Final rehearsal.

Homework: Invite people to our Improv Jam and eat cranberry jam.

Week 14 – November 24 – Thanksgiving – NO CLASS

Week 15 – December 1 – Final Improv Jam!

Perform improv for our invited guests in a casual, yet professional environment. Show will be filmed to watch and evaluate during our assigned Final time.

Homework: Final evaluation of your progress and experience in this class. Specific questions to come.

Week 16 – December 8 – FINAL – University assigned final time: 4:30-6:30pm

Assignment Due: Final Written Evaluation

Watch playback of our Improv Jam, with the caveat that improv is never as good filmed as it was live. Discuss, evaluate. Post-mortem.

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.

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. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>. Information on intellectual property at USC is available at: <http://usc.edu/academe/acsen/issues/ipr/index.html>.

Statement on 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 Section 11, Behavior Violating University Standards <https://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. 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/>.

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/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. 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/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage 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>, 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 provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.

Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> 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.