

# USC School of Dramatic Arts

## **THTR-365: Playwriting I**

**Fall 2020—Tuesdays/Thursdays—4:00PM-5:50PM**

**Location: ONLINE**

**Instructor: Luis Alfaro, Associate Professor**

**Office Hours: By appointment/Mondays**

**Contact Info: [luisalfa@usc.edu](mailto:luisalfa@usc.edu)/SLACK/3233698306**

### **Course Description and Overview**

A twice-weekly workshop focusing on the essential elements of playwriting through weekly assignments, students' initiative, readings of scenes, and extensive classroom analysis and dramaturgy.

### **Learning Objectives**

Students will write their own material for the stage and read assigned text, as well as research, create and develop material on a weekly basis. Students will participate in the dramaturgy and assistance of their fellow student's work. The class will work together in the process of honing individual talents, through observation and participation. The focus is on learning how to write a play and engage in dramaturgical response using the landmark essay "Towards A Process of Critical Response" as a base for conversation and suggestion.

### **Goals**

Students will write an original one act play while exploring elements of a play, including conflict, subtext and character development.

### **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

*The Presence of the Actor*

Joseph Chaikin

Publisher: Theatre Communications Group (TCG):

ISBN-10: 1559360305 / ISBN-13: 978-1559360302

*Towards a Process of Critical Response*

Liz Lerman

[professor will provide]

## **Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments**

This class is process oriented and it is assumed that finished works will be the result. Students who have completed the requirements of the class should expect a strong first draft, at the very least, of their work. If the Professor chooses to focus on elements within the play that might benefit the student more than a finished work, the student will not be penalized for an unfinished draft.

The class is split into THREE sections – conceptualization (weeks 1-7), production (weeks 8-12) presentation (weeks 13-15). The First Section will focus on numerous writing assignments and learning the skills of playwriting. The Second Section will focus on writing a one-act play. The Third Section will focus on the art of rewriting and editing.

The semester will be spent creating material, learning technique and doing research. The course will focus on both finding and exploring the individual artist's voice, using autobiographical exercises to build on the authenticity of that voice, as well as focusing on topical or thematic material developed in collaboration with the class.

Assignments are presented in the classroom (online). Therefore, it is expected that you will bring your completed assignments to class and share them. Regular submission deadline will be Sundays at MIDNIGHT.

It is difficult to qualify an artwork, so the discipline and timing of meeting and turning in assignments is important towards your grade. Turning in assignments late, or not at all, will definitely affect your grade.

***FOR SDA Assignments:*** Students will be required to complete written "homework" assignments on a weekly basis. Students are expected to present their work in class weekly. Students will be expected to focus out of class time for the preparation of their performances.

Students must complete a final exam and to come to the final wrap-up class during the scheduled final exam period, in order to pass the course. You cannot leave early. If you have a conflicting final exam, you should let me know at the beginning of the semester. Class assignments will be regarded as written exams.

***FOR SDA GRADING CRITERIA:*** *The grading guidelines shall clearly articulate the specific and expected standards which constitute work of excellent, good, and fair quality with regard to the course in question.*

***Grading Scale for SDA:*** **A** indicates work of excellent quality; **B** of good quality; **C** of average quality; **D** of below average quality; and **F** indicates inadequate work.

## Grading Breakdown

**The SDA GUIDELINES on GRADING as published elsewhere in this handbook are:**

- Each course shall contain at least three assignments, projects, exams, papers or exercises which shall be evaluated during the semester and which shall provide an analytical record of each student's progress in the course.
- Attendance shall be weighted at no more than 15% as per University Guidelines. Studio Courses must delineate how participation will be graded (in class exercises, scene study, etc.)
- There shall be no unexcused absences.
- No late assignments, projects, exams, papers, or exercises shall be accepted unless advance extensions have been arranged between the student and the teacher or unless exceptional circumstances occur.

School of Theatre classes use the University's grading scale:

96-100%=A

95-91%=A-

88-90%=B+

85-87%=B

81-84%=B-

78-80%=C+

75-77%=C

71-74%=C- [Fail Grade for Graduate Credit]

67-70%=D+

66-64%=D

61-63%=D-

Criteria of evaluation will be based on the individual students' potential for learning and creation, and grades will not be competitively based, i.e. who writes the "best" work in the class.

Students are expected to show up on time; present assignments when they are due and actively participate with in-class dramaturgical analysis and discussion of fellow class work. Class time is impossible to make up - one must be there to participate. Reliability and enthusiasm count.

## Grade Evaluation

<u>Student Responsibility</u>	<u>Point Value</u>	<u>% of Grade</u>
Weekly Class Dramaturgy	100	25%
Mid Term Exam	100	15%
Final Exam	100	25%
Character/Environment Assignment	100	10%
First Draft Play	100	25%

## Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

### Week #1 – *It's a Bust*

[Setting up the room. Creating a list of collective class agreements on how we want to work as a collaborative class. What are your personal goals for this course? What can you offer to the larger cohort of collaborators you will be working with? What are the ways you want to work in? How can we listen and respond to each other?]

### Week #2 - *Let's Talk*

[Critical response process. "Towards a Process of Critical Response" by Liz Lerman.

Step One: *Statements of Meaning* - Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed. An affirmation/The Pop/What did you like?

Step Two: *Artist as Questioner* – What were you hearing? Showing my cards.

Step Three: *Neutral Questions* - Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. Criticism in the form of a question.

Taking the trust walk with a partner in the class. Interviewing them. Writing your partners story in a monologue.]

### Week #3 – *Tension & Metaphor*

[Presentation of partner monologue. Tension – partner up and write a scene in which each one of you has a need/want objective/intention. Build the scene together using only one-line responses back and forth on the same page. Assignment: "Children's Story", using metaphor to understand the poetry in your play. Write a children's story for a five-year old about a relationship you recently destroyed, something complicated that allows metaphor to do allow complication and simplicity at the same time.]

### Week #4 – *Environment & Dramaturges*

[Presentation of children's stories. Assigning our dramaturgy partners. Pair up with one other person in the class who will lead your dramaturgy sessions and be your creative partner for the rest of the semester. Assignment: "Blueprint", draw a blueprint of the neighborhood you call home. Label two areas with the following – heart of the neighborhood, scariest place in the neighborhood. Write a memory about either, at least a page long, thinking in details, both physical and emotional.]

### Week #5 – *Character in Action*

[Presentation of the Blueprint exercise. Assignment: "The Pitch", tell your partner your idea for a one-act play. What do you want to say, how do you want to say it? Assignment: Write a monologue in which your character rants on something of utmost importance to you. Think of sustaining an emotion and how to be consistent in the piece.]

*Week #6 – Character & Pitching*

[Introducing your first piece for the class, critical response session led by your partner. Assignment: “Unpack”, add at least one full page to your piece. Where do you need to further a thought or explain a concept or idea? What is missing? Take the age exercise, cut in half and write a story about yourself.]

*Week #7 – Learning from Others*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Breaking into smaller groups to focus on details of your scenes and how we can improve them.]

*Week #8 – Getting to the Core*

[Writing the one-act, challenges and successes. Talking about obstacles in class setting. Getting exercises to help. What is missing in your work?]

*Week #9 – Getting a draft done*

[What does it take to drive the piece, be surprising, authentic and theatrical? Working on your character’s voice.]

*Week #10 – Finishing up the first draft*

[Sending your first draft to your partner. Letting your partner offer a written response. Thinking about the elements that are both exciting and challenging. What is still missing in the piece?]

*Week #11 – turning in that first draft*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Can we use this week just to focus on character? Motivations/Actions.]

*Week #12 – Rewriting exercises*

Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Can we use this week just to focus on start? What are elements of your story that need to be unpacked?]

*Week #13 – Rewriting exercises*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Time to think about form/structure/layout.]

*Week #14 – Rewriting exercises*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Talking about you the whole of our piece to the class.]

*Week #15 – Getting it in.*

[Yay, you did it or Boo, you didn’t... Let’s examine the work collectively. How did we do as a group? Where did we find inspiration in each other or as a collective?]

**Final Examination Date:**

Thursday, November 17, 2020 from 4:30PM-6:30PM ONLINE

***NOTE:** All undergraduate classes must meet for the Final Examination as established by the University. You may not hold your final examination on the last day of classes.*

**Academic Calendar/Holidays**

First Day of Class, Tuesday, August 18, 2020

Labor Day, Monday, September 7, 2020

Last Day of Class, Thursday, November 12, 2020

## 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

#### 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](http://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](mailto: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.

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#### 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](http://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](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. [engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp](http://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](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. [equity.usc.edu](http://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](http://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](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. [studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa](http://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](http://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](http://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. [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

**Luis Alfaro** is a Los Angeles born and raised Chicano writer known for his work in poetry, theatre, short fiction, performance and journalism. Luis spent six seasons as the Playwright-in-Residence at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (2013-2019) and a member of the Playwright's Ensemble at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theatre (2013-2020). He has been associated with the Ojai Playwrights Conference since 2002 and is currently a producer of the festival. He has had multiple productions at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, The Public Theatre in New York and Playwrights' Arena in Los Angeles. Luis is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Last year he was awarded the PEN America/Laura Pels International Foundation Theater Award for a Master Dramatist, The United States Artist Fellowship and the Ford Foundation's Art of Change Fellowship. His plays and performances include *Electricidad*, *Oedipus El Rey*, *Mojada*, *Delano* and *Body of Faith*. Luis spent over two decades in the Los Angeles poetry community, and toured North and Latin America as a Performance Artist. He is a professor at the University of Southern California. An anthology of his plays, *The Greek Plays of Luis Alfaro*, will be released in September by Methuen Drama/Bloomsbury Press, and licensed by Dramatists Play Service, Inc. He currently holds commissions with Denver Center, Geffen Playhouse, South Coast Repertory and Victory Gardens Theatre. He is currently part of the artist collective at Center Theatre Group.