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**THTR 122 Improvisation**

**Instructor Paul Urcioli urcioli@usc.edu**

**Office hours by appointment**

**Course Description and Overview**

This is a workshop course, in which each student actively participates in every class. There are no midterms or exams. However, students must read the textbook as well as attend class for the Final Exam period during its regularly scheduled time.

**Required Reading**

IMPRO by Keith Johnstone

**Learning Objectives**

This course will cover the basic concepts of improvisation: trust, teamwork, listening, commitment and clear communication. At the conclusion of the course, the students will have a solid foundation in confidently playing the three building blocks of improvisation: WHO (relationship), WHAT (activity) and WHERE (location) having learned to obey and follow their impulses in the best service of the scene or given circumstances as well as work cooperatively with scene partners.

The class will be ensemble based, high energy and every student will work in every class. There will always be a group warm up followed by a fun and challenging ensemble exercise and warm down period focusing on energy, group dynamics or narrative skills. There will be a strong concentration on teamwork from week to week. Students will learn to access and then focus their first thoughts/impulses to best serve the scene and learn how best to give and take with their scene partners. We will also be spending a lot of time on basic story telling disciplines so students will learn to habitualize the techniques that keep improvisations coherent as well as entertaining.

**Grading:**

Grades are based on energy and the quality of participation (20%), supportiveness of fellow students (20%), commitment to the exercises (40%), and the desire to improve (20%) at each student’s own capability. Students are NOT judged on their mastery of each exercise, but rather on their willingness to COMMIT ENTHUSIASTICALLY to each game or scene. This class is an opportunity to have fun and take risks.

ONE absence is permitted per semester, excused or unexcused. Each absence thereafter will result in a one level grade drop (e.g. from an A to an A-, B+ to a B). Students who are absent are expected to reach out to colleagues to learn about missed work and or topics covered.

Lateness is not allowed. It’s that simple. Do. Not. Be. Late. This is the first rule of acting and the most basic of all professional habits. Create the habit of arriving 10 - 15 minutes early. NO ONE is permitted to enter the room late. Should you arrive after class begins, do not knock or attempt to enter and disrupt the class. You are welcome to join the class at the break but you will still be counted ABSENT. Please do not petition me or ask for special favors. Respect the rule and please don’t put me in that position. My colleagues and I are fond of quoting Rakhmanov’s reproach to Kostya in the first chapter of Stanislavsky’s An Actor Prepares:

*“We have been sitting here waiting, our nerves on edge, angry and [you are] late. We all came here full of enthusiasm for the work waiting to be done, and now, thanks to you, the mood has been destroyed. To arouse a desire to create is difficult; to kill a desire is extremely easy. If I interfere with my own work, it is my own affair, but what right have I to hold up the work of the whole group? The actor, no less than the soldier, must be subject to iron discipline.”*

CLASS RULES: Show up every week. Come to play. Commit to the warm up. Muster your energy and play hard. Be supportive and respectful of each other. Be prepared to be on your feet for the entire class. Exhibit a concrete desire to improve your skills. Do all this: You’ve got an A.

*GRADING SCALE*

Grades will be determined using the following scale

A 15 Work of excellent quality

A- 14

B+ 13

B 12 Work of good quality

B- 11

C+ 10

C 9 Work of average quality

C- 8

D+ 7

D 6 Work of below average quality

D- 5

F 0 Inadequate work

**Course Breakdown**

Section 1:

Mental and physical warm ups and theater games to break barriers and begin discovering and strengthening the dynamic of ensemble. We’ll explore the Contrapuntal Argument exercise to develop students’ ability to “expand” as well as begin concept of “status” in relationships.

Section 2:

More games and warm ups to get students minds and bodies focused and energized. We’ll begin scene writing basics with the two line exercise and all its variations; introduction of “offers” of Who, What and Where. Group story telling exercises will begin to develop narrative skills.

Section 3:

Physical and mental warm up exercises continue. Concentration shifts to specifying the WHO: Character and Relationship. Explorations include creating characters and exploring the status relationships between characters.

Section 4:

Focus shifts to a concentration on the WHAT – Activity. Space substance/concentration warm up games will focus on specifically playing an activity and incorporating it into the story. Activity work is then brought into improvised scenes adding to previous character and relationship work.

Section 5:

Now we focus on the WHERE – Location. Using student created ground plans, the focus of this class will be on how the space and the character’s relationship to the space can serve to make the scenes more specific and true to life. The Where is then brought into improvised scenes. Exercises continue to incorporate the Where and connect to Who and What.

Section 6:

Putting it all together. We begin to focus on more nuanced aspects of relationship and character adding in “what’s beyond” and background for character. The way to incorporate and heighten emotion comes into play as we begin integrating the discrete parts covered so far.

Section 7:

If ensemble is game, we will delve into some “product” improvisation (games based on audience suggestion designed for performance) with a higher bar of know how and execution.

**Concepts covered will include:**

• Yes And/Teamwork - “Yes And” is a fundamental concept in improvisation. A scene can only move forward when the actors agree on the facts and build on them.

• Emotion - Strong emotional choices and reactions add information, and propel scenes forward.

• Commitment - The audience can only invest in a scene when the actors are committed to it. Without commitment there is nothing at stake and scenes are not believable. MAKE IT MATTER.

• Character - A character is someone with a clear point of view, whose way of looking at the world colors everything they say and do. Playing characters generates interesting and unexpected information.

• Being Specific/Choosing to know - Specific labels are more interesting and vivid than general information. “Choosing to know” leads to a greater flow of specific information.

• Relationship - A clear relationship (who the characters are to each other and how they feel about each other) is the cornerstone of any good scene. If there is no relationship, the scene becomes superficial.

• Give & Take - When scene partners Give & Take, they share the workload and the scene is more vital, because of the constant back and forth dynamic.

• Justifications - Because actors are working without a script, they often say or do things that seem like mistakes. As long as they work together to clarify and make sense of those “mistakes”, anything goes.

**Additional Policies**

* Except for water, no food or drinks are allowed in class at any time.
* All students must help with the set up and strike of every class
* Students must place all extraneous belongings, (backpacks, sweaters, jackets, skateboards, laptops, cell phones, etc.) in the designated corner of the classroom at the start of class
* Students must be in proper rehearsal clothes at the start of class - no flip flops, no accessories, nothing that prevents you from doing whatever the scene might call for. Dress for comfort and the ability to move around.

**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/student/scampus/part-b](https://policy.usc.edu/student/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](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/).

Discrimination, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and harassment are prohibited by the university.  You are encouraged to report all incidents to the Office of Equity and Diversity/Title IX Office <http://equity.usc.edu> and/or to the Department of Public Safety [http://dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu/). This is important for the health and safety of the whole USC community. Faculty and staff must report any information regarding an incident to the Title IX Coordinator who will provide outreach and information to the affected party. The sexual assault resource center webpage <http://sarc.usc.edu> fully describes reporting options. Relationship and Sexual Violence Services <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp> provides 24/7 confidential support.

## **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://ali.usc.edu](http://ali.usc.edu/), which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students. The Office of Disability Services and Programs [http://dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu/) 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.