

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 122: Improvisation and Theatre Games
2 Units
Fall 2024 – Thursdays – 12-1:50pm
Location: MCC 111

Instructor: Kirstin Eggers (she/her)
Email: kqeggers@usc.edu
Office: JEF 204
Zoom Office: <https://usc.zoom.us/j/kirstin.sda>
Office Hours: By appointment — schedule via email

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) every week, 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

Brightspace will be updated regularly with announcements, readings, etc. Please check often. Brightspace help for students is at studentbrightspacehelp.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 Brightspace.

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.

Optional Supplemental Readings

- *Letters to a Young Artist* by Anna Deavere Smith
- *Bossypants* by Tina Fey
- *How to Be the Greatest Improviser on Earth* by Will Hines
- *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

Optional Supplemental Viewing/Watching/Listening

- Live improv shows – there are several on-campus groups, and off-campus theatres; suggestions upon request
- 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*, *Murderville*, *Last One Standing*, among others
- Improv-centered podcasts such as *Comedy Bang Bang*, *The Hills of Baldwin*, *Improv Nerd*, *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 Brightspace 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, and ensemble support. You will receive 2 points per class, on weeks in which there is not already a graded assignment.

Note: There will be a make-up assignment available for no more than 4 in-class exercises points total, although this is not recommended, and should be used in extreme circumstances only.

- 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 Brightspace.
- Discussion – You will participate thoughtfully, respectfully and fully in discussions about readings, viewings, your own work, and other topics as they arise. Taking notes on your work/process and what you are learning is encouraged.

- Extended Team Improv (Midterm) – You will perform with teammates in an extended improv. Extended focus will be needed. Exact format to be announced.
- 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. Sharing of shows and group outings are encouraged!
- 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	Points
In-class exercises — presence, focus, attitude, willingness, ensemble support (2 pts/class without graded assignments)	16
Character Monologue (Family Member)— written and performed	6
Character Monologue (Stranger)— written and performed	6
Self-Reflections (7 points each)	14
Discussion	5
Live Improv Show Response	10
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 Brightspace 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 Brightspace within a week. If you fail to turn in an assignment, it will show on Brightspace Grade Center – I cannot follow up with you to ask about missing assignments.

Academic Integrity

The University of Southern California is foremost a learning community committed to fostering successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Academic misconduct is in contrast to the university's mission to educate students through a broad array of first-rank academic, professional, and extracurricular programs and includes any act of dishonesty in the submission of academic work (either in draft or final form).

This course will follow the expectations for academic integrity as stated in the [USC Student Handbook](#). All students are expected to submit assignments that are original work and prepared specifically for the course/section in this academic term. You may not submit work written by others or “recycle” work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s). Students suspected of engaging in academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Other violations of academic misconduct include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see the [student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Use of AI Generators

You may wish to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to meet with you to provide guidance with these tools during office hours or after class. However, all work in this course, both in-class and outside of class, is personal and/or creative and AI tools are most likely not appropriate in most scenarios. If you do choose to use it, please discuss with me, acknowledge your use, including notes at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.

Course Content Distribution and Synchronous Session Recordings Policies

USC has policies that prohibit recording and distribution of any synchronous and asynchronous course content outside of the learning environment. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

This includes filming or recording of instructor and/or classmates without the explicit permission of all involved.

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 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 (typically 1 point for lateness). You must be present and ready to work at the start of each class. In learning improv and theatre games, there is no comparable experience to being live in the room.

However, your health and the health of our community eclipses all. Do not attend class in-person if you have symptoms of a virus. If you are not sure, please wear a mask. Depending on the circumstances, there may be opportunity for a hybrid (zoom) classroom experience, and there may be opportunity for make-up Exercise work, up to 4 points.

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, laptops, tablets, and smart watches 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 and devices in class will negatively affect your in-class activity points for the day. Consider yourself untethered in this class. This is a strict policy.

- 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 – Open food and drink is not permitted in any SDA classroom. Absolutely no chewing gum, please dispose of before class.

- Break – We generally do not take an official break during class. Please be prepared to stay in the room and active as both a performer and audience member for the entire 110 minutes of class. 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 (i.e do not enter or leave the room while others are performing).

- 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.

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 29	Welcome/Introductions Introduction to warm-ups and theatre exercises. Begin ensemble and presence work. Syllabus review.		Read selections from <i>Bossypants</i> and <i>Letters to a Young Artist</i> .
2	Thu Sep 5	Tenets/Basics of Improv The Only Lecture — please take notes! Class boundaries discussion. "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 Brightspace.

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
3	Thu Sep 12	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 Brightspace before class.	
4	Thu Sep 19	Physicality & Voice Exploration Beginning character work with voice and physicality. 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.
5	Thu Sep 26	Perform 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!). 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 Oct 3	Perform Stranger monologues. Continuation of character work in scenes.	Perform Stranger Monologues.	
7	Thu Oct 10	FALL RECESS — NO CLASS		
8	Thu Oct 17	Review and Practice Improv Basics		Prepare mentally for Midterm — review rules of improv.
9	Thu Oct 24	<u>Midterm Exam Performance (Extended Team Improv)</u> In-class performance of to be-announced improv format, with ensemble as a whole.	Midterm (Extended Team Improv) Today	
10	Thu Oct 31	Discuss Midterm. Games: Character/Experts/Styles Learn and rehearse more "games" for performance, with emphasis on character, expert, and style games.		
11	Thu Nov 7	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 Brightspace.
12	Thu Nov 14	Discuss Live Shows we saw. Learn and rehearse more "games" for performance.	Written Response of Live Improv Show, posted on Brightspace before class.	

Week	Date	Topics/Daily Activities	Due Today	Homework
13	Thu Nov 21	Final Rehearsal for Final Improv Jam Together, determine final Improv Jam format.		Prepare mentally for Jam — review calling assignments, formats, rules. Invite guests?
14	Thu Nov 28	THANKSGIVING BREAK — NO CLASS		
15	Thu Dec 5	Final Improv Jam! Perform improv for each other, and possibly guests. *Learning Experience Evaluations must be completed before class.	Final Jam Today	Review first self-reflection.
FINAL	TUESDAY DEC 17 — 11am-1pm	Discuss Improv Jam, Postmortem. Possible watch playback. 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

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.

USC Statements on University Academic and Support Systems

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. The [Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the Financial Aid Office webpage for [undergraduate-](#) and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Support Systems:

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline consists of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX (EEO-TIX) - (213) 740-5086

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) 740-2500

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 740-0411

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

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion - (213) 740-2101

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

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) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.