



CTPR 476
Section 18582D
Spring 2025

Directing The Comedic Scene

Units: 2

Wednesday: 6:00-9:50PM

Location: RZC Stage D

Professor: Robert Schiller

Office: SCA 408

Office Hours: By Appointment

Contact Info: rschiller@cinema.usc.edu

Student Assistant: Franco Vidal

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Instructors Statement

“Dying is easy, COMEDY is hard!”

A laugh is recognition of life’s imperfection. It signifies the acceptance of a compromise between what is, and what ought to be. A laugh is an involuntary, reflexive recognition of a truth or contradiction. The ability to negotiate with, and make peace with, existence through laughter is a uniquely human gift.

Fostering comic performance is the act of conjuring that reflexive laugh. The role of the director of comedy is like that of a conjurer. It is the director’s job to conjure the laugh. I believe that skill can be taught.

Learning Goals and Objectives

In this class you will learn that a good scene is far richer than you may have imagined. Even with two people sitting over a breakfast table - something must be happening, something important, something with emotional meaning. That “happening” is what we call the “emotional event” of the scene. Only scenes that have an emotional event are worth including in a dramatic narrative. Only such scenes are worth shooting.

In this class you will learn how to excavate a scene and uncover its emotional event. You will learn how to collaborate with actors, make them your partners in exploration, and enable them, through performance, to deliver the emotional event of the scene.

Directors will complete a variety of assignments during the semester, designed to increase awareness, sharpen the senses of seeing and listening, clarify what the director wants from the actor, explore methods of getting it, and recognize whether it has truly been achieved. Emphasis will be on the communication between the director and performer, and the textual analysis of dramatic scene work. Through analytical preparation coupled with class exercises and rehearsal, the director should learn to collaborate with actors

Although classes exist and many books have been written on writing comedy, few (if any) take up the challenges of directing comedy. There are those who do not believe that such a thing can be taught. Carmen Ghia, an outrageous character in Mel Brooks' "The Producers," says about comic aptitude: "Or you got it - or you ain't". It would seem that the majority of comedy practitioners are satisfied to leave the matter at that.

Aptitude is an asset in the study of any subject and this one is certainly no exception. The ability to "get" a joke, a sense of humor and of timing will be needed to fully benefit from our work together. There are underlying principles that pertain to comedy that can be studied and applied by all directors. This course will attempt to identify those principles and demonstrate their application.

Course Description

This is a course on the art of directorial interpretation. We focus on the dialogue scene, the director's work with actors, and the challenge of unlocking comedy from the text and in performance.

Students work with material not of their own creation, learning to shape a scene by breaking it down into component parts and uncovering its main event.

In addition, the course is designed to develop the director's ability to communicate effectively with actors in a way that brings forth their best work.

Finally, this workshop course will address the specific challenges of directing a comic narrative.

The scene is the basic unit of dramatic storytelling. The actor is the essential vehicle, carrying the narrative forward.

No matter how interesting the shots are or how sparkling the dialogue if the director does not identify, target and deliver the emotional payload of the scene - the "Event of the Scene" - the story will not move forward with emotional authority.

Likewise, no matter how good the other creative elements, unless the actors engage the audience as credible intriguing characters, the film will rarely succeed.

In class we explore the art of storytelling through the mounting and performance of the two-person scene.

Course Notes

Each student will be assigned a scene from 50/50, by Will Reiser to analyze, cast, explore through rehearsal and staging.

This is a workshop course - its subject is the process of directing. The assigned scene is a tool for learning. It is never to be considered a "product". It is our understanding that the work you present is "work in progress".

During the first five weeks we will explore methods of auditioning, casting, scene analysis and breakdown, rehearsing, staging and actor business. Also during these

weeks students will begin casting and rehearsing their scenes.

Each scene will be rehearsed outside of class and then brought into class for an in-class rehearsal. The director will then have the opportunity to repeat the process, rehearsing both outside and again in class, before presentation and critique.

Through this process of exploration, and trial and error, it is expected that the student will learn practical principles and apply them to directing actors and comedy.

More Class Notes/Details

Rehearsal:

Rehearsal is a critical tool in the making of comedy. This class will teach rehearsal technique and sharpen the students' appreciation for the use of rehearsal in the finding and rendering of comedy.

Students are required to rehearse for **NO LESS THAN FOUR HOURS** outside of class before bringing work into class. You may not bring an unrehearsed actor to class.

If an actor presents you with a sudden conflict that makes them unavailable to rehearse in class you must notify the instructor and your SA immediately. You may not bring a "surprise actor" to class.

Casting:

Casting is crucial. You may cast someone you know -- you must, however, go through the audition process for the experience and to see what alternatives are available. As actors often drop out of projects, it is strongly advised that you be prepared with backup casting options.

You may not cast your relatives or lovers because you may be required to recast. If you have to recast you must notify the instructor and the SA before bringing a new actor to class.

Any RECASTING must be done with the instructor's knowledge and approval. Casting Resources:

You may use LA Casting, Breakdown Express and the various databases and websites available to find actors. You may also use any other resource at your disposal.

Actor Database:

An Actor Database posted in the google drive for this class is made up of actors who have worked successfully in an SCA class/project. You are encouraged to take advantage of this resource.

School of Dramatic Arts Actors:

You are strongly advised to cast students from USC School of Dramatic Arts when possible and appropriate. Students who have done so have found them to be well-trained professionals and reliable collaborators.

SAG cast members must be reminded that they are allowed to post no more than thirty seconds of the material given to them onto the Internet.

Actor Contact information:

Prior to your first in-class rehearsal you are required to provide your SA with your actors' NAMES/ Preferred Contact info (cell phone and email)/Digital Headshot Photo - If you recast you must update this information.

THIS IS NOT AN OPTIONAL REQUEST: Supplying these materials to your SA is required for credit toward completion of the course.

Meetings:

I am open to meeting with you at any point in the semester by appointment. I am happy to address a variety of topics that you'd like clarified. I leave the focus of the meeting to you.

Meetings are scheduled in my office - SCA 408 - at a time mutually agreed upon by the student and myself. They may be over zoom!

Critique - Giving and Taking:

Each time a student presents work it will be subject to in-class discussion, "critique" and revision.

In this course we share "work in process". Artists "in process" feel vulnerable. One of the goals of this course is to help students learn to observe work in process and share their observations in a way that is helpful to the director.

It is important that critique be received with a sense of openness.

Learning how to give and take useful criticism is by no means easy. It takes care, mindfulness and practice. Together we will endeavor to create an atmosphere that is conducive to good process.

Inclusivity:

Comedy like language both brings us together and sorts us apart. It has the capacity to either divide or include. Like language, inclusivity is the central goal of comedy. It reminds us of what we have in common - our humanity - and assures us that we are not alone. In this class you are encouraged to raise any concerns you may have, either publicly or with me in private.

Disclaimer and Fair Warning:

The purpose of comedy is not to be hurtful but to explore hurtful subjects in a safe way. Comedy is controversial by its nature. One of its functions is to test moral and social boundaries. Whatever the intention it is possible that material shown and discussed in class may offend. Be aware of this possibility before deciding to take this class.

Written Reflections:

Your Written Reflections are important to me. They enable me to get a better understanding of what you are learning, and they help me customize my teaching to your individual needs. I consider them to be crucial communications and their importance is reflected in the weight I give them toward your grade.

Be advised that failing - through forgetfulness - to turn in reflections on time is the most common way students lose points toward their grades.

Reflections need not be long - one page is sufficient - and they need not be written according to formal rules. Think of it as a personal communication from you to me. Your reflection may refer to any aspect of your process.

Each time you present work in class - you are required to write a "reflection" about it.

The reflection following your first rehearsal should include your reasons for casting each of your actors.

All Reflections must be emailed to me by 12pm on the Tuesday after each Wednesday in- class rehearsal. All Reflections and other assignments must be in WORD, TXT, Pages or other editable form. No work turned in on PDF will be accepted.

Students are required to submit a total of Three Reflections:

1. First In-Class Rehearsal
2. Second In-Class Rehearsal
3. Final shoot/presentation

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

50/50 by Will Reiser - I will make available as a download.

“The Comic Toolbox” by John Vorhaus

Use of Electronic Devices

Use of cell phones/computers during class not related to class experience, will be subject to a warning. 3 Warnings will result in a grade deduction of 5 points.

Grading Breakdown

Assessment Tool (assignments)	Points	% of Grade
First Rehearsal	10	10
First Rehearsal Reflection	10	10
Second Rehearsal	15	15
Second Rehearsal Reflection	15	15
Final Presentation	20	20
Final Presentation Reflection	15	15
In class Participation	15	15
TOTAL	100	100

Grading Scale

(Optional – the following is only an example of what one might look like if included)

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale

- A 95-100
- A- 90-94
- B+ 87-89
- B 83-86
- B- 80-82
- C+ 77-79

C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 and below

Assignment Submission Policy

All Reflections must be emailed to me by 12pm on the Tuesday after each Wednesday in- class rehearsal. All Reflections and other assignments must be in WORD, TXT, Pages or other editable form. No work turned in on PDF will be accepted.

Student Attendance Policy

Production Division Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. One absence may result in a student's grade being lowered by one notch (IE: A becomes A-). Two absences may result in a student's grade being lowered by two notches (IE: A- becomes B). A third absence may result in a student's grade being lowered another full point (IE: B becomes C). Grades can be lowered by one full point for every additional absence.

Tardiness: A student is deemed late 7 minutes (number can be adjusted as desired) after the class is scheduled to start. One late arrival may not affect your grade. Two late arrivals equate to one full unexcused absence. (IE: A becomes A-). Three late arrivals may result in your grade being dropped by two portions (IE: A- becomes B). Four late arrivals may result in your grade being dropped three portions (one full point: B becomes C). Lateness of more than 30 minutes will count as an absence.

Timely attendance is mandatory and failure to attend all class sections from beginning to end may affect grades.

- Exemptions will be allowed on a case-by-case basis, and must be supported by a written accommodation request from the USC Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS).
- Students who become ill and need to self-isolate will be supported in their efforts to stay current with classwork and assignments. Faculty are no longer required to provide an option for students to zoom into class. However, Faculty may choose to use zoom at their discretion in an effort to help students stay current in their course work.

Students must contact the professor or SA 24 hours prior to class start time if they need to miss class for any reason.

Such advance notice is helpful, respectful and appreciated, and will be noted. It does not however guarantee that the absence will be “excused.”

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Preparation	Deliverables
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Week 1 1/15	Intro-House Keeping What Is Funny & Why View clips/discuss Why We Laugh	Read 50/50 Screenplay The Comic Tool Box Chapter 1 "Comedy is Truth and Pain"	Consider character descriptions for casting posting by 1/22
Week 2 1/22	Discuss the screenplay 50/50 50/50 Scene Distribution Scene Analysis/breakdown Set design consideration Blind Scene practice Casting Comedy Audition Process	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 2 "The Will To Risk"	Post Casting Notices Scene analysis due 1/28 @ 5pm
Week 3 1/29	Review Scene Analysis Beats-50/50 scene diagnosis What is comedy-how to bring comedy to text - physical, and between the lines. A/B present Casting	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 3 "The Comic Premise"	Final casting choices due 2/5 Group A rehearsal before 2/12
Week 4 2/5	Directing Actors The Rehearsal Demonstration- Blind Scene exercise C/D present Casting	The Comic Tool Box Chapter 4 "Comic Characters"	Group B rehearse before 2/19
Week 5 2/12	Group A Rehearsal	The Comic Tool Box Chapter 5 "Some Tools from the toolbox"	Group C rehearse before 2/26 Group A reflection due by 2/18,
Week 6 2/19	Group B Rehearsal	The Comic Tool Box Chapter 6 "Types of comic stories"	Group D rehearse before 3/5 Group B reflection due by 2/25
Week 7 2/26	Group C Rehearsal	The Comic Tool box Chapter 7 "The comic through Line"	Group C reflection due by 3/4
Week 8 3/5	Group D Rehearsal	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 8 "More tools from the toolbox"	Group D reflection due by 3/11
Week 9 3/12	Directing Comedy Staging & Shooting	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 10 "Comedy and jeopardy"	
Week 10 3/19	Spring Break -no class		
Week 11 3/26	Group A – In class Rehearsal #2	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 11 "Still more tools from the toolbox"	Group A reflection due by 4/1
Week 12 4/2	Group B – In class Rehearsal #2	The Comic Toolbox Chapter 12 "Situation Comedy"	Group B reflection due by 4/8

Week 13 4/9	Group C – In class Rehearsal #2	<i>The Comic Toolbox</i> Chapter 13 “Sketch Comedy”	Group C reflection due by 4/15
Week 14 4/16	Group D-In class Rehearsal #2	<i>The Comic Toolbox</i> Chapter 14 “Toward Polish and Perfection”	Group D reflection due by 4/22
Week 15 4/23	Lecture/Rough cut notes		
Week 16 4/30	Screen Projects		

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 [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

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.

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

eetix.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 for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

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

osas.usc.edu

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) 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, Equity and Inclusion - (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.

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

ombuds.usc.edu

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) 442-3340 or otfp@med.usc.edu

chan.usc.edu/otfp

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

STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND AGREEMENT

I (print your name)

have read the syllabus for CTPR 476. I acknowledge the requirements and rules of the course, and agreed to meet and abide by them.

**Signed,
(your signature)**

<p>PLEASE NOTE: FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACE IN THE SCHOOL OF CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX</p>
