

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Sketch Comedy for Theatre
THTR-470 (2 units)
Section 63081
Fall 2018
Mondays & Wednesdays 12-1:50pm
Location: MCC 107

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Course Description and Overview

"The duty of comedy is to correct men by amusing them." – Molière

In this experiential writing and performance workshop course, we will explore and develop our comedic voices via the creation of comedic sketches, through the entire process – from idea generation, to writing, rewriting, rehearsal, and finally production and performance of a fully realized sketch comedy show, with an emphasis on comedic collaboration and ensemble building.

Learning Objectives

Throughout this course, we will work to develop our comedic voices through the medium of sketch – comedic explorations of concepts, characters and situations. We will learn sketch writing structure through the study of prominent existing sketches, and techniques for sketch performance and character creation. Students are expected to generate a high volume of comedic concepts and written material to serve their own creative exploration, and their own work ethic and writing practice. Students are also expected to serve the needs of the group, and work toward building a true comedy ensemble.

Although we will be working toward a final workshop presentation, this course is focused on process over product – you are not expected to be funny 100% of the time, or even 10% of the time. You are expected to be brave, be open-minded, and stretch out of your comfort zone to explore and strengthen your own unique comedic voice.

"I'm not funny. What I am is brave." – Lucille Ball

Supplementary Materials

Required Viewing:

- Please watch *Saturday Night Live* weekly throughout the semester.
- You will also be called upon to watch and analyze existing produced sketches. Current/recent television sketch shows include *Saturday Night Live*, *Key & Peele*, *Inside Amy Schumer*, *Portlandia*, *Kroll Show*, *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, *Baroness Von Sketch Show*, etc. Historical sketch shows include *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Chappelle's Show*, *The Kids In The Hall*, various Tracey Ullman, *MADtv*, *In Living Color*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, etc.

Required Reading:

- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- You may also be given handouts and/or web links throughout the semester which you are expected to read and retain for discussion as needed.

Recommended Reading:

- *Live From New York: An Uncensored History of SNL* by Tom Shales & James Andrew Miller
- *Steal Like An Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative* by Austin Kleon

- *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow
- *I Must Say: My Life As a Humble Comedy Legend* by Martin Short
- *Why Not Me?* by Mindy Kaling
- *The Last Black Unicorn* by Tiffany Haddish

Recommended Viewing/Watching/Listening:

- Attend a live sketch comedy show – suggested comedy theaters include Groundlings, UCB, The Second City LA, among others.
- Comedy-centered podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *Comedy Bang Bang*, *Spontaneanation*, etc.

“Comedy is here to bring joy to the world, whether you want to hear the curse words or not.” – Kenan Thompson

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Class attendance and participation is crucial for your success in this class. There are no excused absences, and absences must be coordinated with the instructor, via email. Though attendance is not the sole aspect of your participation grade, please be aware that missing more than 15% of classes, or being late for more than 25% of classes, or a combination thereof, will automatically lower your final grade in this course.

This class demands a high volume of written material, and will include meeting with writing and performance partners outside of class. All written sketch material **MUST** be printed out ahead of time, with a copy for each cast member. If you have a sketch, but it is not printed, it will not be considered for the day, and will affect pitch presence points.

In writing sketches at the Pitch level, I recommend you work on a screenwriting program for your ease, but it is not necessary. Final Draft is the industry standard, and available for purchase, but Celtx also does the job and is a free download.

You will keep a Comedy Notebook throughout the course. This will be your personal notebook in which you will record observations and ideas, but will be reviewed periodically to confirm participation. Specific notebook assignments will be announced in class. You should have daily interaction with your notebook, and it should attend every class with you.

Our final workshop show will be Thursday, November 29 at 7:30pm. Tech rehearsal will be Wednesday, November 28 in the evening. Your attendance at both is mandatory. There may also be additional rehearsal in the evening that week as needed. You are also expected to take on additional production duties, such as tech coordination, music compilation, costuming and prop mastery, publicity, set-up and strike, etc. Specific production assignments will be determined later in the semester.

Additional Policies

When in class, you must be focused, and mentally, physically and emotionally present. Cell phones and other electronic devices often impede this. Devices should be put away completely unless you are called upon to use it (e.g. watching videos for reference). You should never have devices out during any lecture/lesson/rehearsal/feedback session, or when watching others perform in any way. For certain in-class work, you may use a laptop if you prefer to write on it. Unauthorized device attention may affect your participation points.

Please wear clothing and shoes in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way, whether by unwanted exposure or physical limitations. Shoes should be closed-toed and stay on your feet— no flip-flops. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. If you must wear a hat, it must not obscure your face in any way.

Food or drink is not allowed in SDA classrooms, water excepted. Absolutely no gum.

Please help restore classroom studio to neutral at the end of each class.

USC SDA Grading Criteria

The final course grade is articulated as a Letter Grade. Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

| <u>Excellent</u> | <u>Good</u> | <u>Average</u> | <u>Below Average</u> | <u>Inadequate</u> |
|------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| A = 95-100 pts | B+ = 87-89 pts | C+ = 77-79 pts | D+ = 67-69 pts | F = 59 or below |
| A- = 90-94 pts | B = 83-86 pts | C = 73-76 pts | D = 63-66 pts | |
| | B- = 80-82 pts | C- = 70-72 pts | D- = 60-62 pts | |

- When the GPA falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students with excellent/good attendance & class participation, and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average/poor attendance & participation.
- If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W (November 9).
- I am happy to discuss your work with you at any time.

Grading Breakdown

| | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Class Participation – Attendance, focus, attitude, willingness, ensemble support | 15 points |
| Family Member Monologue | 5 points |
| Stranger Monologue | 5 points |
| Sketch Analysis | 5 points |
| Comedy Notebook (inc. ideas) | 5 points |
| Midterm – franchise character sketch co-write and presentation | 15 points |
| Pitch Presence | 25 points |
| Final Show – Professionalism, participation, attitude, competence | 25 points |
| TOTAL | 100 points |

"To make comedy, maybe you just have to work hard and be funny." – Tina Fey

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

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

Classes may begin with warm-ups, depending on the nature of the day's work.

Week 1 – **Aug 20** – Welcome/introductions/syllabus review. Intro to sketch via improv.
Intro to comedy notebook.
Aug 22 – DUE TODAY: 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.

Present family monologues.

Week 2 – **Aug 27** – In-class monologue writing.
Aug 29 – DUE TODAY: Observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes (set your
timer!). Get close and far. Write a 1-2 minute monologue playing that stranger –
what is happening to them that day? Be specific. The funny is in the details.

Present stranger monologues.

- Week 3 –** **Sep 5 – DUE TODAY:** Bring in (send) web links of 2 of your favorite sketches. Analyze and present the beats. Begin sketch types.
- Week 4 –** **Sep 10 –** In-class writing/improvising. Sketch types, continued.
Sep 12 – In-class writing/improvising. Sketch types, continued.
- Week 5 –** **Sep 17 – DUE TODAY:** 30+ sketch ideas. Sketch idea speed dating. Sketch structure overview. Begin paired writing.
Sep 19 – Continue sketch idea speed dating. Continue paired writing.
- Week 6 –** **Sep 24 – DUE TODAY:** Franchise character idea and presentation. Begin supported co-writes for franchise characters.
Sep 26 – Supported co-writes for franchise characters, continued.
- Week 7 –Oct 1 –** In-class writing/improvising. Midterm prep.
Oct 3 – MIDTERM: presentation of franchise character sketches, written/rehearsed outside of class.
- Week 8 –** **Oct 8 –** Midterm reflection. Review pitch formatting. Begin pitch.
Oct 10 – Pitch. (Sketches written, copies printed and given to cast, presented for feedback/rewriting.)
- Week 9 –** **Oct 15 –** Pitch.
Oct 17 – Pitch.
- Week 10 –** **Oct 22 –** Pitch.
Oct 24 – Pitch.
- Week 11 –** **Oct 29 –** Pitch.
Oct 31 – Pitch.
- Week 12 –** **Nov 5 –** Pitch. Begin to narrow down.
Nov 7 – Pitch/rehearse for show. Assign auxiliary roles.
- Week 13 –** **Nov 12 –** Pitch/rehearse for show.
Nov 14 – Pitch/rehearse for show.
- Week 14 –** **Nov 19 –** Rehearse for show.
- Week 15 –** **Nov 26 –** Rehearse for show. All tech final collection.
Nov 28 – Rehearse for show. Show order confirmed. All costumes and props final collection/approval.
- Nov 28 – TECH REHEARSAL 6pm in McClintock Theatre**
Nov 29 – FINAL SHOW 7:30PM in McClintock Theatre (calltime TBA)
- FINAL –** **Fri Dec 7 –** 11am-1pm – Post-Mortem

"Work hard, be kind, and amazing things will happen." – Conan O'Brien

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 Standard <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/departments/departments-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.

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.

Support Systems

- Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 - 24/7 on call
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

- Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>
- Sexual Assault Resource Center
For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>
- Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance - (213) 740-5086
Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>
- Bias Assessment Response and Support
Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>
- The Office of Disability Services and Programs
Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>
- Student Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710
Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student, ex: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>
- Diversity at USC
Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>
- USC Emergency Information
Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>
- USC Department of Public Safety - 213-740-4321 (UPC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.
Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>