

THTR 322– Improv 2: Advanced Improv
2 Units
Spring 2023 – Thursdays – 3-5:50pm
Location: PED 202

Instructor: Nick Massouh (he/him)
Email:
Office Hours: By appointment.

Course Description

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

In this workshop course, students will continue the study of the rules and structure of improvised comedy scene work, exploring the use of improv as a tool for performance, writing, and storytelling in general, and improv as a performance art in and of itself. Though the class will encourage a comedic atmosphere, rather than pushing the need to "be funny," the class will embrace relationship and character commitment as the road to successful comedy. Students will amass a body of characters and techniques, a positive mindset for the collaborative and creative process, and a sense of the importance of braveness, boldness, and discipline to carry into their personal, professional, and performance lives.

Prerequisites: THTR 101 or THTR 122

Learning Objectives

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

1. Apply the fundamentals of improv and performance fluently
2. Assess their own performance work, and others' performance work, with the intent of growth
3. Create innovative applications of the artform and study of improv
4. Generate varied comedic characters
5. Perform a wide range of improvised formats and techniques with confidence

"I'm not funny. What I am is brave." – Lucille Ball

Course Notes

Due to the collaborative, experiential, and performative nature of improv, you must attend class live and in-person (medical status withstanding).

You may also be expected to meet and rehearse with your fellow improvisers outside of class.

Communication

Please email me at massouh@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 Reading

- *How to Be the Greatest Improviser on Earth* by Will Hines (available at USC Bookstore or bookstore of your choice)
- PDFs and/or links throughout the semester. All readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Required Viewing

Students are required to attend at least one live improv show of your choice, and turn in a written response to the show.

Supplemental Reading

- *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deveare Smith
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* by Ian Roberts & Matt Walsh
- *Improvisation for the Theatre* by Viola Spolin
- *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone
- *Improv Nation: How We Made A Great American Art* by Sam Wasson
- *Life Unscripted: Using Improv Principles to Get Unstuck, Boost Confidence, and Transform Your Life* by Jeff Katzmann, MD and Dan O'Connor

Recommended Viewing

- A variety of live improv shows, especially formats with which you are less familiar
- Improvised (or semi-scripted) movies and television, such as Christopher Guest-directed movies, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Bajillion Dollar Properties*, *The League*, *Reno 911*, among others
- Improvised character podcasts such as *Comedy Bang Bang*, *The Hills of Baldwin*, *Spontaneanation*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus*, among others
- *Whose Line Is It Anyway* episodes
- *Middleditch & Schwartz*

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.

- 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.
- Warm-Up Leader – Each student will lead the class in an improv "warm-up" that may focus on the concepts of focus, release, playfulness, ensemble-building, imagination, quick thinking, fearlessness, etc. Dates will be assigned. Warm-Up Leaders must be prepared and ready on the specified day.
- Midterm: "Four Through The Door" – You will participate in an extended improvised character exercise called "Four Through the Door," with the goals of experiencing creativity, stamina, and focus. Specific instructions will be discussed in class.
- 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. You are encouraged to see a type or format of improv with which you are less familiar. You are encouraged to share information about improv shows (this might include online improv shows) with the class.
- Ensemble Creation – You will be randomly grouped into ensembles of 3-4 students. Together you will create and rehearse (outside of class) a short improv performance in the format of the groups choosing. You will also write a one page written reflection on your experience.
- Final Workshop – As an ensemble, you will create, plan, produce and perform in a full workshop improv show. The workshop show is scheduled for April 27 and is mandatory.
- Final: Character Interview – Using the skills learned over the course of the semester, you will participate in an audition-style improvised character interview. Specific instructions will be discussed in class.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	% of Grade
In-class exercises — presence, focus, attitude, willingness (2/class)	28
Self-Reflections (6 points each)	12
Warm-up Leader	5
Four Through the Door (midterm)	10
Live Improv Show Response (written)	10
Ensemble Creation (+ written reflection)	10
Final Workshop — Skill level, growth, commitment, application of learned techniques	20
Final Character Interview	5
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 me as the instructor to offer any feedback on the course.

Attendance

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

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, with Camera On. I will not open the Zoom classroom unless you notify me via email before class begins. Travel and other activities are not grounds for attending via Zoom.

Extracurricular activities do not excuse you from class work. (Activities that have been officially sanctioned by the larger university are exempt, with pre-submitted official documentation. See SDA Statement on Productions, ISPs, and Extra-Curricular Commitments below.)

Classroom Norms

- Devices – Engagement with cell phones and other electronic devices during class is prohibited. Cell phones should be left on silent in your backpack/bag (not pocket), away from your work in class. This is to encourage your focus, presence, and respect to your peers. Use of cell phones in class will negatively affect your in-class activity points for the day.
- Attire – Please wear clothing in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way. No flip flops or open toes shoes. 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 break 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 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.

"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.

Every class will begin with group warm-ups.

Week	Date	Topics/ Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
WEEK ONE	1/12	Welcome/Introductions. Begin ensemble work. Syllabus review. Review rules of Improv. Begin scene work.		Opening Reflection. 500+ words on: What draws you to improv? What do you hope to get out of this class? What personal traits do you feel help you with improv/ performing and what might hold you back? What are your strategies for working through that?
WEEK TWO	1/19	Tenets/Basics of Improv. Continue to review improv foundations. Games/ exercises to support basic improv structure.		Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> , chapters 'Preface,' 'Introduction,' 'Some Terms,' 'Be Present,' 'Be Changeable' and 'Fight Well.'

Week	Date	Topics/ Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
WEEK THREE	1/26	Begin Character Work. Continue to review improv foundations, with emphasis on longer scene work. Begin character exploration. Schedule Warm-Up Leaders.	Opening Reflection, posted to Blackboard before 3pm. Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> (chapters 'Preface' through 'Fight Well') for discussion.	Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> , chapters 'Be Brave,' 'Top of the Scene,' 'Difficult People' and 'Be Authentic.'
WEEK FOUR	2/2	Physicality/Voice Exploration. Character work continued, including spectrum of reality work. Practice open scenes, filling in the details of character, location, story, etc. Warm-up Leaders begin.	Warm-Up Leaders begin — be ready for your assigned week. Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> (chapters 'Be Brave' through 'Be Authentic') for discussion.	Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> , chapters 'Be Funny,' 'Be Healthy,' 'Thoughts on Conventions and Forms' and 'Final Thoughts.'
WEEK FIVE	2/9	Deeper scene work and presence work.	Read <i>How To Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth</i> (chapters 'Be Funny' through 'Final Thoughts' for discussion.	Bring one costume piece.
WEEK SIX	2/16	Improvised Monologue presentation. Further character work within scenes.	Bring one costume piece.	
WEEK SEVEN	2/23	Character Work/Scene Work. Continuation of character work in scenes. Prep for midterm.		Prep for midterm — solo character work.
WEEK EIGHT	3/2	MIDTERM (part 1): Improvised character exercise "Four Through the Door."	Midterm Performance	Prep for midterm — solo character work.
WEEK NINE	3/9	MIDTERM (part 2): Improvised character exercise "Four Through the Door."	Midterm Performance	
SPRING BREAK!				
WEEK TEN	3/23	Improv Types. Introduction to Improv types — discuss and explore, short-forms, long-forms, narrative, genre, alt, etc.		Written Response to Live Improv Show, unfamiliar genre strongly encouraged. Min. 600 words, prompts posted on Blackboard.
WEEK ELEVEN	3/30	Discuss attended shows. Improv type exploration, continued.	Written Response to Live Improv Show, posted to Blackboard before 3pm.	Prepare and plan presentation and written explanation of original improv format/game for performance purposes.
WEEK TWELVE	4/6	Ensemble creation presentations begin.	Present Original Improv Format/Games. Written explanation.	

Week	Date	Topics/ Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
WEEK THIRTEEN	4/13	Ensemble creation presentations continued. Catch-up and coverage as needed.	Present Original Improv Format/Games. Written explanation.	
WEEK FOURTEEN	4/20	Review and rehearse games/formats. Rehearse. Establish show list and callers. Learning Experience Evaluations.		Prepare for Final Workshop.
WEEK FIFTEEN	4/27	Final Workshop — 4:30pm — details TBD.	FINAL WORKSHOP READY TO GO.	Final Reflection.
FINAL	Tues 5/9 2-4pm	Discuss workshop. Character interviews.	Final reflection, due by 11:59pm, posted to Blackboard. Prompts TBD.	

*"Because what else are we going to do? Say no?
Say no to an opportunity that may be slightly out of our comfort zone?
Quiet our voice because we are worried it is not perfect?
I believe great people do things before they are ready." – Amy Poehler*

SDA Statements On...

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 are exempt. You must submit official documentation to your professor regarding your participation in an event prior to your absence.)

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>

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theater Consent Culture

Through our pluralistic approach of diverse pedagogies, methodologies, ideologies, and modalities of artistic expression, we invite (engage) and challenge students to expand their breadth and depth of knowledge, complexity, and range of the human experience. Even though we nurture, guide, and challenge our students to embrace the unknown or unfamiliar and step outside of their comfort zones through storytelling/art, we aim to practice effective strategies and offer tools to students mindful of their physical, psychological, social, and emotional wellbeing. In alignment with professional and industry standards, we will integrate core principles and techniques of Intimacy in Theater and Building Cultures of Affirmative Consent. This will provide agency, offer resources and support to the teachers, students, directors, and staff to establish healthy boundaries of consent when working on material that is physically, intimately, or emotionally charged content in both the classroom and production.

Communication Agreements

It is important that we not only perform improv with respect and grace for our scene partners, but that we talk about the experience with the same respect. When we discuss the work, we agree to the following principles.

The Five (and a Half) Agreements

1. Address access needs. (let others know what you need so you can be accommodated or feel free to make yourself more comfortable if you need to, e.g. dimming the lights and screen if you have a migraine during a Zoom call)

2. Address intent vs. impact. (What you meant is not always what comes across, and it's important to let others know the impact that they had on you. Feel free to say "ouch" in the moment and it can be addressed in that moment or a later time)

3. Use "I" statements to speak from your own experience. (Let others know where you're coming from and be willing to share your feelings, but don't try to control someone else's narrative).

4. Speaking "in draft" because we're all learning and revising ourselves and our views. (Remember that we all have room to grow not just as artists, but as people)

5. Assume best intentions. (We all love each other, so assume that people don't intend harm even though sometimes people who love each other accidentally hurt each other.)

5b. Don't be an a-hole.

Questions you can ask yourself:

1. Am I acting in defensiveness? It's often hard to hear that you've hurt someone and our first instinct is to deny and blame; be aware of that tendency to be defensive.

2. Who is benefitting in this story? We all want to be the heroes of our own stories, so is it possible that we have blindsides to our own foibles that create uneven dynamics or tough situations? Be aware of times when you are trying to "win".

3. What can I do to make this a space where people can fail boldly? We can only work as an ensemble if we all feel safe enough to be vulnerable and fail, what can we do to help ourselves feel safe but to create that feeling of safety for others?

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 // Non-emergency: 213-740-6000
dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu
Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime.