

**THTR 202: The Fundamentals of Comedy**  
**2 Units**  
**Spring 2021 – Tuesdays – 10am-12:50pm PT**  
**Location: see Zoom link via Blackboard**

**Instructor: Kirstin Q. Eggers**  
**Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda>**  
**Office Hours: By appointment – schedule via email.**  
**Email: [kqeggers@usc.edu](mailto:kqeggers@usc.edu)**  
**USC Slack: @Kirstin Eggers**

### **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 the art and craft of comedy, especially the basic concepts of comedic acting, structure, genres and forms. 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**

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Employ basic comedy techniques in both performance and writing/creation
2. Apply techniques for bravery and collaboration to serve the creative process
3. Evaluate existing comedy material, in a variety of genres
4. Devise varied comedic material, from idea to process to product
5. Further identify and develop their own comedic voices

*"Laugh as much as possible, always laugh.  
It's the sweetest thing one can do for oneself  
and one's fellow human beings." –Maya Angelou*

### **Course Notes**

Due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of comedy, classes must be synchronous for your success – you must attend online class LIVE.

### **Communication**

Please email me at [kqeggers@usc.edu](mailto:kqeggers@usc.edu) anytime with questions or concerns. Emails will generally be returned within 48 hours on weekdays. I can also meet with you via my Zoom personal meeting room. Slack may at some point be an acceptable way to get in touch with me as well.

I also ask that the class as a whole have a communication group, platform of your choice, so you can easily get in touch with each other.

### **Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required**

Students will use Zoom with Audio and Video. To fully engage with all in-class activities, Video On and Unmuted are necessary settings. However, students may use virtual backgrounds, and earphones or headsets to improve audio quality.

### **USC Technology Rental Program**

If you need resources to successfully participate in your classes, such as a laptop or internet hotspot, you may be eligible for the university's equipment rental program. To apply, please submit an application at [studentbasicneeds.usc.edu](http://studentbasicneeds.usc.edu).

## USC Technology Support Links

Zoom information for students: [keep-teaching.usc.edu/tools/zoom](https://keep-teaching.usc.edu/tools/zoom)

Blackboard help for students: [studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu](https://studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu)

Software available to USC Campus: [software.usc.edu](https://software.usc.edu)

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## Required Reading

All readings will be posted on Blackboard or linked via ARES/USC Library. You are not required to purchase any of these books.

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
- Additional web links and/or PDFs 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. You are encouraged to watch comedy created by artists both of and outside of your personal identity.

## Supplemental Reading

- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by M. Bruder, L.M. Cohn, M. Olnek, N. Pollack, R. Previto, S. Zigler
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life* by Steve Martin
- *On The Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* by Mel Watkins
- *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* by Yael Kohan
- *Why Not Me?* by Mindy Kaling
- *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels and the History of American Comedy* by Kliph Nesteroff
- *Sick in the Head: Conversations About Life and Comedy* by Judd Apatow
- *Poking a Dead Frog* by Mike Sacks

## Supplemental Viewing

You are encouraged to watch comedy created by artists both of and outside of your personal identity.

- Current or historical comedy movies of your choice. (check out essential comedy movie lists on [rottentomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com), [vulture.com](https://www.vulture.com) and [ranker.com](https://www.ranker.com) for suggestions)
- Current or historical comedy television of your choice. (check out essential comedy television lists on [rottentomatoes.com](https://www.rottentomatoes.com), [indiewire.com](https://www.indiewire.com) and [ranker.com](https://www.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.

"What is comedy? Comedy is the art of making people laugh without making them puke." –Steve Martin

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

In-class Activities – *“The answers to making it, to me...center on having a tolerance for delayed gratification, a passion for the craft, and a willingness to fail.” – Ali Wong*

This is an experience based course, and you are expected to participate and commit during every class and activity with a generous heart, an curious mind, and a devoted work ethic. You are not graded on your laughs in this class, you are graded on your attempts (your willingness to fail). There is no progress without putting in the work.

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 turned in 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. Some weeks the material will be assigned, some weeks will be your choice.

Personal Comedy Material Share – Select 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 created. Be prepared to send a link or share screen. It should be about 2-5 minutes in length. You will analyze and discuss what draws you to the piece in class.

Open Comedy Scene (Midterm) – 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/ on Blackboard.

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  | % of Grade |
|---|------------|
| In-class exercises – presence, focus, attitude, willingness (2/class) | 30         |
| Comedy Notebook – creative & consumption weekly engagement            | 25         |
| Personal Comedy Material Share  | 5          |
| Open Comedy Scene Midterm Classwork                                   | 5          |
| Open Comedy Scene Midterm Presentation                                | 10         |
| Open Comedy Scene Written Component                                   | 5          |
| Final Project Classwork   | 5          |
| Final Project Presentation  | 15         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>100</b> |

## **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

## **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.

Written Assignments should be posted on Blackboard before the deadline date and time. Late submissions will have points taken off. PDFs preferred. Do Not post link to a Google Doc. Formatting for clarity is expected.

Grades will generally be posted to Blackboard within a week. If you fail to turn in an assignment, it will show on Blackboard Grade Center – I cannot follow up with you to ask about missing assignments.

## **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, homework that is required as preparation for class, or lack of participation in class resulting from your extra-curricular involvement.

## **Attendance**

In-class exercises are essentially impossible to experience asynchronously, therefore missing more than 2 classes will lower your final grade. Being late or leaving early for more than 3 classes will also lower your final grade.

## **Classroom Norms**

- Please keep attention on the class, not on phones, other internet, other beings in your house, etc. This is to encourage your focus, mindfulness, and respect to the ensemble.
- Please wear clothing in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.
- Please reserve break-time activities for before and after class, and our break. We will generally take an official break at the approximate halfway point of class. Other than that, you should be prepared to stay active in the class, both as performer and audience.
- Please don't eat or chew gum during class.
- Please stay upright unless the scene/activity calls for otherwise.
- Be honest with yourself about how and where you will do your best learning, and commit to it.

## **Zoom Etiquette**

- You must have Video on, unless the scene/activity calls for otherwise.
- Please keep the Zoom chat quiet during scenes/activities.
- You may be asked to stay UNmuted during certain activities, unless you have ambient noise you can't control.
- Having a quiet, private place in which to play is the most important Zoom setting there is! Preferably with a little space to move around. Comedy can get wild, so set yourself up for success by not having distractions or an audience.

### Synchronous session recording notice

All synchronous class sessions will be recorded and provided to all students asynchronously.

### Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

USC policy prohibits sharing of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment.

*SCampus Section 11.12(B): Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is a violation of the USC Student Conduct Code. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).*

What happens in class, stays in class!

### Course Evaluation

Learning Experience Evaluations should be completed before the last class session, via the link USC provides.

*"Comedy is here to bring joy to the world, whether you want to hear the curse words or not." –Kenan Thompson*

### 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   |
|------|-------------|--|-----------|--|
| 1    | Tues Jan 19 | Welcome/Introductions.<br>Syllabus and expectations review.<br><br>Our thoughts on and relationship to Comedy.<br><br>Begin fearlessness and personal material work. |           | DUE NEXT WEEK: Bring in an existing piece of comedy that feels personal to you, ignites you in some way and makes you laugh out loud.<br><br>Read chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i> , posted on Blackboard.<br><br>Read articles "It's OK to Find Humor in Some of This" (NYTimes) and "How Do You Make People Laugh During a Pandemic?" (NPR) |

| Week      | Date        | Topics/Daily Activities   | Due Today  | Homework   |
|-----------|-------------|---|--|--|
| <b>2</b>  | Tues Jan 26 | Discussion and exercises on Comedy Theories: (Incongruity, Relief, Superiority, et al).<br>Comedy terms overview.<br><br>Personal comedy share.<br><br>Discussion and exercises on Comedy Acting Tools. Begin improv & reaction work. | Read for discussion: Chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i> , NYT and NPR articles.<br><br>Personal comedy share. | Read chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i> , posted on Blackboard.<br><br>Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. |
| <b>3</b>  | Tues Feb 2  | Improv & reaction work.<br><br>Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.  | Read for discussion: Chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i>   | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>4</b>  | Tues Feb 9  | PHYSICAL COMEDY/ CLOWNING Part 1 with guest teacher Zach Steel.<br><br>Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.  |  | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>5</b>  | Tues Feb 16 | PHYSICAL COMEDY/ CLOWNING Part 2 with guest teacher Zach Steel.<br><br>Discussion and exercises on Comedic Characters.  |  | Read chapters 1-3, <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i> , posted on Blackboard.                                     |
| <b>6</b>  | Tues Feb 23 | Discussion and exercises on Comedic characters.<br>Discussion and exercises on Comedy Premises/Plots.<br>Begin open scene work in pairs.  | Read for discussion: Chapters 1-3 of <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i>                         | Rehearse/plan comedy open scene.<br>Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.<br><br>Rehearse comedy open scene.    |
| <b>7</b>  | Tues Mar 2  | Open scene work.  |  | Final Rehearsal comedy open scene.   |
| <b>8</b>  | Tues Mar 9  | Midterm: present open scenes.<br><br>Introduction to comedy types and mediums.  | MIDTERM: Present open scenes. Written component due before class.                                  |  |
| <b>9</b>  | Tues Mar 16 | STAND-UP COMEDY with guest teacher Judith Shelton.  |  | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>10</b> | Tues Mar 23 | WELLNESS DAY – NO CLASS   |  |  |

| Week         | Date                                   | Topics/Daily Activities  | Due Today  | Homework   |
|--------------|--|--|--|--|
| <b>11</b>    | Tues Mar 30                            | SKETCH COMEDY with Kirstin.  |  | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>12</b>    | Tue Apr 6                              | SITCOMS with guest professionals.  |  | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>13</b>    | Tue Apr 13                             | Pitch Final Project. Assign collaboration support. Final project discussion/rehearsal. |  | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.   |
| <b>14</b>    | Tue Apr 20                             | Final project draft due/rehearsal. Notes.  | Final project draft due.   | Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Compile all Comedy Notebook assignments for submission. |
| <b>15</b>    | Tue Apr 27                             | Learning Experience Evaluations. Final prep for final project.                         | Final Notebooks Due! All creative assignments and consumption reflections. |  |
| <b>FINAL</b> | <b>TUESDAY<br/>MAY 11 –<br/>8-10am</b> | Final Presentation of Final Comedy Project   |  | Happy Summer!  |

*"You start learning (comedy), and it's like playing a piano. You know exactly what keys to stroke, 'cause really, with comedy, you're, like, fiddling with people's souls." - Tiffany Haddish*

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### 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

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call [dps.usc.edu](http://dps.usc.edu)

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.