

THTR 202: The Fundamentals of Comedy

2 Units

Spring 2020 — Tuesdays & Thursdays — 9-10:50am

Location: PED 205

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers

Office: MCC 214

Office Hours: By appointment. Please schedule via email.

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Course Description

*"Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process
and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind." — E.B. White*

This course lays the foundation for studying various elements of the art and craft of comedy. Through readings, viewings, and functional creative exercises, students will learn basic theories and structures of comedy acting, writing, creating, and consuming, and will use these tenets in practice, in a variety of experiential comedy-based projects.

Learning Objectives

Students will be introduced to the basic concepts of comedic acting, structure, genres and forms, and will examine and apply these concepts through classroom exercises and presentations.

Students will:

- Begin to identify, appreciate, and develop their own comedic voice
- Identify, critique and use a range of comic techniques, plots and characters
- Learn and experience the beginning structures to a variety of comedic genres, especially improv, sketch, stand-up, and longer narrative
- Watch and respond critically to existing comedic material
- Explore and practice acting basics, as they apply to comedic performance
- Work toward a regular creative habit, and strive for bravery within it
- Embrace the necessity for failure in a creative/comedic practice
- Understand the partnership of the audience in the art of comedy
- Support the necessity of using camaraderie and partnership as it relates to successful comedy.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Readings will be made available via ARES/USC Library or via other online platforms as much as possible.

Required Reading

Sections from:

- *Ha!: The Science of When We Laugh and Why* by Scott Weems
- *The Comic Toolbox* by John Vorhaus
- *The Comedy Bible* by Judy Carter

- *Comedy for Animators* by Jonathan Lyons
- *The Eight Characters of Comedy* by Scott Sedita
- You will also be given additional web links and/or handouts throughout the semester to read and retain for discussion.

Required Viewing

You are required to watch 15-20+ hours of varied comedic material throughout the semester and reflect on each piece. This translates to approximately 60-80 minutes each week — or one movie, one live comedy show, 3 sitcom episodes, one episode of SNL, 12 online sketches, one or two stand-up specials, etc. Some weeks, the material will be dictated, some weeks the material will be free choice.

Recommended Reading

- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by M. Bruder, L.M. Cohn, M. Olnek, N. Pollack, R. Previto, S. Zigler
- *Poking a Dead Frog* by Mike Sacks
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin
- *Why Not Me?* by Mindy Kaling
- *Improvisation for Actors and Writers* by Bill Lynn
- *The Last Black Unicorn* by Tiffany Haddish
- *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow

Recommended Viewing/Watching/Listening:

- Current or historical comedy movies of your choice. (check out essential comedy movie lists on rottentomatoes.com, vulture.com and ranker.com for suggestions)
- Current or historical comedy television of your choice. (check out essential comedy television lists on rottentomatoes.com, indiewire.com and ranker.com for suggestions). Include non-sitcoms such as sketch shows and late-night.
- Current and historical stand-up specials and albums.
- Documentaries about comedy such as *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, *Dying Laughing*, *A Piece of Work*, *The Aristocrats*, *The Muslims Are Coming!*, *Don't F*ck This Up*, etc.
- Comedy-centered podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron*, *Comedy Bang Bang*, *2 Dope Queens*, *Conan O'Brien Needs A Friend*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, etc.

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Participation — "Art resides in the quality of doing; process is not magic." — Charles Eames

This is an experience based course, and you are expected to participate and commit with a generous heart, an open mind, and a devoted work ethic. You are not graded on 'talent' or 'funny' in this class, you are graded on your Quality of Doing — there is no progress without putting in the work.

Discussion — You are expected to participate regularly and extensively in any discussion of readings, viewings and assignments. You may be asked to present on material as well.

Comedy Notebook — You will keep a Comedy Notebook (Journal) throughout the course. This will be your personal notebook in which you will record observations, ideas, writing assignments, and reflections on viewed

material. It will be reviewed periodically to confirm participation, and will be reviewed in its entirety and returned in the last week of class. Your Comedy Notebook interaction is two fold — creative and consumption. Creative: you will be given writing assignments weekly as part of your notebook, and you are encouraged to engage with your notebook daily. Creative assignments will often be shared in class. Consumption: You will consume (watch/listen) a minimum of one hour of comedy per week and write a short journal recount and response. Comedy mediums should be varied. Certain weeks the material will be assigned, most weeks will be your choice. Prompts for responses will be given in class.

Personal Comedy Material Share — Refer to Week One of Course Schedule.

Open Comedy Scene — Using the parameters of an open scene, and the comedic guidelines learned, actors will work in pairs as assigned by the instructor to create a fully-rehearsed comedic scene. Meetings and rehearsals outside of class are crucial to the success of this project. Outside rehearsals will be discussed in class. A final presentation of each open scene will be scheduled — full costumes, props and overall preparation is mandatory. The written component will analyze and specify all comedic elements used — prompts given in class.

Final Project — Students will create a final comedy project of their choice. This might be a stand-up set, a sketch, a comedy video, a character reel, a short play, a sitcom script, etc. It should have elements of both writing and performing. It must be pitched, discussed, approved, and rehearsed in class. There may be opportunity for partnership -- specifics TBD. It should be created specifically over the course of this semester, not a previous project.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Participation — Attendance, focus, attitude, willingness	15	15
Discussion of readings, viewings, assignments	5	5
Comedy Notebook — creative engagement (weekly assignments)	20	20
Comedy Notebook — consumption engagement (weekly viewing)	15	15
Personal Comedy Material Share	5	5
Open Comedy Scene Midterm Classwork	5	5
Open Comedy Scene Midterm Presentation	10	10
Open Comedy Scene Written Component	5	5
Final Project Classwork	5	5
Final Project Presentation	15	15
TOTAL	100	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

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 3).
- I am happy to discuss your work and/or grade with you at any time.

Assignment Submission Policy

Rehearsal and Performance Assignments are presented in class, and copies of written work do not need to be submitted, although you will refer to your work and must be prepared.

When written material will be submitted, it should be emailed as a PDF unless otherwise specified. Do not send links to GoogleDocs.

Additional Policies

Attendance — Class attendance and enthusiastic participation is the most important part of your success in this class. Your attendance and punctuality is crucial for building an ensemble, understanding the material, and respecting your fellow comedians and the work itself.

There are no excused absences or tardies. Although attendance is not the only factor in your participation grade, please note that being absent for 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. Additional points may also be deducted for missed in-class work. In the event of an absence, you are responsible for the content of any missed class time.

Do not be late. You must be present and ready to work at the start of each class.

Please take to heart, from great comedic actress Lucile Ball — *"I'd rather regret the things I've done than regret the things I haven't done."* Things=class.

Collaboration/Rehearsal — You are expected to rehearse and meet with your fellow comedians outside of class, as part of the collaborative nature of comedy. We will discuss your outside rehearsals in class. Both in-class and outside rehearsal/meetings usually require notes to be taken — please be prepared.

As a class, you should establish an information sharing group (platform of your choosing) early in the semester. You must be able to contact each member of your ensemble easily.

Devices — No cell phone or electronic devices of any kind may be used in class, unless specifically instructed. This is to encourage your focus, presence, and respect to your peers. However, in-class writing or internet reference may be necessary, and devices such as laptops/tablets may occasionally be permitted.

When rehearsing with written comedic material, it must be printed out ahead of time for class, not read off devices.

Attire — Comedy can be physical and can get sweaty — dress accordingly. Your clothing and shoes should allow you to move freely and comfortably. Shoes should be closed-toed and stay on your feet. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.

Eating — Food and drink (except water) is not permitted in any SDA classroom. Absolutely no gum.

Break — We do not take an official break in the hour and fifty minutes of class — be prepared to stay in the room. In the event of an emergency for which you must leave the room, observe theatre rules of being discrete and respectful to your fellow actors, not entering or exiting during performance or feedback.

Strike — Students are expected to restore the classroom to neutral at the end of each class.

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 are asked to remain flexible, and you will be informed of any changes as much as possible.

Most classes will begin with group work and warm-ups, exploring foundations of presence, physicality, focus, relaxation, concentration, imagination, storytelling, playfulness, and ensemble-building.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
WEEK ONE	Tues Jan 14	Welcome/Introductions. Syllabus and expectations review. Our thoughts on and relationship to Comedy. Begin fearlessness and personal material work.		DUE THURSDAY: Bring in an existing piece of comedy that feels personal to you, ignites you in some way and makes you laugh out loud. This may be a sketch, scene from movie/tv, stand-up set, written material you read outloud, etc. It should not be something you wrote. Be prepared to send a link or connect your devices with classroom television. It should be about 3-5 minutes in length. Reading for Tuesday: Chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i>
	Thurs Jan 16	Present personal comedy pieces.	Personal comedy share.	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK TWO	Tues Jan 21	Discussion and exercises on Comedy Theories: (Incongruity, Relief, Superiority, et al)	Read for discussion: Chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i>	Reading for Tuesday: Chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i>
	Thurs Jan 23	Discussion and exercises on Comedy Acting Tools. Begin improv & reaction work.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK THREE	Tues Jan 28	Improv & reaction work.	Read for discussion: Chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i>	
	Thurs Jan 30	Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK FOUR	Tues Feb 4	Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.		Reading for Tuesday: Chapters 1-3 of <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i>

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
	Thurs Feb 6	Discussion and exercises on Comedic characters.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK FIVE	Tues Feb 11	Discussion and exercises on Comedic characters.	Read for discussion: Chapters 1-3 of <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i>	
	Thurs Feb 13	Discussion and exercises on Comedy Premises/Plots. Begin open scene work in pairs.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse/plan comedy open scene.
WEEK SIX	Tues Feb 18	Open scene work.		Rehearse/plan comedy open scene.
	Thurs Feb 20	Open scene work.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse comedy open scene.
WEEK SEVEN	Tues Feb 25	Physical Comedy with Zach Steel. Open scene work.		Rehearse comedy open scene.
	Thurs Feb 27	Physical Comedy with Zach Steel. Open scene work.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse comedy open scene.
WEEK EIGHT	Tues Mar 3	Open scene work.		Rehearse comedy open scene.
	Thurs Mar 5	Open scene work.		Final Rehearsal comedy open scene.
WEEK NINE	Tues Mar 10	Midterm: present open scenes.	MIDTERM: Present open scenes. Written component due before 10:30am.	
	Thurs Mar 12	Introduction to comedy types and mediums.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
SPRING BREAK — NO CLASS — MARCH 16-20				
WEEK TEN	Tues Mar 24	Stand-Up Comedy with Judith Shelton.		
	Thurs Mar 26	Stand-Up Comedy with Judith Shelton.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK ELEVEN	Tues Mar 31	Sketch comedy.		
	Thu Apr 2	Sketch comedy.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK TWELVE	Tue Apr 7	Pitch Final Project. Assign collaboration support.		
	Thu Apr 9	Final project discussion/rehearsal.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK THIRTEEN	Tue Apr 14	Final project draft due. Notes.	Final project first draft due.	
	Thu Apr 16	Final project draft due. Notes.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
WEEK FOUR TEEN	Tue Apr 21	Final project discussion/rehearsal.		
	Thu Apr 23	Final project discussion/rehearsal.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
WEEK FIF TEEN	Tue Apr 28	Final project discussion/rehearsal.	Final Notebooks Due! All creative assignments and consumption reflections.	
	Thu Apr 30	Learning Experience Evaluations. Final prep for final project.		
FINAL	TUESDAY MAY 12 – 8-10am	Final Presentation of Final Comedy Project		Happy Summer!

Extra-Curricular Commitments and ISPs

Should you choose to participate in any extra-curricular project, such as an Independent Student Production, the SDA administration and faculty will not make allowances or exceptions for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, home work that is required as preparation for class, or lack of participation in class resulting from your extra-curricular involvement.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

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, 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 engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling
Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1 (800) 273-8255 www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention (RSVP) – (213) 740-4900 – 24/7 on call engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp

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