

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 500 Dramaturgical Perspectives and Approaches, 63223D

Please note that this syllabus is subject to updates after the third week of classes.

Units: 2

Spring 2021, Session 060—Mondays—Time: 5:00-7:50 PM

Location: Online

Instructor: Velina Hasu Houston, MFA, PhD

Office: USC School of Dramatic Arts, 1029 Childs Way, Mail Code 0791

Office Hours: 3-5 PM Mondays by appointment only via email to the instructor (other times can be negotiated); as a courtesy, 24-hour cancellation via email to the instructor and/or student required.

Contact Info: greentea@usc.edu, (213) 740-8686; email is preferred contact, response in 48 hours or less.

IT Help: USC Information Technology Services, <http://itservices.usc.edu>; School of Dramatic Arts – Mr. Prakash Shirke, Contact Info: shirke@usc.edu, (213) 740-1288, MCC

Catalogue Description

Investigates art and craft of dramatic writing initiated/completed in other MFA in Dramatic Writing courses or writing that was submitted as a sample for program entry.

Course Description and Overview

The course will focus on a page-one, fully reconsidered revision of a play that you wrote in a past USC MFA in Dramatic Writing course or on the play that you submitted to enter the program. This is not a class in which you start a new play, but one in which you focus on the evolution of an existing play that fits the aforementioned parameters.

Learning Objectives

Your objective is to deepen your grasp of key dimensions of your play – character and story in particular – to strengthen and refine past work that is important to you as a playwright. You should be aware of the world in which you have set your play, the time in which it is set, and other key characteristics of your creative expression.

Required Readings

“Soot Suit and Other Plays” by Luis Valdez. ISBN-10 : 155885048, ISBN-13 : 978-1558850484; Publisher : Arte Publico Press; 1st edition (April 30, 1992).

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom: A Play” by August Wilson. ISBN-10 : 0452261139, ISBN-13 : 978-0452261136; Publisher : Plume; Reissue edition (April 24, 1985).

“Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” by August Wilson. ISBN-10 : 0452260094, ISBN-13 : 978-0452260092; Publisher : Plume; Reissue edition (October 30, 1988).

Blackboard <https://blackboard.usc.edu/> provides additional links to pertinent readings, essays, and resources. (Blackboard, in addition to being the site that contains some course materials is also the means of communication and continuation of curriculum in the event of an emergency. If you do not know how to use Blackboard, visit the site and follow links to USC Blackboard Help.) The syllabus is posted on Blackboard as well as on the USC Schedule of Classes.

Supplementary Readings:

The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers By Christopher Vogler

Letters to A Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (Available On-line), http://www.carrothers.com/rilke_main.htm

The Art of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri
The Book of Tea by Kakuzo Okakura
Poetics by Aristotle
African Philosophy: An Anthology Edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Academic integrity is important to the University. The student is urged to remember that professors do not “give” grades; students *earn* grades. Thus, a final grade is entirely up to the student with regards to the effort he or she chooses to expend to meet course requirements.

Please note that I invite you to visit with me outside of class if you need support or counsel about the course content.

Please note that late work is given a ten percent (10%) penalty and is accepted only within one week of its due date. The only exception is illness or personal crisis.

Here are USC’s definitions of grades: “A” for work of excellent quality, “B” for work of good quality, “C” for work of fair quality for undergraduate credit and minimum passing for graduate credit, “C-” as a failing grade for graduate credit, “D-” for work of minimum passing quality for undergraduate credit, “F” for failure, “IN” for incomplete work, *student-initiated after 12th week and only awarded under exceptional circumstances.*

Each assignment is graded on a percentage, i.e. 9/100, according to this scale:

A	95-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69	F = 59 & below
A-	90-94	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	63-66	
		B-	80-82	C-	70-72	D-	60-62	

[Failing Grade for Graduate Credit = C-]

The final grade summarizes the semester’s grades and the final project assessment. This culminates in a letter grade calculated on the same grading scale above.

Your grade for this course is assessed as follows:

1. 10% - Participation and engagement in weekly dramaturgy and page submission
2. 15% - Life of the Mind Presentations
3. 25% - Character Development Statements (1 for each character in your play, see Attachment A)
4. 50% - Final Project

Participation and engagement means that you will write pages every week and bring them into class for reading and dramaturgical feedback. You will provide constructive criticism to your peers and accept their constructive criticism in return. You will take notes on what is said to you, type them up, and submit them to the instructor within twenty-four hours of the end of course (midnight the Tuesday after class). You will complete reading assignments and discuss them meaningfully towards the expansion of your universes of thought, which organically feeds your creative expression.

Life of the Mind Presentations are team presentations based upon required readings. Three teams will be designated on the first day of class. Each team will be responsible for a presentation about an assigned required reading that assesses these elements of the reading: Characters beginning with Protagonist, World of the Play (place, time period, sociopolitical realities of the time period), History of the Author, Premise of the Play, Point of Attack of the Play, Q&A. Each presentation should be no more than 30 minutes in length.

A Character Development Statement is due three times during the semester. Please make note of the submission dates in the course schedule below. For each character in your play, prepare a 1-page document that provides numbered responses to each of the categories below. To be precise, if you have 10 characters, then you will submit 10 Character Development Statements, one for each character you are developing. The cast of characters you desire for your play will determine the amount of character development research you will need to complete. Each CDS is graded on a percentage basis, i.e. 95/100 and calculated into the final grade based on the same grading scale noted above. Be precise, concise, and specific, i.e. not “he likes dogs because they’re cute,” but something more like “he likes Akitas because they are large, imposing dogs with loud barks that ward off would-be intruders.”

The Final Project. This is a coalesced assignment (final exam/final project) *You must submit a play that is a fully reconsidered revision of the play that you designate on the first day of class.* A superficial revision is not acceptable. Please make certain you fully reconsider your work over the course of the semester and that this development is obvious in the Final Project that you submit.

Your final project play must be typed in standard manuscript format with standard top/bottom/side one-inch margins in Courier or Times 12-point type. Please see the professional formatting standards of the Dramatists’ Guild: <https://www.dramatistsguild.com/script-formats>. As noted herein, please be mindful that your Final Project grade will be diminished if you do not submit it in professional format.

You must submit your Final Project electronically as a Word doc/docx document so that commentary also may be provided electronically. If you submit it as a PDF, it is understood that you do not desire written feedback, but merely summary comments.

Because you are presenting your work to the profession, you are expected to refine your thesis into a play manuscript that is between *50-89 pages*, not including the title page, copyright page, and cast of characters page. Do not exceed the maximum.

You are encouraged to copyright your play (Electronic Copyright Office: https://eco.copyright.gov/eService_enu/start.swe?SWECmd=Start&SWEHo=eco.copyright.gov).

The Final Project play shall be graded according to the following rubric:

- 25% Quality of character development.
- 25% Quality of story development.
- 25% Quality of dialogue crafting.
- 25% Originality, overall creative achievement, and professionalism of project, which includes formatting, spelling, and grammar.

See Attachment B for the assessment breakdown.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Dramaturgical notes are provided throughout the semester. Please retain and refer to them in the continued refinement of your play.

1/18 – Martin Luther King, Jr., Holiday – No Classes

1/25 – Review of syllabus, and interactive questions and answers. Assessment of projects to be revised. Designated Life of the Mind Presentation teams (3 teams). For 2/1, read “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” and prepare revision plan for your project that you can share in class on-screen. Also due is the first set of Character Development Statements for your cast of characters.

2/1 – Wellness Day.

2/8 – Life of the Mind Presentation Team #1 presents on “Joe Turner....” Peer sharing of revision plans in breakout room, followed by class sharing of revision plans and discussion. In class writing workshop doing discovery exercise of play regarding character and story development questions. For 2/22, read “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” and revise the first scene of your play.

2/15 – President’s Day, Holiday – No Classes

2/22 – Life of the Mind Presentation Team #2 presents on “Ma Rainey....” Writing workshop focuses on sharing of revised first scenes with peer and mentor dramaturgy. For 3/1, read “Zoot Suit” and revise the second scene of your play as well as the first scene based on peer and mentor dramaturgy from today’s class.

3/1 – Life of the Mind Presentation Team #3 presents on “Zoot Suit.” Writing workshop focuses on sharing of revised first and second scenes with peer and mentor dramaturgy.

3/8 – Wellness day, no class. For 3/22, revise first act of your plays.

3/15 – Writing workshop focusing on revised first acts with peer and mentor dramaturgy.

3/22 – Wellness day, no class. For 4/12, revise second acts of your plays.

3/29 – Writing workshop focusing on revised second acts with peer and mentor dramaturgy.

4/5 – Wellness day, no class.

4/12 – Wellness day, no class.

4/19 – Writing workshop focusing on revisions remaining from 3/15 and 3/29 sharings, with peer and mentor dramaturgy.

4/26 – Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Outreach Event. Narratives of Black Culture in the US. Participants to be announced.

FINAL PROJECTS DUE 4/30 AT 5 PM VIA greentea@usc.edu.

*ADDITIONAL POLICIES

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.

Statements 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. 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.

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. Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. 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

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

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

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

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

The Office of Disability Services and Programs. Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. 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

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

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

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

ATTACHMENT A

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT STATEMENT FOR THTR 500, S2021

For each character in your play, prepare a 1-page document that provides numbered responses to each of the categories below. To be precise, if you have 10 characters, then you will submit 10 Character Development Statements, one for each character you are developing. The cast of characters you desire for your play will determine the amount of character development research you will need to complete.

- 1) Character name and age
- 2) 3 Entities that are most important to the character
- 3) Place of birth and what it means to the character
- 4) Country/city of residence and what it means to the character including type of residence in which the character lives (apartment, tent, house, etc.) and what is its internal nature (furniture, cleanliness, collections, etc.)
- 5) Family of the character and nature of the character's relationship to these family members
- 6) Friends of the character, their value to the character, and what each of them wants in life
- 7) Romantic relationships of the character, i.e. lover/partner/spouse
- 8) Job/career of the character and why that job/career
- 9) Spiritual or religious beliefs of the character and why
- 10) Recurring dream of the character and why/what does the character think it means
- 11) Three strongest incidents in character's life and why they were so critical
- 12) Racial or ethnic identity of character including coloring and appearance of character (phenotype), i.e. hair, skin, overall complexion
- 13) Gender and sexuality of character
- 14) Physicality of character including body type (height, weight, shape), health, and personal hygiene
- 15) Ethics/morality of character, i.e. integrity/civility/compassion or lack thereof
- 16) Personal stances of character: political affiliations/beliefs, artistic/literary/musical tastes
- 17) Greatest desire of the character and why
- 18) Greatest fear of the character and why
- 19) Darkest secret of the character and why
- 20) Most sentimental object of the character and why

Example:

For my play, "Moon over Phoenix," I have six characters: Ethel, Vanessa, Robin, Barbara, Melvin, and Theo. Here are six Character Development Statements, one for each of these characters. I understand that, each time this assignment is due, I must submit six separate statements, one for each character.

ETHEL

- 1) Her name is Ethel Black and she is 25 years old.
- 2) The three entities that are most important to her are her cat, Snow; her locked journal, and her younger brother (Theo) who is 20.
- 3) Ethel was born in Junction City, Kansas, which is important to her because she likes having grown up in the rural Midwest rather than a large city where people often are anonymous to each other.

Etc.

ATTACHMENT B

Rubric for Assessment of Final Project/Final Exam

USC MFADW FINAL PROJECT EVALUATION

Course Number/Name: THTR 500 Dramaturgical Perspectives and Approaches, Spring 2021

Student Name: _____

Grading Guidelines from Syllabus:

USC definitions of grades: "A" for work of excellent quality, "B" for work of good quality. USC Department of Grading details the grading issue: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/ARR/grades/gradinghandbook/gradingpolicies.html>.

Grading is determined on the following scale:

A	95-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	67-69	F = 59 & below
A-	90-94	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	63-66	
		B-	80-82	C-	70-72	D-	60-62	

[Failing Grade for Graduate Credit = C-]

The class presentation grade is evaluated on this scale with the grade breaking down as follows: 25% Quality of structure/through-line/ plotting (story execution), 25% Quality of character development and execution, 25% Quality of dialogue crafting and execution, 25% Quality of overall creative achievement/ professional promise of project/ theatricality/ originality of vision/ presentation.

- _____ Quality of storytelling (through-line/execution)
- _____ Quality of character development
- _____ Quality of dialogue development
- _____ Quality of overall creative achievement (professionalism: professional formatting/ theatricality/ originality of vision)

These guidelines mean that I will ask myself the following questions about your play; these are examples, but please extrapolate from the four categories noted above:

- Am I able to discern the story?
- How does the story on the page compare to the story verbalized by the playwright in class?
- Is the story well-executed with a clear and progressive through-line?
- Do all of the characters have a dramatic purpose in the play? Are the characters necessary to the story that is executed?
- Are the characters' fully dimensional?
- Is the dialogue well-crafted?
- Does each character have his or her or their own way of speaking and is it clear why?
- Is the play formatted professionally?
- Is the play 89 pages or less?
- Has the playwright copy-edited the play for spelling and grammar precision?
- What elements of theatricality exist in the play and are they integrated into the world of the play?
- Is the artistic vision of the play original?

Etc.