**WRITING THE HALF HOUR DRAMEDY PILOT**

**Spring 2017**

**CTWR 437**

**Section 19226**

**Instructor: Mort Nathan**

**Class schedule: Monday, 10-12:50 PM**

**Class Location: SCB 101**

**Office Hours: By appointment**

**Contact Info:**  **MortNath@usc.edu**

**Course Objective**

The course objective is to have a completed original half hour dramedy pilot accompanied by a potential narrative arc, which supports the series.

**Course Description**

There are lots of mainstream television channels and several cable outlets for dramedy series. Having a strong, well-crafted original half hour dramedy pilot, along with the network standard spec script are the current tools of the trade.

The class will serve as a guide to the writing and re-writing of an original dramedy pilot. It will examine the elements that make a dramedy different from a traditional sit-com – specifically focusing on the function of a series antagonist with a comedic take in an inherently dramatic/emotionally complex situation. (think Orange is the New Black, Transparent, etc.) This course will help the writer develop their unique voice, and also deepen their understanding of situations, characters and the dynamics that are needed to create a successful dramedy series.

Through the use of humor, the course will concentrate on the creation and development of several narrative strands over more than one episode, the creation of credible, interesting and engaging characters with layered, relevant stories to tell, and the exploration of plot lines that provide a journey that we the audience want to follow. In addition, the course will focus on the writer’s ability to work the subtext of the series – to maximize the emotional links between the story lines and the theme that originally drives the creation of the pilot, and ultimately the show on a weekly basis.

**Each week** we will try and watch a different pilot in order to study, dissect and learn how the series was built successfully - or how it fell apart due to how it was conceived.

**Course Reading**

Dramedy pilots (TBD)

Handouts

**Grading Criteria**

Grades will be determined by the same standard that television writers are judged if hired. Always show up on time. Always meaningfully contribute. Assignments are never late. Ever.

\*Notes are taken and re-writing is the norm.

\**A note on notes*. Learning to take notes on industry writing is an important skill. I read your scripts extremely carefully. If you do not understand or disagree with a note please set up an appointment so we can talk about it. *Ignoring notes will only put you behind in your writing.*

Participation: 10%

Pitch: 10%

Beat Sheet: 10%

Outline: 10%

First Draft: 30%

Second Draft: 30%

100%

**As per Writing Division policy ( or thereabouts) the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:**

A 100% to 94%

A- 93% to 90%

B+ 89% to 87%

B 86% to 83%

B- 82% to 80%

C+ 79% to 77%

C 76% to 73%

C- 72% to 70%

D+ 69% to 67%

D 66% to 63%

D- 62% to 60%

F 59% to 0%

**Writing Division Attendance Policy:**

Students are expected be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered by one full point (ex: A to a (A-). A third unexcused absence will result in your grade being lowered another full point (ex: B to a (B-). Your grade will be lowered by one point for every absence after. Two late arrivals equates to one full absence.

In order for an absence to be excused the student must have approval from the professor

and provide documentation at the next attended class session. Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

**Laptop and Cell Phone Policy:**

Students will be allowed to bring their laptops to class and may use them when we are reviewing material as a group, or if the student is referring to something for the benefit of the class. (This excludes surfing the web and yelling out random television facts.) The rest of the time students will be expected to keep their laptops closed. No writing your scripts in class unless you are taking notes. Cell phones should be turned off, because …c’mon.

**Digital Information Loss Policy**

Students are expected to back up all of their writing on a cloud service or a flash drive. A crashed computer or loss of a file is only a valid excuse if you were born in the 60’s.

**Course Goals**

The class will be heavily weighted in defining structure, purpose, venue, character and conflict.

The class will also dissect what makes a unique situation and what is the dynamic that can sustain it.

Another crucial component will be developing skills to analyze and critique your work and other writers with an emphasis on always making it better and yes, while making it “weird” is now a seemingly TV standard, our goal is to see that it things are never weird for weird sake and that even “weird” needs to be grounded.

An introduction to the loneliness of the long distance pilot writer: the joys and sorrows of writing on your own, sticking to a schedule, and continuing to rewrite. To continue the education of leaving excuses and defenses behind while learning the grace and flexibility of a writers room.

**GENERAL Class Schedule:**

(Specific dates are subject to change per the discretion of the professor)

The class will be divided into GROUPS (decided in the first class) so that the schedule for handing in assignments and reviewing them won’t kill us.

**GROUPS will –**

PITCH their ideas to the class and make a decision about which idea to write. Each student will then turn in their BEAT SHEET in ONE WEEK.

Students will present their Beat Sheets to the class for notes. They will have ONE WEEK to hand in an OUTLINE.

The following week, they will receive notes on their OUTLINE. They will have TWO WEEKS to write the ACT ONE of their script.

The following week, notes will be given by the instructor and the class on the ACT ONE. The student will have ONE WEEK to write the ACT TWO.

The following week notes will be given on the ACT TWO, etc.

In addition to analyzing students works in progress and current TV pilots, topics for discussion will also include…

Week 1: Why do some pilots work and others don’t?

Assignment: Two potential pilot ideas and pilot stories

Week 2: What’s the best situation in a situation comedy?

Assignment: Beat sheet for pilot story

Week 3: The Beat Sheet v. Ideas

Assignment: Revised, more detailed beat sheet/outline.

Week 4: Just Do It – writing the fast draft.

Assignment: Written, formatted pilot teaser

Week 5: Motivation – tricks and tips for getting it done.

Assignment: Rewritten teaser, Act I

Week 6: Comedy is a character in trouble – Why some characters are iconic. Why some characters don’t work.

Assignment : Rewrite teaser, Act I

Week 7: All the world’s a stage – What is funny? Shock value as a comedy tool, if properly motivated.

Assignment: Act II

Week 8: Grounding and Emotional Cores. Both comedy and drama come from “truth.” Exploring a situation honestly to get comic and dramatic value.

Rewrite Act II

Week 9: Just Breathe. (Getting and giving notes.)

Assignment: Refine and rework Teaser through Act II

Week 10: Re-writing is writing. If you think it’s funnier than it is… it isn’t.

Assignment: Act III

Week 11: The joke pass. What you don’t see coming.

Assignment: Rewrite Act III

Week 12: Series arcs and future episodes. How to approach the series “Bible.”

Assignment: Refine and rework Teaser through Act III

Week 13: Writer’s rooms and how to thrive.

Assignment: Final revisions on pilot script

Week 14: Polishing, the fine line of your voice vs others.

Assignment: Putting together the series “Bible”

Week 15: Agents, Biz Stuff. Special industry guest, pending availability

Finalize series “Bible.”

**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 that the letter is delivered to the Professor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776

**Statement on Academic Integrity**

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty included 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 expectd to understand and abide by these principles. SCAMPUS, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 1.00, 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 Judical 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/>.

**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.

Please activate your course in Blackboard with access to the course syllabus. Whether or not you use Blackboard regularly, these preparations will be crucial in an emergency. USC's Blackboard learning management system and support information is available at [blackboard.usc.edu](http://blackboard.usc.edu/).

**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.

**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 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 of the

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 http://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. 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.