

USC School of Dramatic Arts

THTR 527 63186D Writing the Pacific Rim: Global and Western Dramatic Writing

Fall 2024 Thursday 6 – 9:50 pm

Location: DMC 153 **Section** 63186D

Instructor: Paula Cizmar

Office Hours: Wed 2:30 - 4 pm; Tuesday Noon – 4 pm; please note that office hours are by appointment only; contact me via email or phone, at least 24 hours in advance. For appointments outside these hours, I am available by videoconference.

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ITHelp: USC Information Technology Services

<http://itservices.usc.edu>; School of Dramatic Arts – Mr. Prakash Shirke, Contact Info: shirke@usc.edu; 213.740.1288. MCC

Course Description

Catalogue description: THTR 527 An advanced script workshop that focuses on writing dramatically, utilizing the Pacific Rim and the Western United States as cultural sites of knowledge and as inspirations.

Thoughts from two Angeleno writers:

I'm a 48-year-old writer who can remember being a 10-year-old writer and who expects someday to be an 80-year-old writer. I'm also comfortably asocial — a hermit in the middle of Los Angeles — a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive.

– *Olivia Butler in a panel discussion filmed at UCLA, 2002.*

Language can explode from the tiniest impulse. Words are not thought, they're felt. They cut through space and make perfect sense without having to hesitate for the "meaning".

-- *Sam Shepard, "Language, Visualization and the Inner Library," The Drama Review, vol. 21, no. 4 (December 1977)*

Course Overview

Writing the Pacific Rim is a workshop focused on using place and the lore of a place as a starting point for drama. In this case, we're using the Pacific Rim—and a particular part of it at that: Los Angeles. For many factors, which we will research and discuss, Los Angeles is a complex city that is immense in size, diverse in population, and a microcosm of many of the triumphs and challenges that face the entire United States. Often, in LA, the challenges and triumphs emerge before the rest of the US is ready and/or aware. Often we're in the middle of something before we even recognize it ourselves. Often, the various neighborhoods and ethnicities go unnoticed—for so many reasons. Often, pop culture tells us what we are supposed to think about this place while neglecting to notice that we live in a desert terrain surrounded by mountains and ocean, a place that is so geographically spread out that several states could fit within our borders; LA is a sanctuary to newly arrived migrants, a place of escape for many pursuing a dream, a victim of climate change and extreme weather, a locale with heavy contrasts of haves and

have notes, a vast landscape of stories that many fail to see because they are unaware of the hidden pockets of humanity that are tucked into corners and cul-de-sacs of the seemingly endless neighborhoods. MFA writers will be challenged to be proactive in the class and develop a play that uses the hidden stories of Los Angeles as a foundation for exploration of character, story, human emotions, our shared future, etc. Consider: The Jet Propulsion Lab and the aerospace industry employ large numbers of people; during WWII people migrated here from various parts of the country to work in the war industries; there are over 200 languages spoken here; on Central Avenue jazz and the blues ruled; the tech industry has taken over wetlands and established Silicon Beach; the garment industry, among others, makes this a union town; earthquake scientists have gained a certain amount of celebrity due to the natural phenomena that occur here, etc. So much to look into! As we get to work, particular emphasis will be placed on establishing and maintaining empathy, especially when working on difficult and/or dangerous characters/topics, as well as using metaphor to deepen all that we do.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, participants will be able to:

- research the geography, history, and culture of a specific place;
- apply various strategies for story development and character creation;
- establish a tone for the play that mirrors the locale;
- establish the “lore” of the play and how this expands the characters’ journey;
- be open to working in a new way with fresh eyes and an open viewpoint;
- provide constructive feedback on character development and scenes;
- continue to grow in terms of process and skills.

The School of Dramatic Arts’ Dramatic Writing Program guidelines call for each student in playwriting courses to read at least seven plays as part of the course and to investigate them critically. You are encouraged, in particular, to read contemporary work. Plays will be suggested in class. The more you read, the more you will become aware of the diverse styles, voices, and structural forms open to you as a writer.

In descriptions of Nature one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you’ll have a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball.
– *Anton Chekhov in a letter to his brother.*

Special Note

All students enrolled in MFADW are required to attend program events. While some of these dates are not yet solidified, please put the times/dates in your calendar as soon as they are announced. Because we are monitoring professional development in every course that you take, and in the MFADW overall, your participation in these program events will have a direct impact on your annual review. Please make any and all travel plans for after the last of the New Works Festivals.

Additional Fuel

Please remember, throughout the course of the workshop, to keep reading and viewing—current and classic work, comedic and dramatic, realistic and non-. We will sometimes be traveling (both virtually and in real time) to various parts of the city. Get into the habit of looking at visual art and visiting museums: LACMA, MOCA, the Japanese American National Museum, the Getty, the Norton Simon, Museum of Latin American Art, California African American Museum, the Huntington Library, the Autry, etc. Expand your senses. Allow music to inspire and awaken emotions and images. During a focused creative effort it is important to be constantly refueled. The work of other artists from other media provides imaginative stimulation resulting in ideas, inspirations, and solutions to problems you might not have come to otherwise.

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Grading criteria: The quality of work for all components (see list under “Grading Breakdown”) is determined by the thoroughness of the effort, the continuing process, and the imagination displayed.

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

Excellent: A (4) = 100-94; A- (3.7) = 93-90

Good: B+ (3.3) = 89-86; B (3) = 85-84; B- (2.7) = 83-80

Acceptable: C+ (2.3) = 79-76; C (2) = 75-74; C- (1.7) = 73-70

Poor: D+ (1.3) = 69 – 66; D = 65-64 (1); D = 63 - 60 (0.7) = 60s; F (0) = 59 and below

Note: A minimum passing grade for graduate students is C.

- “Excellent” indicates that the student couples clear understanding of the class material with original and creative insight, as demonstrated by their work; “Good” means that the student demonstrates a clear understanding of the material and has done the work well; “Acceptable” indicates that the student demonstrates a general understanding of the material but with some gaps; “Poor” indicates that there are identifiable gaps in the student’s understanding of the class material; “Failure” is the result of the student not having completed his or her assignments coupled with poor understanding of the material.
- When the average falls between two grades, the final grade will be weighted toward the positive end of the scale for students whose attendance and participation in class have been good, and will be weighted toward the negative end of the scale for those with poor attendance and participation.

Grading Breakdown

Your grade will be based on multiple components: the research you have done on the place (including its history, culture, geography, etc); the creation of an inspiration/research presentation; the development of ideas based on stories and story threads you uncover; ongoing writing and revision; a draft of a play based on ideas from the Pacific Rim.

Please bear in mind that you earn your grade based on the timely completion of your work, plus the quality of your work. Late assignments are marked down due to missed deadline. Assignments are accepted only within one week of due date. After that, they are considered a missed assignment, which counts as zero. (Note: A late assignment is marked down one grade notch, approximately 5 points; i.e., an assignment that would have earned an A receives an A- for

missing the deadline; an assignment that would have earned a B+ receives a B for missing the deadline, etc.)

Components of the overall grade are weighted as follows:

Research Presentation	20 percent
Character Development	15 percent
Story Development	15 percent
Participation in Field Trips	15 percent
Ongoing Writing and Revision	20 percent
Draft of Play	15 percent
TOTAL	100 percent

Note: The University of Southern California has vast resources. The libraries not only have hard copies of books and research materials, but they also offer access to online archives, etc., including historical accounts of Los Angeles as it grew to become the city that it is. Further, there are Special Collections available to you, including Chicano studies writings, the Feuchtwanger papers, Alice in Wonderland archives, etc. There are institutes and foundations throughout the city that house materials from past residents of Los Angeles (including playwrights such as Brecht and scientists such as Nobel Prize winners from Cal Tech and the Jet Propulsion Lab); at the Natural History Museum across the street on Exhibition, there is an exhibit about how Los Angeles grew from a home to indigenous people to a multicultural settlement colonized by Spain to an agricultural center to a center for finance and innovation. Have fun diving into the various parts of the puzzle.

HINT: Keep a Creative Journal! This is an archive of your explorations for writing; it may include jottings off the top of your head, stuff from your Inspiration Board, research, ideas, resources for current and future writing, and exercises and raw material from class. NOTE: It's no longer necessary to keep an actual journal, on paper. Due to the proliferation of smart phone and tablet apps for storing notes, etc., the Creative Journal may now be electronic. But do keep one. It will make your writing so much easier!

Note: The SDA GUIDELINES on GRADING state that:

- *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. Under such exceptional circumstances, no late penalties will accrue.*

Additional Policies

This course is modeled along the lines of a professional, artistic workshop; thus, as a member of such a workshop, your participation is necessary not only for the development of your own work, but for the development of your colleagues' work as well. Theatre is a highly collaborative, community-oriented medium and play development is a key part of the life of a playwright. Indeed, in this class, one of our projects depends upon collaboration. Please honor your obligation to your colleagues' work and contribute to the discussion. Absences must be for reasons of illness or emergency and must be accompanied by a written explanation; in your

absence, please prepare the assigned work that is due and turn it in immediately upon return to the workshop.

Zoom Etiquette

If it becomes necessary to Zoom: "Netiquette," or "internet etiquette," is important for collaborative work. Please respect the following guidelines:

- Whenever possible, please use your computer to log-in to the class rather than your phone. This will help us with the quality of visuals and audio, plus it will present fewer problems when sharing screens.
- If you have technical issues during class, please contact: USC Information Technology Services <http://itservices.usc.edu>; School of Dramatic Arts – Mr. Prakash Shirke. Contact Info: shirke@usc.edu; 213.740.1288.
- Your camera must be on at all times, unless you are requested to hide video.
- Please attempt to log-in from an environment that does not have distracting background noise, such as pets, family members, machinery, music. If you find yourself in a situation with distracting noise, please use ear buds or headphones.
- When not speaking (for example, during a reading of a scene, when you are not playing a role), please mute your microphone. During discussions feel free to leave your mic on.
- Remember that you are in class, therefore behavior appropriate to class should be followed. Please do not walk around, leave the room, read, play games, etc. during class.
- You may use your devices for research that enhances the discussion during class, but please stay attuned to what is going on while engaged in research.
- Try to take turns speaking. Remember that Zoom creates problems when voices overlap.
- The chat box will be available to you to use during class, however please don't abuse it. For example, remember that everyone can see what you type in the chat. Therefore your comments should not contain private messages to another class member—which can be read in the saved chat. Also, try to use chat to enhance the discussion, rather than interrupt it.
- Remember: The class session is being recorded. (This includes the chat.)
- Be respectful of others at all times.
- Remember: We're all in this together. Now more than ever.

Sharing of Course Materials Outside of the Learning Environment

USC has a policy that 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).

Course Schedule

Aug 29 - Meet at Mercado La Paloma and begin the discussion/exploration of the place.

Sept 5 - Meet at the Gumbo Pot in the Farmer's Market to meet with David Ulin, editor of the anthology *Writing Los Angeles*.

Sept 12 – Attend LA Skins Fest – Bad Press (Visions and Voices)

Remainder of class includes:

LA Theatre makers as guest speakers

Performances of plays in the LA area

Brainstorming, writing and revising a Pacific Rim-LA script

REMINDER: Class materials, information, handouts, additional essays, source materials, etc., will be sent via email.

Art, like dreaming, is something so necessary to internal balance that people deprived of it go a little wacky. Art is the collective dreamplace, the reservoir of our deepest understandings and desires and hopes, as essential as water. In recognition of this fact, the marketplace offers us entertainment, hoping to replace the wild and forested interior of our souls with potted plastic plants. Just as we dream—whether we want to or not, whether we long for or fear our dreaming—people make art and are drawn to art. It's just something our psyches need, even in the most life-denying environments conceivable—drawings made with burnt matches on cigarette papers in the secret prisons of the Argentine junta, poetry carved with nails into the walls of the Angel Island immigrant detention center in San Francisco Bay, songs passed along in whispers from half-buried cellars in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto. Every vital social movement immediately begins to generate art—songs, poetry, posters, murals, novels—an outpouring of the creativity that people will create from even the smallest crumbs of hope.

—Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998), p. 129

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. 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 (Video Phone), (213) 740-8216 (FAX) 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 stay up to date with University policies on coronavirus, including screenings and testing, etc. The University sends out guidelines on a regular basis, and we must all expect things to change as the number and type of infections change. Your health and safety, and the health and safety of your peers, are my top priorities. If you are experiencing any symptoms of covid, 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 University health and safety instructions. If you test positive, if you are feeling ill, or if you have been exposed to someone with the virus, please stay home to protect others. SDA will work to assist you and help you continue to participate in class in some alternative way so that your education is not disrupted.

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, USC recommends that face coverings (masks) be worn indoors including in classrooms. I will be wearing a mask. As the semester proceeds, the recommendation may become a requirement. If it does, face coverings should cover your nose and mouth. Eating or drinking during class is prohibited because of the risk posed by airborne particles. 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/>).

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 and 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 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298
equity.usc.edu, 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.

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

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 - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, 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

Non-emergency assistance or information.