

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 202: The Fundamentals of Comedy
2 Units
Spring 2023 — Tuesdays — 2-4:50pm
Location: PED 207

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers
Email: kqeggers@usc.edu
Office: JEF 204
Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/my/kirstin.sda>
Office Hours: By appointment

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, performance, 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, you must attend class live and in-person (medical status withstanding).

You will also be expected to meet and rehearse with your classmates outside of class.

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.

You will occasionally need to print scripts — please be prepared with printing capability.

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.

Selections 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, vulture.com and ranker.com for suggestions)
- Current or historical comedy television of your choice. (Check out essential comedy television lists on rottentomatoes.com, indiewire.com and 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*, CNN's *The History of Comedy*, *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

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 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, a 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 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 out loud, etc. It should not be something you created. Be prepared to send a link or share your laptop. 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 Activities – 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

Assignment	% of Grade
Final Project Presentation	15
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

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 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

Being absent, late, or leaving early disturbs the important ensemble nature of this class, and in-class activity points will be deducted. You must be present and ready to work at the start of each class.

However, your health and the health of our community eclipses all! If your Covid-19 (or other virus) 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 scenarios 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-toed shoes. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged.
- **Eating** — Open food and drink is not permitted in any SDA classroom. Absolutely no chewing gum, please dispose of before class.
- **Break** — We will likely take one break, at around 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.

"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 10	Welcome/Introductions. Syllabus and expectations review. Our thoughts on and relationship to Comedy. 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. Read chapter 1 of <i>Hal</i> , posted on Blackboard. Read article "The rise and fall of cancel culture in comedy," posted on Blackboard.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
2	Tues Jan 17	Discussion and exercises on Comedy Theories: (Incongruity, Relief, Superiority, et al). Comedy terms overview. Personal comedy share. Discussion and exercises on Comedy Acting Tools. Begin improv & reaction work.	Read for discussion: Chapter 1 of <i>Ha!</i> & LA Times article. Personal comedy share.	Read chapter 3 of <i>The Comic Toolbox</i> , posted on Blackboard. Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
3	Tues Jan 24	Improv & reaction work. 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.
4	Tues Jan 31	Basic Rules for the Comic Actor: From body to script. Scriptwork.		Read chapters 1-3, <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i> , posted on Blackboard.
5	Tues Feb 7	Discussion and exercises on Comedic characters. Discussion and exercises on Comedy Premises/Plots. Begin open scene work in pairs.	Read for discussion: Chapters 1-3 of <i>The Eight Characters of Comedy</i>	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse/plan comedy open scene.
6	Tues Feb 14	Open scene work.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Rehearse comedy open scene.
7	Tues Feb 21	PHYSICAL COMEDY/ CLOWNING with guest teacher Zach Steel.		Final Rehearsal comedy open scene.
8	Tues Feb 28	Midterm: present open scenes. Introduction to comedy types and mediums.	MIDTERM: Present open scenes. Written component due before class.	
9	Tues Mar 7	COMEDY ANIMATION with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
SPRING BREAK!				
10	Tues Mar 21	SKETCH COMEDY.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
11	Tue Mar 28	STAND-UP COMEDY with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
12	Tue Apr 4	SITCOMS with guest professional.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
13	Tue Apr 11	Pitch Final Project. Assign collaboration support. Final project discussion/rehearsal.		Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment.
14	Tue Apr 18	Final project draft due/rehearsal. Notes.	Final project draft due.	Notebook: Creative/Consumption Assignment. Compile all Comedy Notebook assignments for submission.
15	Tue Apr 25	Learning Experience Evaluations. Final prep for final project.	Final Notebooks Due! All creative assignments and consumption reflections.	
FINAL	THURSDAY MAY 4 – 2-4pm	Final Presentation of Final Comedy Project (Comedy Fest!)		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

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.

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.