

School of Cinematic Arts
The John Wells Division of Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 404
Section 19311
Foundations of Comedy
Fall 2023
(2.0 Units)
Monday 7pm - 10pm
SCI 106

Instructor: F. J. Pratt fjpratt@usc.edu
Office Hours: By Appointment

DA: Jamie Wolpert (jwolpert@usc.edu)

Please contact Jamie for any course questions

“The Practical Foundations of Comedy” is designed as a gateway course to a specific curricular pathway through the program of the School of Cinematic Arts known as USC Comedy.

Course Objective—Comedy, popular though it is, has never held the status of pure Drama as an art form. Perhaps the very nature of Comedy belies its serious study, e.g., how to break down the campfire scene from Blazing Saddles or the “Master of My Own Domain” episode from Seinfeld. That said, it is built on the same foundation of human conflict and irony as Drama, but it veers off to expose and exploit the cosmic absurdity present.

It is time to give the study of Comedy its due.

It is the premise of this course that learning the genealogy (bloodlines), theory and applications of Comedy is, in fact, directly applicable to the making of Comedy, which is the practical goal.

Many musicians can't read music notation and have no schooling in music theory. Still, it is widely accepted that the learning of music theory can only broaden a musician's range. The same is true of the art of making Comedy.

Our studies will demonstrate that the timeless targets and concerns of Comedy are alive in our most contemporary expressions of Humor and need to be explored by anyone serious about comedy.

Course Description and Goals:

This course will be lecture and discussion based. Films, television series, standup acts and other materials will be used as illustration. Readings relevant to the subject will be recommended.

We will discuss why something is taken to be funny. We will explore where, why and how Writers, Actors, Directors and Stand-Ups throughout history have looked to find humor. We will examine the techniques they have employed to capture the funny and conjure the laugh.

Our goal will be to understand why something is funny. We will consider Comedy in all its forms, physical, verbal, visual, written, and transformational. We will study the nature and purpose of laughter...and if all goes as planned, we will create laughter.

NOTE: There will be 8 brief writing assignments for the semester. 4 will be due on Week #8 and other 4 will be due Finals Week. (They must be uploaded to Blackboard) I will get into the nature of these assignments in our first class. Don't sweat it... these will be fun assignments!

COURSE SCHEDULE - WEEKS OF CLASS

WEEK ONE – AUG. 21st - INTRODUCTION: COMEDY IS CHARACTERS.

Introduction, course objectives. Overviews: The historical significance of comedy. The importance of character conflict in mining comedy. Will screen: "WAITING FOR GUFFMAN"

Assignment—Comedic Influences - Blackboard entry including favorite comedy movie, sitcom series, stand up artist.

WEEK TWO – AUGUST 28th - INCONGRUITY

The Macro Lecture---Comedy Axioms, Context and Structure. Breakdown of Comedic Character. The funny in Fear.

Assignment: Create a Comic Protagonist using the Character Breakdown demonstrated in class. (Due in Week 3 class)

WEEK THREE – SEPTEMBER 4th : Labor Day: No class... but make a friend laugh on that day!

WEEK FOUR – SEPTEMBER 11th : “THE OUTSIDER”— DIVERSITY AND THE PERSONAL ROOTS OF COMIC EXPRESSION

Exploring Comedy as created in reaction to the established society. How various groups and cultures, traditionally outside the mainstream, stamped their mark on American Humor.

Guest Speaker: Prof. Robert Townsend (Writer/Director, Hollywood Shuffle., Director Eddie Murphy: Raw)

WEEK FIVE— SEPTEMBER 18th: THE ART OF PHYSICAL COMEDY
Silent movies. Slapstick. The physical expression of Comedy. Will screen: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel & Hardy and contemporary artists.

Assignment: Create a Comic Antagonist to your Protagonist using the same Character Breakdown. (Due in Week 6 class--Sept. 26)

WEEK SIX– SEPTEMBER 25th--- LOVE & LAUGHS -- ROMANTIC COMEDY

Misinformation, misunderstanding, sexual chemistry. Romcoms as a reflection of contemporary society. Screwball Comedies. How the romantic dynamics between men and women have changed with the times. Romcom conventions. Will screen: “THE LADY EVE”.

WEEK SEVEN – OCTOBER 2nd – THE BUILDING OF THE ROMANTIC COMEDY. We discuss how a romantic comedy is made from script, production and casting. **GUEST LECTURER: GIL JUNGER, Director of “10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU”.**

WEEK EIGHT---OCTOBER 9th -- THE ANATOMY OF COMEDY – PROVEN THEORIES AND FAWLTY LOGIC

Analysis of comic expression. Timing. British comedy. Monty Python, The Goon Show, Peter Sellers, Cook & Moore, Rowan Atkinson. Will screen: BLACK ADDER.

Assignment: Mid-Term Papers and uploaded to Blackboard. Due in Week 8 class— (Details to follow)

WEEK NINE – OCTOBER 16th -- FROM LUCY AND MARY TO ISSA AND PHOEBE -THE ROOTS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION COMEDY - PART 1

Transition of Sitcom from radio to TV. The rise of Multi-camera comedies. Dynamics in families and marriages. Various sitcom camps: i.e. Norman Lear, MTM, Garry Marshall. Contrast between ‘50s and ‘60s/70s. The maturation of the Form. Will screen: “THE HONEYMOONERS”, “DICK VAN DYKE SHOW”, “ALL IN THE FAMILY”, “EVERYBODY LOVES RAYMOND,”

WEEK TEN – OCTOBER 23rd -- FROM LUCY AND MARY TO ISSA AND PHOEBE -THE ROOTS AND DEVELOPMENT OF SITUATION COMEDY - PART 2

The maturation of the Form from Traditional to the Absurd. Guest Speakers: Mike Platt & Barry Safchik, Executive Producers of “GRACE & FRANKIE” and “THE GAME”. Will screen: 30 ROCK, INSECURE, FLEABAG

WEEK ELEVEN – OCTOBER 30tht — BLACK COMEDY – IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

Anarchy, dark themes, political themes, subversive themes, pushing the bounds of good taste, challenging society and political correctness. Will screen: “KING OF COMEDY”

WEEK TWELVE – NOVEMBER 6th -- STAND UP COMEDY – YOU’VE BEEN A WONDERFUL AUDIENCE

Vaudeville, club comics, the evolution of stand-up. Different styles. Political comedians. Groundbreaking comedians. Female Artists. Guest: TBA. Will screen: RICHARD PRYOR appearances and TAYLOR TOMLINSON’s latest Netflix special.

WEEK THIRTEEN – NOVEMBER 13th -- SKETCH COMEDY – WITH OR WITHOUT A SCRIPT

Telling comic story in only a few minutes. Sketch Comedy as it’s served Broadway, TV variety shows, late night variety shows and now the Web. Will screen: Clips from SNL, CAROL BURNETT SHOW, SCTV, IN LIVING COLOR. Improvisation: writing sketch comedy on your feet. Rules of improvisation. Class exercises.

WEEK FOURTEEN – NOVEMBER 20th – ANIMATION

The many comedic styles and functions of Animation. The practice of an animated Comedy series. Guest Speaker: Emmy winner from Robot/Chicken: KEVIN SHINICK

WEEK FIFTEEN – NOVEMBER 27th – WHY WE NEED COMEDY!

Comedy heals our ills when we need it most. How can you explain the resurgence of “Friends” and “The Office” during the science fiction world we lived in called Covid? Would “Ted Lasso” had the success if we were not in dire need of something kind and gentle? I’m not so sure. They say food and water is necessary for survival... well, I would throw in comedy. I’m serious! For those non-performer types... you can lead a life filled with comedy. We will show you!

FINALS WEEK - TBD - FINAL EXAM

NOTE: The weekly schedule is subject to change depending on availability of the guests and the instructor's discretion. Items to be screened may also change.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Class attendance is mandatory and students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Tardiness is unprofessional and disrespectful to the class. Two late arrivals equal one full absence. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by a half grade point (Ex. A to A-) Any further unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered another two thirds of a point (ex: B to a C+) for each absence

Excused absences can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on.

If you find you must miss class due to personal emergency or personal crisis, please contact your professor as soon as possible so they can assist you in finding the appropriate University care and guidance. Your health and well-being are of utmost importance to the Wells Writing Division and to your Faculty.

GRADING---

Grading breakdown:

Participation: 10% (in class responses, in class participatory exercises, Blackboard submissions.)

2 Character Breakdowns: 20%

Mid-Term: 30% take home paper

Final Exam: 40%

As per Writing Division policy the following is a breakdown of numeric grade to letter grade:

A 100% to 94% A- 93% to 90% B+ 89% to 87% B 86% to 83% B- 82% to 80% C+ 79% to 77%

Expectation of Professionalism:

C 76% to 73% C- 72% to 70% D+ 69% to 67% D 66% to 63% D- 62% to 60%

F 59%

All material is expected to be turned in on time and in the proper format. Assignments will be penalized for grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, format mistakes, and typos. Please proof your assignment prior to submission.

Participation Breakdown--

As mentioned above, this class is jumbo sized. There are more than a hundred and forty of you and only three at the lectern. We really want to hear from you, and we also have a ton of great material we want to get to. Some weeks we might not get to hear every comment or show every clip we'd like to.

That's why we're going to continue the conversation on Blackboard.

Any clip we show from online sources will be available for you to view, comment on, and share on Blackboard. We'll also try to post "deep cuts"-- material to help you dig deeper into a topic, if it interests you.

Your course participation grade-- 10% of your final average-- will be mainly determined by your participation in the conversation on Facebook. (Although your participation in the lecture discussion will always be duly noted.)

At the Midterm, you'll submit a summary of your Blackboard submissions. A printed summary with five or more original submissions gets you five points. Four or fewer get you two points. An excuse as to why you forgot to print it gets you no points. (Translated to Nike: Just do it!)

On the last day of class, you'll do the same: five or more new posts gets you the remaining five points, four or fewer is worth two, and "sorry, I forgot..." is worth zilch.

If we do this right, we'll end this course with more than a thousand pieces of content to look over, share, and discuss. (That's probably an inflated figure, but an impressive one.)

Recommended Reading --

John Vorhaus – The Comic Toolbox

Dan O'Shannon – What Are You Laughing At?

Ken Levine – Blog: KenLevine.blogspot.com

Sigmund Freud-Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious Dick

Gregory--Autobiography

Henri Bergson – Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic Tina Fey

– Bossypants (Best Book Cover ever!)

Marc Maron – Attempting Normal

Andy Goldberg – Improv Comedy

(NOTE: If there are books or articles about Comedy that you would like to suggest please mention them in class or on Blackboard)

Office Hours—Available anytime by appointment.

LAPTOP POLICY: Once again, this is a large lecture style class. That is why we require laptops (and smart phones) to be turned off and put away while the lecture and/or discussion, or film is in progress. To turn your attention to anything but the work at hand is disrespectful, not to mention un-professional. The highlights of each class will be posted on Blackboard during the week after the session.

A.I. Policy

The uses of generative Artificial Intelligence to create narrative continue to evolve throughout the media workplace. However, it is vital that before relying on AI to assist in aspects of storytelling that we learn to source and execute our work via our own unique imagination.

Creating, analytical, and critical thinking skills are part of the learning outcomes of this course. All assignments should be prepared by the student working individually or in groups. Students may not have another person or entity complete any substantive portion of the assignment. Developing strong competencies in these areas will prepare you for a competitive workplace. Therefore, using AI-generated tools is prohibited in this course, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC CONDUCT AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

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” [https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-](https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/)

[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>.

Support Systems:

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website:

<http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and micro-aggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response.

<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic.

<https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

PLEASE NOTE:

FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for

students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>
