

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Characters of Comedy
THTR-483 (2 units)
Section 63215
Spring 2019
Thursdays 10am-12:50pm
Location: MCC 111

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers
Office: MCC 214
Office Hours: By appointment. Please schedule via email.
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Course Description and Overview

"Comedy to me is all about the bumps and bruises and weird tics." – Melissa McCarthy

In this experiential workshop course, we will explore and develop our comedic voices, writing and performing abilities, via the creation of comedic characters, through a variety of means, including the study of historical comedic influences and archetypal characters from commedia dell'arte to modern-day sitcom, as well as exploration of observation, physicality, voice, behavior, point of view, et cetera, through both improvisational and written means.

Learning Objectives

Throughout this course, we will work to develop our comedic voices through the medium of character, and comedic explorations of concepts, characters and situations. We will examine the role of archetypal characters and their influence on modern-day comedy, and apply these facets to our own comedic character development.

The concept of creating and performing comedic characters as its own art form has grown in recent years – we will work toward a professional-level body of character work, and identify the future of these characters for further creative projects.

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 creative practice.

Though this course focuses on comedy, it 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 truthful, and stretch out of your comfort zone to explore and strengthen your own unique comedic voice, as well as be supportive of and collaborative with your fellow creators.

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

Supplementary Materials

Required Viewing:

- *The Characters*, Season One. Available on Netflix.

Required Reading:

- You will be given handouts and/or web links throughout the semester which you are expected to read and retain for discussion.

Recommended Reading:

- *The Cheeky Monkey: Writing Narrative Comedy* by Tim Ferguson
- *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* by John Rudlin
- *The Eight Characters of Comedy* by Scott Sedita
- *In Such Good Company: Eleven Years of Laughter, Mayhem, and Fun in the Sandbox* by Carol Burnett
- *Steal Like An Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative* by Austin Kleon
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow
- *Yes Please* by Amy Poehler

Recommended Viewing/Watching/Listening:

- Comedy character-based television, including current/recent shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *Key & Peele*, *At Home with Amy Sedaris*, *Portlandia*, *Kroll Show*, *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, *Baroness Von Sketch Show*, etc. and historical shows such as *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.
- Attend a live sketch, improv, or character comedy show – suggested comedy theaters include Groundlings, UCB, The Second City LA, among others.
- Comedy and character-centered podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *Comedy Bang Bang*, *The Hills of Baldwin*, *Spontaneanation*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, among others.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Class attendance and participation is crucial for your success in this class. There are no excused absences. Though attendance is not the sole aspect of your participation grade, please be aware that missing more than 15% of classes, or being late (or leaving early) for more than 25% of classes, or a combination thereof, will automatically lower your final grade in this course. In the event of an absence, you are responsible for any missed classwork or learned information.

This class will include meeting with writing and performance partners outside of class.

Most classes will have a different assignment due, in exploration of characters. Specific assignments will be announced the previous week.

In-class writing should generally be handwritten, not typed.

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

Our final project (Character Reel) will entail some degree of video recording and editing abilities. We will explore the options briefly together in class, but you should be prepared to learn very simple recording and editing, and have access to a video recording device – a smartphone is fine.

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.

If you are reading a piece for performance, it must be on paper, NOT phone or device.

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. Hats are generally discouraged.

We will take a brief break at the halfway point of class. Please reserve leaving the classroom for that time.

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.

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	

- If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W (April 5).
- I am happy to discuss your work or grade with you at any time.

Grading Breakdown

Class Participation – Attendance, focus, attitude, willingness, ensemble support	15 points
Discussion of Readings/Viewings	10 points
General Character Notebook Participation	10 points
Midterm – Historical Archetypes in Modern Day Scene Presentation (+written component)	20 points
Weekly Character/Notebook Assignment (2 points each)	20 points
Final – Character Reel	25 points
TOTAL	100 points

“As the purpose of comedy is to correct the vices of men, I see no reason why anyone should be exempt.” – Moliere

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 – Jan 10 – Welcome/introductions/syllabus review. Humans as characters. Observation character development, using Proust Questionnaire.

Homework: Read handout from *The Cheeky Monkey*. Notebook assignment #1.

Week 2 – Jan 17 – Free-writes of character monologues, with variety of impetus. Explore physicality, voice, face, status, behavior, attitude, energy. Improvisation of characters.

Homework: Read Commedia handout. Notebook assignment #2.

Week 3 – Jan 24 – Commedia! Exploration of the archetypal characters of Commedia dell'Arte.

Homework: Read Characters after Commedia handout. Notebook assignment #3.

Week 4 – Jan 31 – Explore and discuss Restoration Comedy, Melodrama, Early Film Comedy.

Homework: Read Stock Characters handout. Notebook assignment #4.

Week 5 – Feb 7 – Explore and discuss Stock and Sitcom characters. Assign midterm scene groups.

Homework: Notebook assignment #5. Work with midterm group.

Week 6 – Feb 14 – Continue exploration of Stock and Sitcom characters.

Homework: Notebook assignment #6. Work with midterm group.

Week 7 –Feb 21 – Rehearsal and review of midterm scenario.

Homework: Work with midterm group.

Week 8 – Feb 28 – Midterm. Presentation of modernized archetype scenes. Written component due.

Homework: Watch *The Characters*.

Week 9 – Mar 7 – Impressions, satire, parody.

Homework: Notebook assignment #7.

–SPRING BREAK–

Week 10 – Mar 21 – Modernized character work, writing and performance.

Homework: Notebook assignment #8.

Week 11 – Mar 28 – Modernized character work, writing and performance.

Homework: Notebook assignment #9.

Week 12 – Apr 4 – Modernized character work, writing and performance.

Homework: Notebook assignment #10.

Week 13 – Apr 11 – Modernized character work, writing and performance.

Week 14 – Apr 18 – Character rehearsal and review for reels.

Week 15 – Apr 25 – Learning Experience Evaluations. Last chance in-class rehearsal and review.

FINAL – Tues May 7 11am-1pm (as per university schedule) – Viewing of all Character Reels. AV/ technical requirements and due dates TBD.

“Comedy is a tool of togetherness. It’s a way of putting your arm around someone, pointing at something, and saying, ‘Isn’t it funny that we do that?’ It’s a way of reaching out.” – Kate McKinnon

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" policy.usc.edu/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>.

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 the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for DSP and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 740-6948 (TDD only), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) ability@usc.edu.

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. See the university's site on Campus Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

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. 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. 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. 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: 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. emergency.usc.edu

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-4321 - HSC: (323) 442-1000 - 24-hour emergency or to report a crime. Provides overall safety to USC community.