

THTR 122
Improvisation and Theatre Games
Section 62619
Units: 2
Spring 2025
Friday 2-350pm
Location: MCC 112

Instructor: Zachary Steel
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Course Description

Through improv-based theatre games and exercises, this class explores how to be present, access our most playful selves, act on impulses without judgement, and create inspired, collaborative performances. The term “improv” refers to any type of theatre exercise or performance that doesn’t work from a previously written text. This class is a laboratory to discover how we uniquely thrive within the structures of improv performance. Often, but not always, the modern forms of improv theatre are comedic in nature. Our work will tend in that direction as well although this class does distinguish between comedic results and comedic efforts, as in the latter is not necessarily the path to the former. Improv, at it’s core, requires the participants to listen, be impulsive, be playful, and have an understanding of the fundamental rules of performance. This will be the focus of this class.

Learning Objectives

The goals for this course are as follows:

- To identify the fundamental ingredients of an improv scene
- To recognize the structure of various theatre games
- To implement the principles of improv during in-class exercises
- To evaluate the work of others based on their implementation of learned improv skills

Prerequisite(s): N/A

Co-Requisite(s): N/A

Concurrent Enrollment: N/A

Required Reading

The Comedy Improv Handbook by Matt Fotis and Siobhan O’Hara, sections 1 & 2 (available on Brightspace)

Suggested Readings

[Impro](#) by Keith Johnstone

[Improvisation for the Theatre](#) by Viola Spolin

[The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual](#) by Besser, Roberts, Walsh

[Free Play](#) by Stephen Nachmanovitch

Description and Assessment of Assignments

There will be two **Self-Assessments** (due dates in the weekly breakdown), which are meant to document where you are in your comprehension and application of the work. Additionally, you will be required to write an **Improv Report** about an improv show, either amateur or professional, that you will have seen. These will take the form of journal entries and be graded on thoroughness, application of ideas and principles studied in class, and clarity of thought.

The **FINAL** will be an improv jam on the last day of class. It will be structured like a full length improv performance. During the final period, we will review the recording of the jam **over zoom**. This is the most important part of the process, and therefore your final grade is dependent on your participation in the jam AND your presence and participation in the video review.

Regular Weekly Attendance is the only way to get high points for **Participation** and **Class Work** in Improv class. This is an activity course, missing even one class will lower your participation grade. Arriving at the start of class ready to work is part of your participation grade. If you are to be absent, e-mail the instructor to verify the reason. Please inform the instructor immediately if you have **any injuries or any conditions** that might prevent you from participating fully in the class. No cell phone use in class unless instructed.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Assessment #1	100	10
Assessment #2	100	10
Improv Report	100	10
Class Work (games)	100	35
Participation (discussion and evaluation)	100	15
Final	100	20
TOTAL	600	100

Grading Scale (Example)

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 written assignments will be turned via Turnitin on Blackboard prior to the date/time listed on the weekly breakdown.

Grading Timeline

Grades will generally be posted within a week of submission.

Course evaluation

Course 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 with me as the instructor to offer any feedback on the course.

Additional Policies

- Learning in class depends on the presence and participation of each individual student at a high commitment level. Points may be deducted for missed in-class work, in the event of absence or tardiness. In the event of an absence, you are responsible for the content of any missed class time. You must be ready to work at the start of each class.
- If you are going to be absent for COVID reasons or any other reason, it is required that you inform me in advance of the class, not thirty minutes before class or after class has begun.
- Please wear clothing in which you can move freely and comfortably. Your clothing and shoes should not inhibit you in any way. If hair gets in your face, secure it back. Hats are generally discouraged. Acting can get messy, plan accordingly.
- Please reserve break-time activities for before and after class. Depending on the day's flow, we may or may not take an official break in the hour and fifty minutes of class — you should be prepared to stay active in the class, both as performer and audience.
- Please don't eat in class unless absolutely necessary and please never chew gum.

Zoom etiquette:

- Please find as private and quiet a setting in your house as you possibly can. Keep in mind that as important as it is to not have any interruptions, it is also important to feel comfortable making sound and not be too concerned with disrupting others who are sharing a living/working space with you.
- Zoom camera should be on unless there is a specific reason for them to be turned off. Virtual backgrounds are ok.
- While we are in class, no applications should be in use on any device besides Zoom, unless otherwise instructed.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

This schedule is subject to change based on the flow and needs of the class.

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/ Due Dates
Week 1 1/17	Guest Teacher: Judith Shelton		
Week 2 1/24	Syllabus Review, Class introduction		
Week 3 1/31	Discussion: Improv History Activity: Basic Improv Games	To be read: The Comedy Improv Handbook: Section I Improv History (PDF on Brightspace)	
Week 4 2/7	Discussion: The Fundamentals of Improv	To be read: The Comedy Improv Handbook: Section II Improv Rules (PDF on Brightspace)	

	Activity: Basic Improv games		
Week 5 2/14	Activity: Basic Improv games	Suggested Reading for week 5: <u>Improvisation for the Theatre</u> by Viola Spolin	Due 2/13 @ 11pm Self-Assessment #1
Week 6 2/21	Activity – Basic Improv games		
Week 7 2/28	Activity – Basic Improv games		
Week 8 3/7	Activity: Basic Improv games	Homework: Bring in an impersonation of a loved one. More details will be discussed in class.	
Week 9 3/14	Activity – Short form Improv games	Suggested Reading for week 9: <u>Improv</u> by Keith Johnstone	
SPRING BREAK March 16-23			
Week 10 3/28	Activity – Medium form Improv games	Suggested Reading for week 10: <u>The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual</u> by Besser, Roberts, Walsh	Due 3/27 @ 11pm Improv Report
Week 11 4/4	Activity – Medium form Improv games		
Week 12 4/11	Improv review and “Jam” prep		
Week 13 4/18	Improv review and “Jam” prep		
Week 14 4/25	Improv review and “Jam” prep		
Week 15 5/2	Invited Improv Jam	Suggested Reading for week 15: <u>Free Play</u> by Stephen Nachmanovitch	Due 5/1 @ 11pm Self-Assessment #2
FINAL (ON ZOOM)	Review Video of Improv Jam		Date: Monday, May 12 th , 2pm – 4pm

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 Integrity:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work,

compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, 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. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity 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](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

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.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theater Consent Culture Statement:

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.

SDA 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>

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 is comprised 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) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

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.