

# USC School of Dramatic Arts

**THTR-365: Playwriting I**  
**Fall 2021—Tuesdays/Thursdays—4:00PM-5:50PM**  
**Location: GFS202**

**Instructor: Luis Alfaro, Associate Professor**  
**Office: JEF Upstairs #207A**  
**(Green building corner Jefferson and McClintock)**  
**Office Hours: By appointment/walk in (call first)**  
**Contact Info: [luisalfa@usc.edu](mailto:luisalfa@usc.edu)/SLACK/3233698306**

## **Course Description and Overview**

A twice-weekly workshop focusing on the essential elements of playwriting through weekly assignments, students' initiative, readings of scenes, and extensive classroom analysis and dramaturgy.

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will write their own material for the stage and read assigned text, as well as research, create and develop material on a weekly basis. Students will participate in the dramaturgy and assistance of their fellow student's work. The class will work together in the process of honing individual talents, through observation and participation. The focus is on learning how to write a play and engage in dramaturgical response using the landmark essay "Towards A Process of Critical Response" as a base for conversation and suggestion.

## **Goals**

Students will write an original one act play while exploring elements of a play, including conflict, subtext, and character development.

## **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

*The Presence of the Actor*

Joseph Chaikin

Publisher: Theatre Communications Group (TCG):

ISBN-10: 1559360305 / ISBN-13: 978-1559360302

*Towards a Process of Critical Response*

Liz Lerman

[professor will provide]

## **Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments**

This class is process oriented and it is assumed that finished works will be the result. Students who have completed the requirements of the class should expect a strong first draft, at the very least, of their work. If the Professor chooses to focus on elements within the play that might benefit the student more than a finished work, the student will not be penalized for an unfinished draft.

The class is split into THREE sections – conceptualization (weeks 1-7), production (weeks 8-12) presentation (weeks 13-15). The First Section will focus on numerous writing assignments and learning the skills of playwriting. The Second Section will focus on writing a one-act play. The Third Section will focus on the art of rewriting and editing.

The semester will be spent creating material, learning technique, and doing research. The course will focus on both finding and exploring the individual artist's voice, using autobiographical exercises to build on the authenticity of that voice, as well as focusing on topical or thematic material developed in collaboration with the class.

Assignments are presented in the classroom (online). Therefore, it is expected that you will bring your completed assignments to class and share them. Regular submission deadline will be Sundays at MIDNIGHT.

It is difficult to qualify an artwork, so the discipline and timing of meeting and turning in assignments is important towards your grade. Turning in assignments late, or not at all, will affect your grade.

**FOR SDA Assignments:** Students will be required to complete written “homework” assignments on a weekly basis. Students are expected to present their work in class weekly. Students will be expected to focus out of class time for the preparation of their performances.

Students must complete a final exam and to come to the final wrap-up class during the scheduled final exam period, to pass the course. You cannot leave early. If you have a conflicting final exam, you should let me know at the beginning of the semester. Class assignments will be regarded as written exams.

**FOR SDA GRADING CRITERIA:** *The grading guidelines shall clearly articulate the specific and expected standards which constitute work of excellent, good, and fair quality with regard to the course in question.*

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

### **Grading Breakdown**

**The SDA GUIDELINES on GRADING as published elsewhere in this handbook are:**

- *Each course shall contain at least three assignments, projects, exams, papers or exercises which shall be evaluated during the semester and which shall provide an analytical record of each student's progress in the course.*
- *Attendance shall be weighted at no more than 15% as per University Guidelines. Studio Courses must delineate how participation will be graded (in class exercises, scene study, etc.)*
- *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.*

School of Theatre classes use the University's grading 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- [Fail Grade for Graduate Credit]  
 67-70%=D+  
 66-64%=D  
 61-63%=D-

Criteria of evaluation will be based on the individual students' potential for learning and creation, and grades will not be competitively based, i.e. who writes the "best" work in the class.

Students are expected to show up on time; present assignments when they are due and actively participate with in-class dramaturgical analysis and discussion of fellow class work. Class time is impossible to make up - one must be there to participate. Reliability and enthusiasm count.

**Grade Evaluation**

Student Responsibility	Point Value	% of Grade
Weekly Class Dramaturgy	100	25%
Mid Term Exam	100	15%
Final Exam	100	25%
Character/Environment Assignment	100	10%
First Draft Play	100	25%

**Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown**

EDI @SDA: Professional Development/Mandatory EDI Training  
 Wednesday, September 15, 2021

All SDA students are welcome to join an interactive community building experience that explores how we integrate core values of equity, diversity, and inclusion into our educational and artistic journey at SDA. Competencies that will be covered will include, but not limited to, Anti-Racism as Everyday Practice; Equity-Mindedness (w/colleagues from USC Race & Equity Center); and Theatrical Intimacy & Building Cultures of Consent. More details will follow. NOTE:

All SDA classes will be cancelled to support involvement in this effort. We encourage all to participate.

#### Week #1 – *It's a Bust*

[Setting up the room. Creating a list of collective class agreements on how we want to work as a collaborative class. What are your personal goals for this course? What can you offer to the larger cohort of collaborators you will be working with? What are the ways you want to work in? How can we listen and respond to each other?]

#### Week #2 - *Let's Talk*

[Critical response process. "Towards a Process of Critical Response" by Liz Lerman.

Step One: *Statements of Meaning* - Responder's state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed. An affirmation/The Pop/What did you like?

Step Two: *Artist as Questioner* – What were you hearing? Showing my cards.

Step Three: *Neutral Questions* - Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. Criticism in the form of a question.

Taking the trust walk with a partner in the class. Interviewing them. Writing your partners story in a monologue.]

#### Week #3 – *Tension & Metaphor*

[Presentation of partner monologue. Tension – partner up and write a scene in which each one of you has a need/want objective/intention. Build the scene together using only one-line responses back and forth on the same page. Assignment: "Children's Story", using metaphor to understand the poetry in your play. Write a children's story for a five-year old about a relationship you recently destroyed, something complicated that allows metaphor to do allow complication and simplicity at the same time.]

#### Week #4 – *Environment & Dramaturges*

[Presentation of children's stories. Assigning our dramaturgy partners. Pair up with one other person in the class who will lead your dramaturgy sessions and be your creative partner for the rest of the semester. Assignment: "Blueprint", draw a blueprint of the neighborhood you call home. Label two areas with the following – heart of the neighborhood, scariest place in the neighborhood. Write a memory about either, at least a page long, thinking in detail, both physical and emotional.]

#### Week #5 – *Character in Action*

[Presentation of the Blueprint exercise. Assignment: "The Pitch", tell your partner your idea for a one-act play. What do you want to say, how do you want to say it? Assignment: Write a monologue in which your character rants on something of utmost importance to you. Think of sustaining an emotion and how to be consistent in the piece.]

#### Week #6 – *Character & Pitching*

[Introducing your first piece for the class, critical response session led by your partner.  
Assignment: “Unpack”, add at least one full page to your piece. Where do you need to further a thought or explain a concept or idea? What is missing? Take the age exercise, cut in half, and write a story about yourself.]

*Week #7 – Learning from Others*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Breaking into smaller groups to focus on details of your scenes and how we can improve them.]

*Week #8 – Getting to the Core*

[Writing the one-act, challenges, and successes. Talking about obstacles in class setting. Getting exercises to help. What is missing in your work?]

*Week #9 – Getting a draft done*

[What does it take to drive the piece, be surprising, authentic, and theatrical? Working on your character’s voice.]

*Week #10 – Finishing up the first draft*

[Sending your first draft to your partner. Letting your partner offer a written response. Thinking about the elements that are both exciting and challenging. What is still missing in the piece?]

*Week #11 – turning in that first draft*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Can we use this week just to focus on character? Motivations/Actions.]

*Week #12 – Rewriting exercises*

Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Can we use this week just to focus on start? What are elements of your story that need to be unpacked?]

*Week #13 – Rewriting exercises*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Time to think about form/structure/layout.]

*Week #14 – Rewriting exercises*

[Continue group dramaturgy session, led by partners. Talking about you the whole of our piece to the class.]

*Week #15 – Getting it in.*

[Yay, you did it or Boo, you didn’t... Let’s examine the work collectively. How did we do as a group? Where did we find inspiration in each other or as a collective?]

**Final Examination Date:**

Thursday, December 9, 2021, from 4:30PM-6:30PM in GFS202

**NOTE:** All undergraduate classes must meet for the Final Examination as established by the University. You may not hold your final examination on the last day of classes.

### **Academic Calendar/Holidays**

First Day of Class, Wednesday, August 25, 2021

Labor Day, Monday, September 6, 2021

Mandatory EDI Training, Wednesday, September 15, 2021

Fall Recess, Thursday & Friday, October 14 & 15, 2021

Thanksgiving Break, Wednesday-Sunday, November 24-28, 2021

Last Day of Class, Friday, December 3, 2021

### **SDA PRODUCTIONS, ISPS, AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

SDA productions, ISPs and Extracurricular Activities\* will 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.

### **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, <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 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 me (or to TA) 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 (Vidoe Phone), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) [ability@usc.edu](mailto: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.

### **Health and Participation in Class**

You are expected to complete your Trojan Check screener daily and, as your instructor, I may ask you to show your daily screening in class. Your health and safety, and the health and safety of your peers, are my top priorities. 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. My hope is that if you are feeling ill or if you have been exposed to someone with the virus, you will 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/>).

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### **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>

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### **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.symlicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symlicity.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 Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776*

<https://osas.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.

**Luis Alfaro** is a Chicano playwright born and raised blocks from USC in the Pico-Union district of downtown Los Angeles.

Luis is the Associate Artistic Director of Center Theatre Group, the resident theatre company of the Music Center of Los Angeles County, home of the Mark Taper Forum, Ahmanson Theatre and Kirk Douglas Theater.

Luis is the recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, popularly known as a “genius grant,” awarded to people who have demonstrated expertise and exceptional creativity in their respective fields.

He has also received recognition from; the PEN America/Laura Pels International Foundation Theater Award for a Master Dramatist; United States Artist Fellowship; Ford Foundation’s Art of Change Fellowship; Joyce Foundation Fellowship; Mellon Foundation Fellowship, and the Annenberg Artist-in-Residence for the city of Santa Monica; among others. He is the only playwright to have received two Kennedy Center ‘Fund for New American Play’ awards in the same year.

Luis spent six seasons as the inaugural Playwright-in-Residence of the ninety-year-old Oregon Shakespeare Festival (2013-2019); a member of the Playwright’s Ensemble at Chicago’s Victory Gardens Theatre (2013-2020); a resident artist at the Mark Taper Forum (1995-2005); an inaugural member of the Latinx Playwrights ‘Circle of Imaginistas’ at the Los Angeles Theatre Center (2021). and has worked with the Ojai Playwrights Conference since 2002.

His plays and performances include *Electricidad*, *Oedipus El Rey*, *Mojada*, *Delano*, *Body of Faith*, *Straight as a Line*, and have been seen at regional theatres throughout the United States, Latin America, Canada and Europe.

Luis spent over two decades in the Los Angeles Poetry and Performance Art communities.

He is an Associate Professor with tenure at the University of Southern California (USC). Previously, he taught at California Institute of the Arts (Cal-Arts), and in the Writers Program at UCLA Extension.

He has an Emmy-nominated short film, *Chicanismo* (Best Experimental Film, San Antonio CineFestival, Best Short, CineAccion San Francisco) and an award-winning recording, *down town*, on SST/New Alliance Records (Best Spoken-Word Release, National Association of Independent Record Distributors).