

SYLLABUS

CTPR 532

Section 18633

INTERMEDIATE DIRECTING - COMEDY

Units: 2

FALL 2019

Thursdays, 2-5:50PM,

RZC Stage D

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Course Description:

This is a course on the art of directorial interpretation. We focus on the dialogue scene, the director's work with actors, and the challenge of unlocking comedy from the text and in performance.

Students work with material not of their own creation, learning to shape a scene by breaking it down into component parts and uncovering its main event.

In addition, the course is designed to develop the director's ability to communicate effectively with actors in a way that brings forth their best work.

Finally, this workshop course will address the specific challenges of directing a comic narrative.

The scene is the basic unit of dramatic storytelling. The actor is the essential vehicle, carrying the narrative forward.

No matter how interesting the shots are or how sparkling the dialogue if the director does not identify, target and deliver the emotional payload of the scene - the "Event of the Scene" - the story will not move forward with emotional authority.

Likewise, no matter how good the other creative elements, unless the actors engage the audience as credible intriguing characters, the film will rarely succeed.

In class we explore the art of storytelling through the mounting and performance of the two-person scene.

As students do assignments, exercises and rehearsals that lead to the filming of a two-person scene, issues of casting, directing actors, scene analysis, point of view, shooting styles, shooting methods, staging and editing will be considered from the comedic perspective.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

In this class you will learn that a good scene is far richer than you may have imagined. Even with two people sitting over a breakfast table - something must be *happening*, something important, something with emotional meaning. That “happening” is what we call the “emotional event” of the scene. Only scenes that have an emotional event are worth including in a dramatic narrative. Only such scenes are worth shooting.

In this class you will learn how to excavate a scene and uncover its emotional event. You will learn how to collaborate with actors, make them your partners in exploration, and enable them, through performance, to deliver the emotional event of the scene.

It is my hope that you will come to love working with actors and welcome them into your creative process.

Directors will complete a variety of assignments during the semester, designed to increase awareness, sharpen the senses of seeing and listening, clarify what the director wants from the actor, explore methods of getting it, and recognize whether it has truly been achieved. Emphasis will be on the communication between the director and performer, and the textual analysis of dramatic scene work. Through analytical preparation coupled with class exercises and rehearsal, the director should learn to collaborate with actors to realize the scene and capture the resultant vision on camera.

Full Disclosure:

This class represents something of an experiment. Although classes exist and many books have been written on writing comedy, few (if any) take up the challenges of directing comedy. There are those who do not believe that such a thing can be taught. Carmen Ghia, an outrageous character in Mel Brooks’ “The Producers,” says about comic aptitude: “Or you got it - or you ain’t”. It would seem that the majority of comedy practitioners are satisfied to leave the matter at that.

Aptitude is an asset in the study of any subject and this one is certainly no exception. The ability to “get” a joke, a sense of humor and of timing will be needed to fully benefit from our work together. Still, I believe that there are underlying principles that pertain to comedy that can be studied and applied by all directors. This course will attempt to identify those principles and demonstrate their application.

I subscribe to, what for some might be, a broad definition of the comedy genre. Anton Chekhov described his great plays as Comedies. There are those who find that claim to be puzzling. I have always found it to be apt. The contemporary trend is toward such an encompassing definition. Television series such as “Weeds” and “Orange is the New Black” compete for Emmy Awards with the more obviously comedic “The Big Bang Theory” and “Modern Family”. In my estimation “Some Like It Hot” is a supremely great comedy, and “Sunset Boulevard” is as well. I have no problem placing “Austin Powers” and “American Beauty” and “The Death of Stalin” together on a comedy continuum, and will endeavor, in the teaching of this course, to demonstrate why.

Instructor’s Statement:

Comedy is corrective. Comedy addresses “life out of balance.” Its goals are harmony and natural order. Comedy is not about nobility or aspiration; it is about survival. A classical tragedy ends in a death; a classical comedy ends in a marriage. While tragedy rails against fate, destiny, injustice and death, comedy is a negotiation with life.

A laugh is a recognition of life’s imperfection. It signifies the acceptance of a compromise between what is, and what ought to be. A laugh is an involuntary, reflexive recognition of a truth or contradiction. The ability to negotiate with, and make peace with existence through laughter is a uniquely human gift.

Fostering comic performance is the act of conjuring that reflexive laugh. The role of the director of comedy is like that of a conjurer. It is the director’s job to conjure the laugh. I believe that skill can be taught.

Course Description:

This class combines exercises, lectures, demonstrations, readings and written reflections as a means to prepare for directing a comedic two-person dialogue scene.

Each student will be assigned a scene from *Sideways*, by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor to analyze, cast, explore through rehearsal and staging. At the end of the semester students will have the opportunity to shoot, edit and screen their scenes.

This is a workshop course - its subject is the process of directing. The assigned scene is a tool for learning. It is never to be considered a "product". Therefore in rehearsals and in the shot and edited version students may present the entire scene OR only a portion of the scene. (That portion must include the beginning) It is our understanding that the work you present is "work in progress".

During the first five weeks we will explore methods of auditioning, casting, scene analysis and breakdown, rehearsing, staging and shooting. Also during these weeks students will begin casting and rehearsing their scenes.

Each scene will be rehearsed outside of class and then brought into class for an in-class rehearsal. The director will then have the opportunity to repeat the process, rehearsing both outside and again in class, before filming and editing the scene for presentation and critique.

Through this process of exploration, and trial and error, it is expected that the student will learn practical principles and apply them to directing actors and comedy.

Class Philosophy:

In this class, learning is a group endeavor.

I am well aware that most students will be new to the concepts and practices we are considering. I am not so much looking for results, but rather for participation and engagement with a process.

I expect students to learn as much from each other's missteps as from the triumphs. Those missteps are very valuable. I will appreciate your generosity in taking the risks to make mistakes, and your openness to sharing them with the class.

Course Notes:

Rehearsal:

Rehearsal is a critical tool in the making of comedy. This class will teach rehearsal technique and sharpen the students' appreciation for the use of rehearsal in the finding and rendering of comedy.

Casting:

Casting is crucial. Students must hold at least two audition sessions. You may cast someone you know -- you must, however, go through the audition process for the experience and to see what alternatives are available. As actors often

drop out of projects, it is strongly advised that you be prepared with backup casting options.

Scene Analysis Meetings:

Prior to your first in-class rehearsal you will be required to attend a 30-minute meeting with me to review your **Scene Analysis Worksheets**.

An assigned handout - found on the class website - informs students of my expectations for this meeting. Meetings are scheduled in my office - SCA 425 - at a time selected by the student.

Occasionally a student will miss a meeting, or come to a meeting without having prepared. These meetings are important, time-consuming, and difficult to schedule. Students should not expect their missed meetings to be rescheduled - and should expect that missing a meeting or coming unprepared will negatively affect their grades.

Shooting and Editing of Scenes:

This class is a WORKSHOP.

That means that SCA gives you a minimal amount of physical production support in terms of camera and sound package. The emphasis in this class is on the capturing of actor performances - not on production values.

There are many reasons why you might wish to have a nicely produced piece to show. However, be advised, you will not get credit for how well your scene is produced, how good the location was, the wardrobe, or even the editing or shooting. The course spends a minimum amount of time addressing these subjects.

To repeat: the emphasis in this class is on the capturing of actor performance, and not on production values.

We are concerned with the shape of the scene and the performances of the actors.

You are discouraged from making major expenditures on location rental. To me, a table in a living room is the same as a table in an iHop. I won't penalize you if you shoot your scene in your apartment. I won't reward you for doing it in an iHop. I won't penalize you if you shoot it in an iHop...

...Unless I feel you put all your time into production values at the expense of performance. Nothing must take priority over good performance values.

In summary: be advised that this class is not designed to produce a finished product suitable for your reels.

Final Presentation:

As a final presentation students will bring a recorded version of their work for class screening.

Students may choose - with the approval of the instructor - to present a third live rehearsal in lieu of shooting. You must get instructor approval before you can schedule a third rehearsal. This opportunity will be granted case by case, and may be on a first come first served basis.

Critique - Giving and Taking:

Each time a student presents work it will be subject to in-class discussion, "critique" and revision.

In this course we share "work in process". Artists "in process" feel vulnerable. One of the goals of this course is to help students learn to observe work in process, and share their observations in a way that is helpful to the director.

It is important that critique be received with a sense of openness.

Learning how to give and take useful criticism is by no means easy. It takes care, mindfulness and practice. I am still learning how to do this myself. I encourage students to give me feedback on my performance in this regard even as you make efforts in this direction yourself. Together we will endeavor to create an atmosphere that is conducive to good process.

Inclusivity:

Comedy like language both brings us together and sorts us apart. It has the capacity to either divide or include. Like language, inclusivity is the central goal of comedy. It reminds us of what we have in common - our humanity - and assures us that we are not alone. In this class you are encouraged to raise any concerns you may have, either publicly or with me in private.

Disclaimer and Fair Warning:

The purpose of comedy is not to be hurtful but to explore hurtful subjects in a safe way. Comedy is controversial by its nature. One of its functions is to test moral and social boundaries. Whatever the intention it is possible that material shown and discussed in class may offend. Be aware of this possibility before deciding to take this class.

Website:

The official class website at barnetkellman.net contains all the materials and information necessary for this course including schedules, readings, videos and PDFs of class lectures, an actor database and other resources.

Assigned Readings:

Mandatory readings are assigned throughout the semester. Most reading material is available on the class website.

Required Texts:

Sideways by Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor - available on the class website.

Available at the Campus store or Amazon:

The Comic Toolbox by John Vorhaus http://www.amazon.com/Comic-Toolbox-Funny-Even-Youre/dp/1879505215/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1356230359&sr=1-1&keywords=the+comic+toolbox

Directing Actors by Judith Weston <http://www.amazon.com/Directing-Actors-Memorable-Performances-Television/dp/0941188248>

Grading:

I appreciate your talent but I do not grade you on it. You are graded on your fulfillment of the assignments of the course, your engagement with the subjects and challenges we take up, your active participation and the growth evidenced by your work during the semester.

Grading Breakdown:

1 Blog-post by mid-semester	5 points*
First Rehearsal	10 points
First Rehearsal Reflection	10 points
Second Rehearsal	15 points
Second Rehearsal Reflection	10 points
Final Project (shoot or 3 rd Rehearsal)	20 points
Final Project Reflection	10 points

1 Blog-post by final class	5 points*
**Participation	15 points
TOTAL	100 points

*2 posts are the minimum required - to receive credit you must post within the timeframe outlined. You are welcome and encouraged to post as many times as you like. Posting beyond the minimum will count toward your grade in Participation.

**PARTICIPATION is the engine of Group Learning. It is a crucial element in your grade. It includes commitment to the class, involvement with other students' work, helping them in its realization, engagement with the material and contribution to class discussion. Facebook Blog posts in excess of the minimum (for example) count toward one's participation grade.