

**Instructor: Paula Cizmar**

**Office:** JEF 201, 950 W. Jefferson, Los Angeles 90089

**Office Hours:** Available: Wed Noon – 6 pm;

Thurs 9 – 9:45 am; please note that office hours are by appointment only; contact me via email or phone, at least 24 hours in advance. For appointments outside these hours, I am available by videoconference on SKYPE or Google Hangout.

**Contact Info:** [cizmar@usc.edu](mailto:cizmar@usc.edu); 323.376.1216 mobile

[www.paulacizmar.com](http://www.paulacizmar.com)

**ITHelp:** USC Information Technology Services

<http://itservices.usc.edu>; or School of Dramatic Arts – Mr. Prakash Shirke. Contact Info: [shirke@usc.edu](mailto:shirke@usc.edu); 213.740.1288. MCC

**Course Description and Overview**

*Catalogue description: THTR 596 Designed to guide the MFADW student toward refinement of thesis including vision, development, and execution.*

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30. Write in layers. Have as many things happening in a play in any one moment as possible...
32. Keep your chops up with constant questioning of your own work. React against your work. Be hypercritical. Do in the next work what you aimed for but failed to do in the last one...
34. Character is the embodiment of obsession. A character must be stupendously hungry. There is no rest for those characters until they've satisfied their needs...
36. A writer cannot live without an authentic voice -- the place where you are the most honest, most lyrical, most complete, most creative and new. That's what you're striving to find. But the authentic voice doesn't know how to write, any more than gasoline knows how to drive. But driving is impossible without fuel and writing is impossible without the heat and strength of your authentic voice. Learning to write well is the stuff of workshops. Learning good habits and practicing hard. But finding your authentic voice as a writer is your business, your journey -- a private, lonely, inexact, painful, slow and frustrating voyage. Teachers and mentors can only bring you closer to that voice. With luck and time, you'll get there on your own.

—Jose Rivera, from “36 Assumptions About Playwriting”

**Learning Objectives**

Writing a play is both intuitive and technical, involving mechanics and magic. Getting to know all the territory around the characters, situation, story, the world of the play—by deep investigation, meditation, doing research, experimenting with words, images, voices—is a way to get the seemingly opposing forces of playwriting to come together. This coming together is what you have been working toward in your thesis play. In this course, we will further advance the process of getting it ready for its launch out into the

world. THTR 596 offers MFA DW students the opportunity to take the time needed to deepen the heart and soul of the thesis play by delving into many different forms of brainstorming, planning, meditation, reinvention, revision; we will look at whatever strategies suit our needs, whether reality-based or intuitive, archival or mythological, direct or indirect. This is the time to create the layers that will further embed mood, tone, texture, authenticity into the work and strengthen your own writer's voice. The ultimate goal, of course, is a thesis play that engages an audience's imagination in all its richness and with great heart.

Emphasis is placed on *empathy* and *metaphor* as each person strives to:

- further develop the “deep map” of the play, refining the background, foreground, and various other dimensions of the story;
- experiment with diverse modes of storytelling in the revision process;
- discover how to achieve balance, i.e., between research and imagination, between language and story, between originality and clarity.
- explore the “lore” of the play to expand the viewpoints of the characters and to strengthen theme;
- devise a process for working and reworking a script.

### **Communication**

We're adopting a 21<sup>st</sup>-century vision by:

- GOING GREEN
- CONNECTING
- TRANSFORMING

*What does this mean?*

GOING GREEN means that we will save on time, energy, and paper. You will not print your work; you will send drafts, plans, and final scripts as PDFs. All handouts and course materials will be paperless, available online via Blackboard. **[[For Fall 2020, of course, we will meet on Zoom and you'll turn your work in virtually.]]**

CONNECTING means that we will make contact in several ways—with each other, with the creative community, with the world at large. Though we're meeting mostly one on one, we'll take care to stay in touch with the others and perhaps even plan a VIRTUAL coffee break or a VIRTUAL visit to a play or discussion of interest. We'll connect with each other to maintain the support network that you've established over the past few years; plus we'll connect via text message and online to keep up to the minute on what's going on in the theatre world. We'll stay attuned to what's going on in American theatre, and we'll look at what's going on in the world—and explore how we can use art for growth and healing. Let's consider the many stories that have gone untold and the people who have gone unrecognized and determine what we can do to change that.

TRANSFORMING means that we will be looking at theatre writing as a way to effect transformation in our lives and in the lives of others; even though we're using a concrete

tool (research), we'll look at creating theatre from a place of empathy, from a place of heart-driven concern for humanity; we'll look at culture and trends and attempt to define and redefine playwriting for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Prerequisite(s):** MFA DW 1st- and 2nd-year course work.

### Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Several plays (determined after discussion with writers).

Plus: articles, essays, etc., found in Content section of Blackboard.

The School of Dramatic Arts' Dramatic Writing Program guidelines call for each student in playwriting courses to read at least seven plays as part of the course and to investigate them critically. You are also encouraged to read plays (and see plays) in addition to those selected for Required Reading. The more you read, the more you will become aware of the diverse styles, voices, and structural forms open to you as a writer.

### Special Note

All students enrolled in MFADW are required to attend program events. This includes all of the New Works Festival events (NWF I, II, and III), all Western Edge Playwrights' Salon events, and the student orientation held in late August. While some of these dates are not yet solidified, please put the times/dates in your calendar as soon as you can. Because we are monitoring professional development in the program and in every course that you take in the program, your participation in these program events will have a direct impact on you. **[[Yes, via Zoom.]]**

Heads up for Spring: Please make any and all travel plans for after the New Works Festival III.

### Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

**Grading criteria:** The quality of work for all components (see Grading Breakdown) is determined by the thoroughness of the effort, the continuing process, and the imagination displayed.

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

#### USC GRADING SCALE

Overall grading is determined on the following 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-	
67-70%=D+	66-64%=D	61-63%=D-	F = 60 and below

[Failing Grade for Graduate Credit = C-]

- "Excellent" indicates that the student couples clear understanding of the class material with original and creative insight, as demonstrated by their work; "Good" means that the student demonstrates a clear understanding of the material and has done the work well; "Acceptable" indicates that the student demonstrates a general understanding of the material but with some gaps; "Poor" indicates that there are identifiable gaps in the student's understanding of the class material; "Failure" is the result of the student not having completed his or her assignments coupled with poor understanding of the material.
- When the average falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students whose attendance and participation in class have been good, and will be weighted toward the negative end of the scale for those with poor attendance and participation.

### **Grading Breakdown**

Your grade will be based on multiple components: the inquiry into various dramaturgical theories/tools; inspiration/research presentation; preparation for revision; critical analysis; the development of a revision plan, including presentation of the tools/strategies employed and check-ins on your continuing process; ongoing writing and revision; completion of your Final Project.

Please bear in mind that you earn your grade based on the timely completion of your work, plus the quality of your work. Late assignments are marked down due to missed deadline. Assignments are accepted only within one week of due date. After that, they are considered a missed assignment, which counts as zero. (Note: A late assignment is marked down one grade notch, approximately 5 points; i.e., an assignment that would have earned an A receives an A- for missing the deadline; an assignment that would have earned a B+ receives a B for missing the deadline, etc.)

Please strive for excellence—it's a wonderful goal, even if elusive. So what is excellence? It is based on effort and intent and some ephemerals. I am interested in risk-taking. After all, if not now, when? And I am interested in writing that explores the human spirit, the heart, the place in us we can't describe. If you are willing to go there, you will do just fine

Components of the overall grade are weighted as follows (see below for details):

Inspiration board/Vision board for this draft, these characters	10 percent
Dramaturge's table exercise (including you and entire 3 <sup>rd</sup> -year cohort)	10 percent
Reading/viewing assignments (including in-person discussion)	10 percent
Personal assessment of your own script + personal goals review	10 percent
Revision plan	10 percent
Ongoing research	10 percent
Application of assessment, goals, plan, research to script	20 percent
Final Project – A Revised Thesis Play	20 percent
TOTAL	100 percent

The Inspiration Board/Vision Board is an intuitive brainstorming tool—a way to get in touch with your unconscious motivators. In this case, you have already tapped into many sources of inspiration—so the questions are:

*Which of these got you here?*

*How did you arrive at this crucial place in the writing?*

*And what do you need to provide fuel for continuing to create the world of the play, deepening the characters, refining the story and structure, revising the dialogue?*

The Vision Board is a way for you to get in touch with what excites you about this particular work and to take a deep map approach to a play: visual art, musical inspirations, charts, graphics, articles/news stories/essays, photographs, podcasts, archival documents—any kind of source material. If desired, you can create a formal presentation in a specific format, such as Powerpoint, Prezi, Keynote, etc. That's definitely what we would do in a classroom setting. But since we are having one on one meetings ONLINE, you may opt to simply discuss these things out loud or and/or annotate your chosen materials. It helps to present them in some way—and to

bounce them off someone else. So be prepared to discuss your resources and inspirations for your characters/story both in a creative/metaphoric language, as well as pragmatically. Note that the vision board technique is useful at any point in a creative work. This a tool with which you can tap into your imagination at a starting point; you can use it as an active, multimedia form of brainstorming; or as a way to start to explore alternative story points, alternative endings; or as a way to begin to frame your thoughts; as a way to visualize transformations in characters; as a way to promote discussion with other artists to enhance your vision. The “board” part of this vision board presentation is virtual—no need to print it out or work on hard copy. The computer screen is just fine.

Reading plays, seeing plays, and critical analysis is vital to every writer because it provides a process for assessing artistic work; in the analysis of already published plays, you gain experience in taking a deeper look at character, language, and structure—which can then be applied to evaluating your own work, to assist you in drafting and revision. In this class, we’ll attempt to identify specific plays and specific writing that may help you gain ideas and inspiration for problem solving in your play.

The Dramaturge’s Table exercise is an analysis and assessment session that will have each member of our creative cluster (the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year Dramatic Writing MFAs and me, the instructor) respond in a structured way to all of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year scripts as an early part of the rewrite process.

What is the personal assessment of script/personal goals review?

By now, you’ve had some time to consider what your play is intended to be, how you want it to affect an audience, and what your future goals are for the play and for yourself. You’ve also probably got a fairly good idea about specific areas you want to work on and places that you know are truly representative of your own voice. (And after The Dramaturge’s Table, you will have a greater sense of what remains to be addressed.) Please write a short summary of your assessment and a review of your goals. It can be a blog post, a paper, an annotated list—just something that you can give to me so that I can understand what it is that you are after as well as I can, so that I can guide you toward writing the best possible play you can write. And with any luck, it will be one that goes beyond your expectations.

What is the research plan?

Upon completion of your inspiration board/vision board, you will devise some sort of strategy or process-oriented plan for further meditating on and exploring the story, theme, and characters of your play. The detailed plan will be discussed with me. Your plan will be individualized to your needs/desires as a writer (and perhaps, also, individualized to the requirements of the play you’re working on).

What does participation entail?

Participation involves showing up for the meetings and having done the assessment work, the revision plans, the meditation on meaning and the deep thinking required to revise your play.

Your Final Project is a revised draft of your thesis play. Period. It should be a thoughtful and well-imagined draft that emerges from a process in which you were deeply involved, at the intersection of mind, heart, soul.

Hint: Keep a creative journal of some kind. It can be a hard copy old-school paper journal, or it can be electronic. Just find a place to store your thoughts, ideas, visions, brainstorming on the play(s) you're working on—as well as a place to download your feelings and meditations as your work progresses. This will be helpful later when your play goes into production—and you can refer back to what you were thinking and feeling during the process of creating it. This is an archive of your explorations for writing; it may include jottings off the top of your head, stuff from your Inspiration Board, research, ideas, resources for current and future writing, for current and future revision, and exercises and raw material from just about any source. It will make your writing—and rewriting—so much easier!

**Note: The SDA GUIDELINES on GRADING state that:**

- *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.*

**Additional Policies**

Participation is essential and figures into your grade. THOUGH THIS COURSE IS COMPOSED OF ONE-ON-ONE MEETINGS, do be sure to show up for them, and come prepared. Be ready to operate like a professional artist who is open to collaboration. From time to time, we may meet with the other third-year MFAs, therefore remember:

1. You are entering into a collaborative relationship and, thus, it is your responsibility to be available for feedback, analysis, and support.
2. All workshop members must be treated with respect.
3. You are required to attend the meetings and to be on time. Tardiness is defined as being 15 minutes late or more. Excessive tardiness will affect your ongoing writing and participation grade. *[[I recognize that internet connections can be spotty. Just notify me as soon as you are having connectivity challenges via text or email.]]*
4. Absences must be for reasons of illness or emergency, and you must notify me in writing (preferably in advance). *[[And yes, internet connection problems count as an emergency during Theatre in the Time of Zoom.]]*
5. All assignments, written and/or otherwise, must be prepared on time and turned in (or presented) on the deadline date. Late assignments will be marked down due to the missed deadline. Assignments not turned in within a week of deadline count as missed assignments (zero credit).
6. Course materials can be found on the Blackboard site for this course. For your syllabus, handouts, extra bits of info, etc., go to Blackboard.
7. Please check your e-mail regularly to see if there are any changes in class meetings, etc. On rare occasions, it becomes necessary to schedule a new class meeting. I will send you the information via e-mail and/or text message.
8. Please turn in all assignments electronically and LABEL them with date, draft information, etc.

9. If you desire an appointment with me, it is necessary to contact me via e-mail or text message at least 24 hours in advance, otherwise there is no guarantee I will receive your message with sufficient time to make arrangements to meet with you. Please note that I have included multiple ways to contact me on the front page of this syllabus.

### Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

**Note:** This course is a series of one-on-one meetings in which you will consult with me about your work. I would like to schedule a few times in which we can meet together with the other MFA3 colleagues—via Zoom. Let's find a few times to get together and just discuss the process and how everyone is doing.

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/ Due Dates
<b>Weeks 1 - 3</b>	<p><b>Preparation &amp; Gathering</b> Introduction: Who are We? What do we care about? What inspires us? What do we need as artists? What does the world need from us?</p> <p>Consider: Surprising yourself and taking on writing the best play you <i>can't</i> write; writing beyond your comfort zone.</p>	<p><b>Discussion:</b></p> <p>The Deep Map.</p> <p>The Dramaturge's Table Exercise.</p>	<p>Set up a schedule of who meets on what date and on what time. <b>Can we all gather on Wednesday, August 26 at 1 pm, to talk times and dates?</b></p> <p><i>NOTE: For all upcoming meetings, we will follow a calendar that we set up this first week.</i></p> <p>Week 2 meetings: Dramaturge's Table. Inspiration Boards/Vision Boards and prepare assessment reviews.</p> <p>Week 3 meetings: Revision plans.</p>
<b>Weeks 4 - 13</b>	<p><b>Ongoing Exploration, Experimentation, and Transformation as Planned</b></p> <p>Focus on What the Play Needs, How it May Grow.</p> <p>Engage in Planned Creative Anarchy.</p> <p>Sensory Work/Metaphor: Staying Attuned to the Natural World, the Senses. Translating "Reality" through Imagery.</p> <p>The World of Your Play. The "Lore" of That World.</p>	<p><b>Discussion</b></p> <p>Empathy - The Starting Point of the playwright; Metaphor – The Inner Heart of the Playwright's Work.</p>	<p>Weeks 4 - 15</p> <p>Grab all the prep materials and start working systemically and magically.</p>

	The Opportunity for Transformation.		TURN IN: Your Final Project. <b>Due November 20, 2020 by 11:59 pm.</b>
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*REMINDER: Use Blackboard as a resource. Class materials, information, handouts, additional essays, source materials, etc., are posted on the class site on Blackboard.*

We all have two heads and two memories. A head of clay, which will turn to dust; and another, forever invulnerable to the gnawings of time and of passion. One memory that death kills, a compass that expires with the journey, and another memory, the collective memory, which will live as long as the human adventure in the world lives. –Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: Faces and Masks*

### 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, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

#### Support Systems:

*Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.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 – 24/7 on call*  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

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 Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call*  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.



*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) - (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776*

[dsp.usc.edu](http://dsp.usc.edu)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710*

[campussupport.usc.edu](http://campussupport.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](http://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](http://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, 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) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.