

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 515c Section 63177D Advanced Movement

Units: 2

USC FALL 2019 – MW 10am-1150am

Location: MCC 112

Instructor: Zach Steel

Office: JEF 208

Office Hours: Available by appointment

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Course Description

This class is an exploration of the discipline of theatrical clowning. It will challenge students to fully give in to the present moment, to redirect their focus to the relationship between performer and audience, to examine the threshold of what can be done with our bodies and voices in performance, to confront preconceptions about one's own individual capabilities and discover what makes each individual funny, to celebrate one's greatest failures and experience the magnitude of true openness in front of an audience.

Learning Objectives

The function of the class is as follows:

- To discover and develop an open and honest relationship between performer and audience.
- To harness listening and reacting skills and hone the performers awareness of the moment.
- To approach failure and success with the same enthusiasm.
- To confront and destroy the powerful beast of self-doubt.
- To empower the actor not merely as a performer, but as a creator/deviser of theatre.
- To unabashedly bring play and celebration to every moment of performance.

Recommended Readings and Supplementary Materials

Why Is That So Funny? by John Wright

The Moving Body by Jacques LeCoq

Clowns: In Conversation by David Bridel and Ezra LeBank

The Physical Comedy Handbook by Davis Rider Robinson, pages 111 - 126

Free Play by Stephen Nachmanovitch

Clowns by John Towsen

Grading Policy

A work of excellent quality

B work of good quality

C work of average quality

D work of below average quality

E work of inadequate quality

Your grade is assessed according to

Class Work – 50%

Developed Original Material – 25%

Final – 25%

Attendance, Tardiness, Absences

No absences are permitted except in case of illness or emergency.

No lateness permitted.

Violation of these requirements will result in grade deductions.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Weeks 1-4 “Listen and React” - Various exercises wherein the performer is asked to do nothing more than exist and be present onstage. From this place, we hone the skills of listening, not only to the audience and how they are reacting, but also what’s happening inside of us? We discover what amazing life exists in all of us before we open our mouths or move our bodies. We establish the vulnerable and open place from which we will perform throughout the semester.

Week 5 “Birth of the Clown” - The students are guided through a sort of meditation, where they are asked to strip away the assumed components of our identity: where we are (time and place), who we are (name, family, friends), and that we know how to move or make sound. The students are also asked to forget they were ever told “no.” From this blank slate state, the students are asked to “wake up” from their meditation and discover our bodies and voices for the first time. They can then play with each other without the assumptions we make about ourselves.

Weeks 6 - 8 “Thin Ice” - The students are thrown on stage and asked to make us laugh. Inevitable failure ensues. How do we deal with it? Can we celebrate failure and ineptness in the same way we celebrate “success”? We learn with these exercises that bad is not bad. Bad is good. As performers, are we in tune with how the audience is perceiving us, or do we put up walls to protect us and thus prevent us from finding our vulnerability? Are we in the moment, or are we letting past failures linger and weigh us down?

Weeks 9 - 12 “We’re Not Alone” - We try our hand at cooperative performance. Up until now, the students had only to focus on their environment/audience and their impulses. Now they must juggle all that with another player on stage. Exercises and games will enlighten the students on the value of status. Costumes are implemented to bring forward even more our most ridiculous selves, to highlight what is funny.

Weeks 13 - 15 “On With The Show” - The lessons of clowning are applied to bits and comedic routines. The students bring in states of prepared work and present them to the class. We explore the very compelling relationship between written work and clowning. Are we able to stay alive, in the moment, and impulsive with rehearsed work?

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 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://adminopsnet.usc.edu/department/departement-public-safety>. This is important for the safety of the 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 <http://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.