

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Playwriting 1, THTR-365 62964

Fall Term – Tuesdays 3-5:50pm

Location: PIRC 1016

Instructor: Oliver Mayer

Office: PIRC #1007: MCC #101C

Office Hours : by appointment or walk-in (call first).

Contact Info: omayer@usc.edu, 310 867 9192

Course Description and Overview:

Essential elements of playwriting through weekly assignments, students' initiative, occasional productions of scenes, and extensive classroom analysis.

Learning Objectives:

This course will explore what a play can do. This is primarily a writing course. As well, by reading and discussing ten separate dynamic play texts, we will analyze dramatic writing. Using weekly writing exercises, we will build dramatic writing muscles, which we will eventually use in a Final Scene for each student, performed by professional actors. This Final Scene will either be a free-standing ten-minute one act play, a significant fragment, or a scene from a larger work.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Williams, Tennessee, *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*, Penguin.

Wilson, August, *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*, NAL Trade.

Guare, John, *SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION*, Random House.

Valdez, Luis, *ZOOT SUIT*, Arte Publico.

Mayer, Oliver, *THE HURT BUSINESS*, Hyperbole.

Fornes, Maria Irene, *PLAYS*, PAJ.

Fugard, Athol, *MASTER HAROLD...AND THE BOYS*, Penguin.

Mayer, Oliver, *MEMBERS ONLY* (manuscript provided by the professor).

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Remember that professors do not "give" grades: students earn grades. Your final grade is up to you. Meeting course requirements does not equal excellence; I am looking for uncommon effort and commitment in each assignment. Dramatic writing demands bravery, chance-taking, and an active sense of play. The writing exercises will be your opportunity to be brave on the page. Students will be evaluated based on individual progress, receiving extended feedback for each assignment. Late assignments (weekly exercises) can be emailed to me at omayer@usc.edu; the midterm and final exams are mandatory and cannot be missed or made up at a later date.

Grading Scale for SDA: **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: Your final grade consists of:

Overall Weekly Grade: 30% **Final Scene Presentation: 30%**
Midterm Exam: 15% **Final Exam 25%**

School of Dramatic Arts classes use the University's grading scale:

96-100%=A **95-91%=A-** **88-90%=B+** **85-87%=B**
81-84%=B- **78-80%=C+** **75-77%= C** **66-64%=D**
71-74%= C- **67-70%=D+** **61-63%=D-**

WEEKLY WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: These are given both in-class or as homework. Students must be prepared to read aloud their work, for both peer review and my feedback. Absent students should email me or their fellow students about assignments given in-class and/or as homework. These should be turned in on time at the next class.

FINAL SCENE PRESENTATION: The Final Scene will allow you the chance to utilize the sum of knowledge acquired over the course. It will either be an entirely new scene, or a revised and expanded scene from one of the writing assignments. Once chosen, you will turn in a rough draft of the scene, which I will comment upon. At the penultimate class, you will turn in your completed and revised scene. It will be performed by professional actors at the final class. I will secure the actors and provide them your final scenes one week before the presentations. Each student will have the chance to discuss intentions, explain confusions, and answer questions from the actors in the ten or so minutes immediately before the performance begins. The scene will receive a grade based upon your use of dramatic methods and strategies determined over the course of the semester, as well as by your ability to be brave and take chances.

ATTENDANCE: While you are not graded on attendance, you will be graded on participation which requires your being in class. After two absences, excused or not, the third absence will affect your grade. Three tardy tallies will count as an unexcused absence. Be on time.

MIDTERM EXAM: Midterm occurs in class on October 19. Be prepared to define specific terms used in class **IN YOUR OWN WORDS**.

FINAL EXAM: Students will judge each other's Final Scenes based on essential dramatic questions provided by me. The exam will consist of oral presentation of written responses, and discussion of each student piece, and will occur on **Tuesday, December 11 from 2-4pm**. Attendance **MANDATORY** – no exceptions.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown:

- August 21** Introductions. What is a Play? Break early for All-School Meeting at Bing Theatre, 5pm. Writing assignment: CREDO.
- August 28** Desires. Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Attack, close reading of Scene One, introductions of Stanley and Blanche. Reversing off expectations. Writing assignment: introducing characters. Read CREDOS, in class writing.
- Sept 4** Fears. Fornes' *Sarita*. Mystery, love, danger, and violence. Read student scenes in class. First Writing Assignment in-class: a scene that makes you blush.
- Sept 11** Secrets. Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys*, memory and regret. Read student scenes.
- Sept 18** Duende, Filin, Myth, Taboo, and a sense of Play. Mayer's *Young Valiant*. Writing assignment: Valentines.
- Sept 25** Arias and Jubas. Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, elevated writing, superpowers, visions, shared rituals, prophecy. Read student scenes. Writing assignment: write your own personal Juba.
- October 2** Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*, anecdote versus experience. Writing assignment: fictionalize a found story.
- October 9** MIDTERM EXAM given in class. One on one discussions with each student to discuss scenes, identify strengths and weaknesses in the work, and plan writing trajectory through end of semester.
- October 16** MIDTERMS RETURNED. History. Alienation Effects. Valdez's Zoot Suit, Brecht, History of Chicano Movement, Dramatizing events and epochs. Vernaculars and Private Languages. Read student scenes. Writing assignment: activate a private or second language or vernacular.
- October 23** Blood Offerings. Mayer's *Blade to the Heat*, Physical and musical exploits onstage, Spectacle versus Intimacy, the counter intuitive power of truth telling onstage. Writing assignment: Telling Inconvenient Truths.
- October 30** Uncovering myths, extreme reversals. Mayer's *Members Only*. Read student scenes. Writing assignment: fuse two scenes into one concurrent diagonal scene.

- Nov 6** DISCUSSION OF STUDENT SCENES. Which take the most chances? Which reveal the most? Which have the most joy? Which have the largest questions? **FIRST DRAFT OF STUDENT FINAL SCENES DUE.**
- Nov 13** SCENES RETURNED WITH EDITS AND QUESTIONS. Writing assignment: starting anew.
- Nov 20** FINAL SCENES DUE, discussion of Final Class Presentations. Promises Fulfilled and Otherwise.
- Nov 27** LAST CLASS, FINAL SCENES, 3pm at Parkside International Residential College (PIRC 1016). Six actors -- Three Male, Three Female – will read your plays in succession. Attendance is mandatory. Refreshments will be provided.
- Dec 11** Tuesday, 2-4pm FINAL EXAM, PIRC #1016. Be there. No exceptions.

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/departement-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. 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.