

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 122: Improvisation and Theatre Games
2 Units
Fall 2021 – Thursdays – 2-3:50pm
Location: DRC 120 (Massman Theatre)

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers (she/her)
Email: kqeggers@usc.edu
Office Hours: By appointment — schedule via email
Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda>

Course Description

"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." – Charles Darwin

In this experiential workshop course, students will learn and build upon the tenets and rules of theatrical improvisation, with ultimate emphasis on applying these to one's own life. Through theatre games, and improvised experiences and performance, students will work toward freeing themselves physically, vocally, emotionally, and mentally, to stimulate communication, creativity, imagination, self-expression, and the collaborative spirit.

This course may be taken for credit twice.

Learning Objectives

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

1. Apply the "rules of improv" as they relate to relationship, storytelling, and performance;
2. Practice being present in their mind, body and spirit;
3. Evaluate improv performances for content and quality;
4. Empathetically discover human nature through character exploration;
5. Perform confidently in unscripted material;
6. Evaluate their own performance and participation with the intent of self-growth;
7. and relate the improvisational theatre tenets to their own personal and professional lives.

"Improv is the only belief system I've ever experienced that directly works on how to be. Just how to be." – Ilana Glazer

Course Notes

Classes must be attended live and in-person (medical status withstanding), due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of improv.

Communication

Please email me at kqeggers@usc.edu any time 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, or at an on-campus location as schedules allow.

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

Blackboard will be updated regularly with announcements, readings, etc. Please check often. Blackboard help for students is at studentblackboardhelp.usc.edu.

Required Readings

Students will be given pdfs and/or links throughout the semester which they are expected to read and retain for discussion. All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Required Viewing

Students are required to attend at least one live (in-person or online) improv show of your choice, and turn in a written response to the show.

Supplemental Readings

- *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deavere Smith
- *Life Unscripted: Using Improv Principles to Get Unstuck, Boost Confidence, and Transform Your Life* by Jeff Katzmann, MD and Dan O'Connor
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *Improv Nation: How We Made A Great American Art* by Sam Wasson
- *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin
- *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone

Supplemental Viewing/Watching/Listening

- Live in-person or online improv shows – there are several on-campus groups, and off-campus theatres performing in various ways
- TV shows with stage improv such as *Middleditch & Schwartz* and *Whose Line Is It Anyway*
- Improvised narrative film and television, such as Christopher Guest mockumentaries, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Bajillion Dollar Properties*, *Reno 911*, among others
- Improv-centered podcasts such as *Comedy Bang Bang*, *The Hills of Baldwin*, *Spontaneanation*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, among others

Description and Assessment of Assignments

Below is a general overview of the assignments. A detailed assignment description will be posted on Blackboard with ample time for each assignment.

- In-class exercises with enthusiastic participation are the most important part of your success in this class. The bulk of the coursework takes place in class experientially, as is the nature of improv – you must learn by Being Here Now. Points are awarded for presence, focus, attitude, willingness.
- Family Member Monologue – You will write, rehearse, and perform a 45 second-1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves – how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be truthful.
- Stranger Monologue – You will observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes – observe their physicality, vocal qualities, attitude. Write, rehearse, and perform a 30 second monologue as that person. Be specific.
- Self-Reflections – You will write two self-reflections throughout the semester, one at the beginning of the semester, and one at the end. Detailed instructions and prompts will be posted on Blackboard.
- Extended Team Improv (Midterm) – You will perform with teammates in an extended improv. Extended focus will be needed. Exact format to be determined.
- Live Improv Show Response – You will write one response to a live improv show. The show you choose to attend must be over the course of the semester, not something you have seen previously in your life. Many improv groups and theatres are finding innovative ways to do improv during this time. We may keep a Blackboard thread (or GoogleDoc) with shows/groups we find to help each other out with current shows.

- Final Jam – You will participate (choose format, announce, improvise) in a full "Improv Jam" performance. Final Jam may be recorded for you to view as part of our post-mortem, with the caveat that filmed improv is never as good as live improv.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
In-class exercises — presence, focus, attitude, willingness (2/class)	26
Character Monologue (Family Member)— written and performed	5
Character Monologue (Stranger/Documentary)— written and performed	5
Self-Reflections (6 points each)	12
Live Improv Show Response	8
Midterm Team Extended Improv — comprehension, willingness, application of learned techniques	20
Final Jam — Skill level, growth, commitment, application of learned techniques	24
TOTAL	100

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

Performance Assignments are presented in class, and copies of associated written work do not need to be submitted, although you must be prepared.

Written assignments should be posted on Blackboard as a PDF attachment before the specified date and time, and should be formatted for clarity and readability. Late assignments will not be awarded full points. Do not send links to Google Docs.

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.

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!

Learning Experience Evaluation

Learning Experience Evaluation occurs at the end of the semester university-wide. It is an important review of students' experience in the class. You should expect to receive an email update once the system has launched to provide your feedback on this course. In addition, you are always welcome to connect with with me as the instructor to offer any feedback on the course.

SDA Student Support & Reporting Form

To facilitate a supportive environment of accountability, SDA has created an internal system of reporting for students to address issues/concerns and to offer feedback or suggestions for improvement. This mechanism provides a pathway for reporting and offering feedback without fear of retaliation or judgment. Any submission filed through this form will be reviewed and processed accordingly through SDA Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. To file a report, please visit: <https://bit.ly/SDAstudentreporting>

SDA Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments

SDA productions, ISPs and extracurricular activities* do not excuse you from any class work. There will be no exceptions made for absences in class, missed or delayed assignments, homework or lack of class participation resulting from your involvement in any of the above. Your grade will reflect your work in this class, independent from work in any other class or activity.

**Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university, such as marching band, song girls, or varsity sports) are exempt. You must submit official documentation to your professor regarding your participation in an event prior to your absence.*

Attendance

Being absent, late, or leaving early disturbs the important ensemble nature of this class. Do not be late. You must be present and ready to work at the start of each class. Give yourself extra time to complete TrojanCheck to ensure an early arrival.

However, your health and the health of our community eclipses all! If your Covid-19 status precludes you from attending class in-person, I will attempt to conduct class as hybrid, and request you attend class LIVE (via Zoom) instead of watching a recording.

Classroom Norms

Devices – Cell phones and other electronic devices should be left on silent in your backpack/bag, away from your work in class. This is to encourage your focus, mindfulness, and respect to your peers.

Attire – Improv is physical and can get sweaty – dress accordingly. Your clothing and shoes should allow you to move freely and comfortably. Shoes should be closed-toed and stay on your feet – no flip-flops. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.

Eating – Food and drink is not permitted during any class. Absolutely no gum.

Break – We may take a “mask break” outside at the halfway point of class, depending on the day's flow. Other than that, please be prepared to stay in the room and active as both a performer and audience member. In the event of an emergency for which you must leave the room, observe theatre rules of being discrete and respectful to your fellow actors.

Strike – You are expected to restore the classroom to neutral at the end of each class.

Health and Participation in Class

Students must complete the Trojan Check screener daily and you may be asked to show your daily screening in class. The health and safety of everyone in class is the top priority. If you are experiencing any symptoms of COVID-19, or if you discover that you have been in close contact with others who have symptoms or who have tested positive, you must follow the instructions on Trojan Check. If you are feeling ill or if you have been exposed to someone with the virus, you must stay home to protect others. I will ensure that you can continue to participate in class remotely so that your education is not disrupted.

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, USC requires that face coverings (masks) be worn indoors including in classrooms. Face coverings must cover your nose and mouth and be worn throughout the class session. A mask with a valve is not considered an adequate face covering and should not be used, as it can expel exhaled air, increasing the risk to others. Eating or drinking during class is prohibited because of the risk posed by removing your mask for these activities. Failure to comply with these requirements will result in your being asked to leave the classroom immediately. Requests for accommodations related to the face covering and eating/drinking policies should be directed to the Office for Student Accessibility Services (<https://osas.usc.edu/>).

*"Improv is so freeing because there are no bounds; there's no safety net.
You just say something and get an instant response." –Nicole Byer*

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	Thu Aug 26	Welcome/Introductions Introduction to warm-ups and theatre exercises. Begin ensemble work. Syllabus review. Class boundaries discussion		Read selections from <i>Bossypants</i> and <i>Letters to a Young Artist</i> .
2	Thu Sep 2	Tenets/Basics of Improv The Only Lecture — please take notes. “YES, AND” exploration.	<i>Bossypants</i> and <i>Letters to a Young Artist</i> read for discussion.	Write Self-Reflection #1. Prompts and detailed assignment description posted on Blackboard.
3	Thu Sep 9	Storytelling, Status, Space Work, Relationship Exercises focused on space work (using the space/stage and “pantomime”), telling individual and group stories, beginning character work through Status, and establishing relationship.	Self-Reflection #1, posted on Blackboard before class.	
4	Wed Sep 15	EDI @ SDA: Professional Development/Mandatory EDI Training <i>As part of our EDI initiatives and call to action, workshops will be offered to faculty, staff, and students. More details will follow. All are welcome to attend.</i>		
	Thu Sep 16	Physicality & Voice Exploration Beginning character work with voice and physicality, including gibberish and over-the-top work. Tenets of improv, continued.		Write and rehearse a 45 second - 1 minute monologue of a family member you know VERY WELL. Think of their catchphrases, physical and vocal qualities, how they carry themselves — how they walk, sit, stand, move. Your monologue should be very specific. Challenge yourself to be truthful.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
5	Thu Sep 23	Presentation of family member monologues. Further character work, within scenes.	Perform a 45 second - 1 minute monologue you wrote, playing a family member you know very well.	Observe a stranger for at least 10 minutes (set your timer!). OR watch a real person in a documentary. Observe their physicality, listen to their voice. Write a 30 second monologue playing that stranger — what is happening to them that day? Be specific.
6	Thu Sep 30	Perform Stranger Monologues. Practice open scenes, filling in the details of character, location, story, etc. Continuation of character work in scenes.	Present Stranger Monologues.	
7	Thu Oct 7	Review and Practice Improv Basics		Prepare mentally for Midterm — review rules of improv.
8	Thu Oct 14	FALL RECESS — NO CLASS		
9	Thu Oct 21	<u>Midterm Exam Performance (Extended Team Improv)</u> In-class performance of to-be-determined improv format, with ensemble as a whole.	Midterm (Extended Team Improv) Today	
10	Thu Oct 28	Discuss Midterm. Games: Character/Experts/Styles Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on character, expert, and style games.		
11	Thu Nov 4	Games: Guessing/Timed/Energy Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance, with emphasis on guessing, timed and energy-driven games.		Last chance to attend a live improv show of your choice. Prompts and detailed assignment description posted on Blackboard.
12	Thu Nov 11	Discuss Live Shows we saw. Learn and rehearse more “games” for performance.	Written Response of Live Improv Show, posted on Blackboard before class.	
13	Thu Nov 18	Final Rehearsal for Final Improv Jam Together, determine final Improv Jam format. Final rehearsal.		Prepare mentally for Jam — review calling assignments, formats, rules. Invite guests?
14	Thu Nov 25	THANKSGIVING BREAK — NO CLASS		

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
15	Thu Dec 2	Final Improv Jam! Perform improv for each other, and possibly guests. Jam will be reviewed to evaluate during our assigned Final time. *Learning Experience Evaluations must be completed before class.	Final Jam Today	Review first self-reflection.
FINAL	THURSDAY DECEMBER 9 – 2-4pm	Discuss Improv Jam, Postmortem. Write Final Self-Reflection, prompts given in class.		Happy Winter Break!

“Improvors connect for the same basic reason you and your friends connect. Say you meet someone. You like something about them and they like something about you. Your mutual interest begets mutual play. Play begets cooperation and mutual understanding, which, trampolined by fun, becomes love. Love is the highest form of play.” – Sam Wasson

Statement on 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 Needing Accessibility Services

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from OSAS. Please be sure the letter is delivered to your instructor as early in the semester as possible. OSAS is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Website for OSAS and contact information: (213) 740-0776 (Phone), (213) 814-4618 (Video Phone), (213) 740-8216 (FAX), osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Statement on Emergency Preparedness/Course Continuity in a Crisis

In case of a declared emergency or 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, emergency.usc.edu.

Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health

213-740-9355 – 24/7 on call 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
Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)

213-740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call 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 equity.usc.edu
Title IX – 213-821-8298 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
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.

USC Campus Support and Intervention

213-821-4710 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
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 / Dept. of Public Safety

Emergency: 213-740-4321 – 24/7 on call
Non-emergency: 213-740-6000 — 24/7 on-call
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime.