

SYLLABUS

CTPR 476

Section 18572D

DIRECTING THE COMEDIC SCENE

Units: 2

Fall 2021

MONDAYS (6:00PM - 9:50PM)

Stage D of the Robert Zemeckis Center (3131 S Figueroa St #110, Los Angeles, CA 90007)

Professor: ANDY CADIFF

Office Hours: Zoom Appointments

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*I will respond to emails within 48 hours

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Instructor's Statement:

An actor once said: "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard". Which is ironic because historically, "dramatic" actors have been perceived to be serious actors; and less skilled actors, or comedians, were viewed as one dimensional and not truthfully connecting with the audience. In fact, without truth, comedy does not exist, because it taps into human behavior that is far more recognizable than tragedy. Do you relate more to the characters in Game Of Thrones or SuperBad, The Godfather or Annie Hall, Lawrence of Arabia or Sleepless in Seattle?

Woody Allen, all political and personal judgments put to the side, has been objectively one of the greatest modern comedic writers of our time. He wrote, "comedy is tragedy plus time." This simply means that if you take a horrific event in history, and given an adequate passage of time, you can make a joke about it. There are lots of Abraham Lincoln assassination jokes ("other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?") But over fifty years later, still not a great Kennedy assassination joke on the books. Not enough time.

So, with the proper passage of time, we can tap into our weaknesses and missteps and lunacy and laugh at them, rather than wallow in what was once probably quite a sorry or even tragic situation.

Comedy addresses "life out of balance." Comedy is not about nobility or aspiration; it is about survival. A classical tragedy ends in a death; a classical comedy ends in a marriage or life's problems solved. While tragedy rails against fate, destiny, injustice and death, comedy strips the characters bare and exposes their foibles and quirks and reaches resolutions that slightly alter the characters but do not change their essence. And ... comedy makes people laugh.

A laugh is recognition of life's imperfection. It signifies the acknowledgement from the audience of the contrast between what is, and what ought to be. A laugh is an involuntary, reflexive recognition of a truth or contradiction.

Fostering comic performance is the act of conjuring or nurturing that reflexive laugh. The role of the director of comedy is like that of a conjurer. Or nurturer. .It is the director's job to conjure or nurture the laugh. And this is a skill that I believe can be taught. Though an inherent and instinctive sense of comedy doesn't hurt.

This is a course on the art of directorial interpretation of the comedic scene. We focus on the dialogue scene, the director's work with actors, and the challenge of unlocking comedy from the text and in performance.

In addition, the course is designed to develop the director's ability to communicate effectively with actors in a way that brings forth their best work.

Students will do assignments and exercises that focus on issues of casting, directing actors, scene analysis, point of view, and staging a fully realized comedic scene.

Learning Goals and Objectives:

In this class you will learn to identify the richness and depth of a good scene, maybe beyond what you imagined at first glance. Even with two people sitting over a breakfast table – something must be happening, something important, something with emotional meaning and comic undertone. That “happening” is what we call the “emotional event” of the scene. Only scenes that have an emotional event are worth including in a dramatic (or comedic) narrative. And only scenes with a clear comedic premise will be considered for student projects.

Students, in the role of director, will complete a variety of assignments during the semester, designed to clarify what the director wants from the actor, explore methods of getting it, and recognize whether it has truly been achieved. Emphasis will be on the communication between the director and actor, and the textual analysis of scenes to achieve the ultimate goal of mining the comedy in the scene.

The ability to “get” the joke, a sense of humor and of timing, will be a bonus and should make the work seem more natural. Still, I believe that there are underlying principles that pertain to comedy that can be studied, taught, and applied by all directors. This course will attempt to identify those principles and demonstrate their application.

Course Description:

This class combines exercises, lectures, readings and written reflections as a means to prepare for directing a comedic dialogue scene. It will also ask you to expand whatever your prior perspectives on what a directing course would be, or enlighten whatever actual directing experience you might have had prior to taking this course.

Each student will be assigned a scene (two characters) from an existing screenplay or TV show to analyze, cast, explore through virtual rehearsal and imagined staging.

During the first four weeks we will examine the audition and casting process, followed by scene analysis and breakdown, and finally rehearsing and imagined staging.

Each scene will be rehearsed spread out over three classes before presenting the final version to the other students for feedback, analysis, and critique.

Through this process of exploration, and trial and error, it is expected that the student will learn practical principles and apply them to directing actors and comedy at whatever point in time we find ourselves safely on a sound stage or a film set.

Course Notes:

Rehearsal:

Rehearsal is a critical tool in the making of comedy. This class will teach rehearsal technique and sharpen the students' appreciation for the use of rehearsal in the finding and rendering of comedy.

Students are encouraged to rehearse outside of class before bringing work into class.

If an actor presents you with a sudden conflict that makes them unavailable to rehearse in class you must notify the instructor and your SA immediately. You may not bring a "surprise actor" to class.

Casting:

Casting is crucial. Students **MUST HOLD AT LEAST TWO AUDITION SESSIONS**. You may cast someone you know -- you must, however, go through the audition process for the experience and to see what alternatives are available. As actors often drop out of projects, it is strongly advised that you be prepared with backup casting options.

Any **RECASTING** must be done with the instructor's knowledge and approval.

Casting Resources:

You may use LA Casting, Breakdown Express and the various databases and websites available to find actors. You may also use any other resource at your disposal.

School of Dramatic Arts Actors:

You are strongly advised to cast students from USC School of Dramatic Arts when possible and appropriate. Students who have done so have found them to be well-trained professionals and reliable collaborators.

Actor Contact information:

Prior to your first "in-class" rehearsal, you are required to provide your SA with your actors' NAMES/ Preferred Contact info (cell phone and email)/Digital Headshot Photo - If you recast you must update this information.

Meetings:

I am open to meeting with you at any point in the semester, preferably on Zoom, by appointment. Additionally, after you choose your scene and before your rehearsals, I require **a 30-minute meeting with me.**

These mandatory meetings are established to review the in-class presentations and lectures and to gauge your readiness to enter the casting and rehearsal phases for your scene presentations. These are important subjects; however, I understand that students have a variety of topics that they'd like clarified. So I leave the focus of the meeting to you. The important thing is that you come prepared with questions.

Critique – Giving and Taking:

Each time a student presents work it will be subject to in-class discussion, “critique” and revision. In this course we share “work in process”. Artists “in process” feel vulnerable. One of the goals of this course is to help students learn to observe work in process and share their observations in a way that is helpful to the director. It is important that critique be received with a sense of openness. Learning how to give and take useful criticism is by no means easy. It takes care, mindfulness and practice. Together we will endeavor to create an atmosphere that is conducive to good process.

Disclaimer and Fair Warning:

The purpose of comedy is not to be hurtful but to explore hurtful subjects in a safe way. Comedy is controversial by its nature. One of its functions is to test moral and social boundaries. Whatever the intention it is possible that material shown and discussed in class may offend. Be aware of this possibility before deciding to take this class.

Written Reflections:

Your Written Reflections are important to me. They enable me to get a better understanding of what you are learning, and they help me customize my teaching to your individual needs. I consider them to be crucial communications and their importance is reflected in the weight I give them toward your grade.

Be advised that failing – through forgetfulness – to turn in reflections on time is the most common way students lose points toward their grades.

Reflections need not be long – one page is sufficient – and they need not be written according to formal rules. Think of it as a personal communication from you to me. Your reflection may refer to any aspect of your process.

Your first reflection must be your response to either the casting demonstration, the rehearsal demonstration, or my thoughts and lectures on directing the comedy scene. You get to choose which one of these experiences you want to write about.

Each time you present work in class – whether a rehearsal or the final presentation of your scene – you are required to write a “reflection” about it.

The reflection following your first rehearsal should include your reasons for choosing your specific scene and the thought process behind casting each of your actors.

All Reflections must be e-mailed to me by 9AM on the Monday after each in-class rehearsal and after the final presentation.

Students are required to submit a total of FOUR Reflections:

On either the Casting Demonstration, the Rehearsal Demonstration, or introductory lectures

First In-Class Rehearsal

Second In-Class Rehearsal

Final Presentation

Assigned Readings:

Mandatory readings are assigned throughout the semester. All reading material is available on the class website.

Required Texts:

Available at the Campus store or Amazon:

The Comic Toolbox by John Vorhaus

http://www.amazon.com/Comic-Toolbox-Funny-Even-Youre/dp/1879505215/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1356230359&sr=1-1&keywords=the+comic+toolbox

Directing Actors by Judith Weston

<http://www.amazon.com/Directing-Actors-Memorable-Performances-Television/dp/0941188248>

Grading:

I appreciate your talent but I do not grade you on it. You are graded on your fulfillment of the assignments of the course, your engagement with the subjects and challenges we take up, your active participation and the growth evidenced by your work during the semester.

Grading Breakdown:

| | |
|---|------------|
| Demonstration Reflection | 10 points |
| First Rehearsal | 10 points |
| First Rehearsal Reflection | 10 points |
| Second Rehearsal | 10 points |
| Second Rehearsal Reflection | 10 points |
| Final Project 3 rd Rehearsal | 15 points |
| Final Project Reflection | 15 points |
| **Participation | 20 points |
| TOTAL | 100 points |

**PARTICIPATION is the engine of Group Learning. It is a crucial element in your grade. It includes commitment to the class, involvement with other students' work, helping them in its realization, engagement with the material and contribution to class discussion

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale:

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

Production Division Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two absences will result in a student's grade being lowered by one full letter (IE: A becomes B). A third absence will result in a student's grade being lowered by one, additional full letter (IE: B becomes C). A student's grade will be lowered by one full letter for each additional absence. Two late class arrivals equate to one full absence.

If a student misses class due to an emergency, the student must contact the professor prior to class or contact the Production Office at 213-740-3317.

Late Arrival:

15 minutes late constitutes an official late arrival. In cases where petty tardiness – i.e. of less than 15 minutes becomes chronic, I will give one “warning”, and then I will assign penalties. Your SA will keep track of late arrivals.

Reminder: Two late arrivals equals one absence.

Labeling of Assignments:

Improperly labeling leads to your work getting lost or misplaced. For that reason I am very specific in my requirements for labeling. My system allows me to give you proper credit. I will not take on the clerical duties of relabeling your assignments.

All assignments must be labeled using the following format:

Course # - Your Last Name-Assignment-Date.

For Example: **476 – Smith - First Rehearsal Reflection -10/15/20**

The label must be on the document itself...

It is not sufficient to label the email subject line and then attach an unlabeled document.

I will not accept any assignment not properly labeled.

Due Dates:

Missing deadlines is generally regarded as unacceptable in the Industry, and so it will be in this class. If you know ahead of time that unavoidable circumstances will prevent the timely delivery of your work you must notify me immediately, and the circumstances must be documented. Only genuine “emergencies” beyond your control will be accepted.

Unexcused missed due dates will result in reduction of 1/2 of the point value for each full class period past the original due date.

Unforeseen Circumstances:

If you have life problems or circumstances that might affect your work, please let me know in advance. I want to be understanding and helpful if I can. See me to make arrangements for deadline extensions.

Grading Feedback:

You may ask me for feedback about how you are doing at any time. If I notice that a student is at risk of falling below a B, I will reach out and bring this to the student's attention.

Be aware, however, that the majority of grade value is earned after mid-semester. This can make it difficult for me to give precise warnings early on. I urge you to take responsibility for your work and your grade and stay on top of things.

Notes Regarding Projects:

THE FILM OR TV IT IS REQUIRED THAT STUDENTS READ THE FULL SCREENPLAY OR TELEPLAY FROM WHICH THEIR SCENES ORIGINATE. IT IS ALL RIGHT IF YOU HAVE SEEN SHOW IN THE PAST, BUT YOU MUST NOT REVISIT IT UNTIL AFTER YOUR PROJECT IS COMPLETED.

DIRECTORS MUST PRINT OUT COPIES OF THE COMPLETE SCREENPLAY OR TELEPLAY FOR THEMSELVES FOR THE PURPOSE OF NOTE-TAKING.

DIRECTORS ARE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE A PDF OF THE ENTIRE SCREENPLAY FOR THEIR ACTORS AND URGE THEM TO READ IT. ACTORS MUST BE INSTRUCTED NOT TO REVIEW OR STUDY THE EXISTING MATERIAL.

Safety:

All students are expected to abide by USC School of Cinematic Arts Safety Guidelines. Violations of any of the safety guidelines may result in disciplinary action.

Students with Disabilities:

Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability are 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 the Instructor as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30 am to 5:00 pm. The office is in Student Union 301, and their phone number is (213)740-0776.

Stressful Times:

These are stressful times in our country, and college and graduate school in and of itself is stressful. I encourage you to take care of yourself and your fellow students. USC provides opportunities for Mindful Meditation <http://mindful.usc.edu> and Mental health counseling is available at the Engemann Student Health Center, 1031 W. 34th Street, 213-740-9355.

Statement on Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

476 FALL 2021 Schedule of Classes and Assignments

Class 1 – 8/23

Topics: Introduction to 476; Assign Jokes exercise; Top Comedy Films; Scene screenings and discussion; Discuss syllabus; Q & A

Assignments:

Sign on to class website – (find Syllabus under “Classes”) read 476

Acquire textbooks: (available at the Campus store or Amazon)

The Comic Toolbox by John Vorhaus

http://www.amazon.com/Comic-Toolbox-Funny-Even-Youre/dp/1879505215/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1356230359&sr=1-1&keywords=the+comic+toolbox

Directing Actors by Judith Weston

<http://www.amazon.com/Directing-Actors-Memorable-Performances-Television/dp/0941188248>

Reading Assignments from Texts:

Directing Actors "Introduction" (pp. 1-12) "Result Direction & Quick Fixes" (pp. 13-47)

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter One "Comedy is Truth and Pain" (pp.1-8)

Directing Actors - Moment to Moment (pp.49-76) Listening (p.77-90)

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter Two "The Will to Risk" (pp. 9-18)

[Reading Assignments due by next class](#)

Class 2 – 8/30

THINK FUNNY

The Director's Responsibility

How to pick your comedic scene

TAKE THE COMEDY RISK

SCREEN FILM AND DISCUSS

Class 3 – 9/13

NAVIGATING PRE-PRODUCTION; HOW TO RUN A PRODUCTION MEETING; THE TABLE TABLE READ

SCREENING EPISODE FOR DISCUSSION

Group #1 Jokes presentation

Class 4 – 9/20

Group Scene Assignments

Group #2 Jokes presentation

Directing Actors in Auditions (presentation w/ outside actors)

Assignments for Class 3:

Begin Casting Process – schedule auditions Group A

2. Reading Assignments from Texts:

Directing Actors -Actors Choices (pp. 91-132) Casting (pp.235-244)

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter Three: “The Comic Premise” pp 19-29

Class 5 – 9/27

Breaking down a scene: discuss action, event, physicality, staging, comic timing and beats

Rehearsal Process: Directing the Scene (presentation w/ outside actors)

Assignments for Class 4:

1. Begin Scene Analysis and Breakdown
2. Group B auditions
3. Reading Assignments from Texts:

Directing Actors - Script Analysis (p.163-234) Rehearsal (p. 245-279)

The Comic Toolbox – Chapter Four - Comic Characters p 30-46

5. First Reflection Assignment: **by email to me by 9AM (Class 6)**

Write a reflection about one of the following -

your choice:

- a) Audition Demo
 - b) Rehearsal Dem
 - c) lectures and discussion
6. Group A schedule meetings with Andy

Class 6 – 10/4

WHAT IS A COMEDIC SCENE?

Group A - First in class rehearsal

Assignments for Class 5:

Group A First Rehearsal Reflection due by noon, day of next class

Group B Schedule Office Hours with Andy

Class 7 – 10/11

WORKING WITH ACTORS

Group B - First in class Rehearsal

Assignments for Class 6:

Group B 1st Rehearsal Reflection [due by 9AM, day of next class](#)

1. Reading Assignments from Texts:

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter Eight – More Tools from the Toolbox (p. 103 – 115)

Class 8 – 10/18

HOW TO PACE REHEARSALS

Group A - In class Rehearsal #2

Assignments for Class 8:

Group A Schedule Meetings with Andy

Reading Assignments from Texts:

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter Ten – Comedy and Jeopardy (pp. 117-124)

Class 9 – 10/25

STAGING, NOTE GIVING, SHOOTING

Group B – In class Rehearsal

Class feedback and discussion

Assignments for Class 9:

1. Group B Reflection Due
2. Reading Assignments from Texts:

The Comic Toolbox - Chapter Eleven – Still More Tools from the Toolbox (p.125 – 138)

Class 10 – 11/01

THE DIRECTOR'S LANGUAGE

Group A - In class Rehearsal

Class feedback and discussion

Assignments for Class 9:

Group A 2nd Rehearsal Reflection [due by 9AM, day of next class](#)

Class 11 – 11/15

Group A - Final In Class Presentation

Assignments for Class 10:

Group B 2nd Rehearsal Reflection [due by 9AM, day of next class](#)

Class 12– 11/22

Group B - Final In Class Presentation

Assignments for Class 11: Group A & B have Final Reflections [due by 9AM, day of next class](#)

Class 13 – 11/29

THAT'S A WRAP!