

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Theatre 404: Acting Theory

Section 62666 -- 4 units

Spring 2025 -- Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00-3:50 p.m., StopGap Theatre, DAB-B5

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Office Hours: Office hours by appointment via email.

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Course Description

Methods of acting from the eighteenth century to the present are explored through a combination of historical readings, practical exercises, and graded performances. Major issues that will organize class include: How do we describe what the actor does? Do different rehearsal techniques lead to different kinds of performances? How do actors from diverse backgrounds create characters and tell stories? How do we evaluate performance given changing times, media, cultural diversity, and global audiences? What are the power dynamics in actor training that contribute to discrimination in the business of acting with regard to gender and the global majority? The course combines academic study with acting.

Prerequisite(s): THTR 101 and THTR 125

Recommended Preparation: Intermediate/advanced acting and critical studies courses.

Learning Objectives

- Build knowledge and appreciation about the long and diverse history of acting.
- Create awareness of the power dynamics in acting classes that contribute to discrimination with regard to race, gender, and disabilities.
- Sharpen critical thinking through readings and analytical assignments.
- Apply acting skills (i.e. relaxation, concentration, attention, observation, and imagination) to the various techniques studied in this course.
- Experience the rehearsal and performance differences in the techniques studied in the course through monologues and exercises performed in class.

Learner Outcomes

- Demonstrate knowledge about the history of acting through discussions and short reflective papers on the acting techniques studied in class.
- Develop expertise on one topic in the history of acting through a researched presentation, delivered to the full class.
- Practice critical thinking through low-stakes assignments and class discussions.
- Consolidate acting skills (i.e. relaxation, concentration, attention, observation, and imagination) by applying them to the techniques studied in this course.
- Rehearse and perform three graded monologues and engage in a P/NP Active Analysis etude to (a) further develop your acting skills; and (b) experience the differences among major acting techniques.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

- Course platforms are Brightspace, Zoom, the USC email system, and the USC room as assigned.
- A device that has a webcam, microphone, and internet access, as well as standard office software, including a power point for presentations and document/pdf software for written work.
- Written work must be submitted as **Word docs or PDFs**. No google docs, please. They do not open properly.

Class Session Notes

This course will be conducted in person and will follow the policies and protocols for health and safety as established by USC and by LA City and County Officials. Zoom will be used only for emergency purposes. (See also **Course Norms and Expectations** below).

- **PARTICIPATION:** You are expected to participate fully in all classes, whether on-ground or online. If at any time you are unable to attend class, email me and the CA immediately. Participation and good communication about absences is mandatory **to achieve full credit** for the course.
- **WHEN ON-GROUND:**
 1. Arrive promptly and in compliance with health and safety protocols
 2. Bring reading and course materials with you to class.
 3. Be ready to participate.
 4. As per USC policy, only absences for religious holidays are excused. All other absences count. Should you need to miss class due to illness or emergencies, I, your peers, and the CA will be available to help you catch up on any missed work. (See **Attendance** below.)
 5. Feel free to communicate with me about any difficulties you may be experiencing in class.
- **IF ON-LINE:**
 1. Keep your camera on (so we all can see you), mute your microphone (to avoid feedback) unless you are speaking, and log on as individuals.
 2. If for any reason my internet goes down during a class session, I will reconnect as soon as I am able. If your internet goes down, communicate with me or our CA as soon as possible.

Overall Course Norms and Expectations

- **PREPARATION:** Come to class with your text and having read and thought about the assignment for that day or having rehearsed as needed.
- **ENSEMBLE:** We will function as an ensemble. You are therefore expected to respect all members of the class; to work collaboratively with each other; and to show responsibility toward each other with regard to rehearsals.
- **ATTENDANCE:**
 1. Attendance and punctuality are mandatory to build our ensemble. *You will forfeit your right to participate in class if you arrive late or come unprepared.*
 2. If you are unable to attend a class or will be late for any reason, email me and the CA in advance. If you are ill, please do not come to class. I and your peers will help you catch up.
 3. Absences for auditions or professional work will be counted as regular absences. (See also **Extracurricular Commitments and ISPs** below.)
 4. A pattern of lateness and/or absence and/or a lack in any of the expectations outlined here can significantly impact your final grade. (See **Grading Breakdown** below.)
- **ASSIGNMENTS:**
 1. You are expected to do your own work for all assignments. AI Generators are prohibited in this course. If you use research sources, they must be cited as per rules about plagiarism. (See the statements on **Academic Integrity** and **AI** below.)
 2. While the content of each class session may be adjusted to accommodate the pace of class, due dates for graded assignments will not change.
 3. No late work will be accepted and students are expected to manage their time in accord with the due dates.
 4. If you have an unforeseen emergency, email me or the CA immediately.
- **TECHNOLOGY:** Courtesy dictates that you put your cell phone away and do not surf the web on your laptop during class sessions.

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.

Recording a university class without the express permission of the instructor and announcement to the class, or unless conducted pursuant to an Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) accommodation is prohibited. Recording can inhibit free discussion in the future, and thus infringe on the academic freedom of other students as well as the instructor. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Distribution or use of notes, recordings, exams, or other intellectual property, based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study is prohibited. This includes but is not limited to providing materials for distribution by services publishing course materials. 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. ([Living our Unifying Values: The USC Student Handbook](#), page 13).

Required Materials

The following materials have been ordered for you at the USC Bookstore (USCTEXT.com):

1. A digital *Course Reader*—See information on Brightspace about purchasing your reader.
NOTE: You need this Course Reader for the FIRST WEEK of school!
2. Hodge, *Actor Training*, Routledge, ISBN: 9780415471688, e-copy available
3. Carnicke, *Dynamic Acting Through Active Analysis*, Methuen, ISBN: 978135025178, e-copy available
4. Malague, *An Actress Prepares*, Routledge, ISBN: 9780415681575, e-copy available
5. Anton Chekhov, *Four Plays and Three Jokes*, Hackett, ISBN: 9280472050253.
NOTE: This translation is required for Chekhov monologues and the P/NP Etude Assignment.

Recommended Materials:

1. Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Routledge, ISBN: 9780415774920.
2. Baron and Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance*, U. of Michigan Press, ISBN: 9780472050253.

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Breakdown

A: Three graded performances with written reports -- 60% of Final Grade

- The same monologue will be performed using three different acting techniques in order to experience how the techniques studied in class lead to different performance results.
- Each performance will be accompanied by a 2 page performance report.

Monologue Choice and Performances:

- Submit your monologue choice during the first week of class for suggestions and approval.
- The monologue must be chosen from a classic play with heightened language or verse (from any culture including ancient drama) or from a Chekhov play (chosen from *Four Plays and Three Jokes*).
- Choose a monologue that you have not previously performed in order to insure that you approach the work with fresh eyes.
- Choose a monologue from a play with which you are familiar. If you do not know the play, read it in full for your monologue's context.
- Your monologue should be no longer than two minutes (about half a page); cutting is allowed.
- Each of the three performances should be rehearsed and memorized as demonstrated in class.

Prompt for the 2-Page Performance Reports:

Address each of the following issues in your paper:

1. Summarize what specific work you did to prepare for your performance (about a paragraph).
2. Explain how your preparation fits into the historical technique under study by referring to class materials and discussions in your explanation. You must incorporate the historical/theoretical perspective into your paper for full credit (about a page to a page-and-a-half).
3. Assess what you have accomplished and what else you might try if you were to perform this assignment again (about a paragraph).

Other Information on Performances:

“How to Rehearse”:

- Working demonstrations of the technique under study will be held in class to help you prepare for each performance.
- Volunteers will be drawn from class participants. If you wish to volunteer, please make that known in advance.

In-Class Rehearsals:

- Come to rehearsals having prepared your work in advance. If you are unprepared, you forfeit your opportunity to work.
- In-class rehearsals are intended to give you feedback on your performance prior to its being graded, not as a substitute for out-of-class rehearsals.

B: Etude Assignment on an assigned scene by Chekhov—P/NP

- This assignment will entail mandatory participation in 4 classes, that feature collaborative work with all who are registered in the course. The four classes are progressive and will build knowledge step by step.
- You will receive P if you participate in at least 3 of the 4 classes. If you miss 2 or more of these classes, you will receive a grade of NP, which will be figured into your grade point average as an F (0).
- All details for this assignment will be given in class.

C: Two Other Graded Assignments -- 40% of Final Grade

1. **A Ten-Minute In-Class Presentation** on a topic that enhances the course material. Topics with due dates will be distributed in the first week. These presentations are intended to spark discussions and therefore will be held to the time limit. You may deliver a low-tech talk or use a Power Point, shared with the class through Zoom. A one page written outline or your Power Point with a bibliography of 3 to 4 sources will also be due at the time of the presentation.
2. **The Final Examination** will held in person on the day/time scheduled for our course by USC. **Be sure to make any holiday travels plans with this date in mind.** The exam itself will be in two parts: (a) the repetition of a monologue assignment of your choice in order to perfect it; (b) a short in-class written component.

Assignment Submission Policy

- Required dates, submission information, and presentation topics will announced weekly through Brightspace to keep you on track.
- All performances and presentations must be given during class sessions.
- Written work will be submitted through Brightspace via **Word or PDF**. No google drive docs, please. They do not open properly.
- **No late work will be accepted for graded assignments.** If you have conflicts with the timely submission of assignments, contact me **in advance** of the deadlines.

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

Grading Breakdown and Scale

The graded assignments will be weighted as detailed above. P/NP assignments will affect your final grade if you neglect them with NP being counted as an F. The final course grade is determined according to the following scale:

Excellent:	A	95-100
Excellent:	A-	90-94
Good:	B+	87-89
Good:	B	83-86
Good:	B-	80-82
Average:	C+	77-79
Average:	C	73-76
Average:	C-	70-72
Poor:	D+	67-69
Poor:	D	63-66
Poor:	D-	60-62
Failing:	F	59 and below

“Excellent” means that clear understanding of the class material is coupled with original and creative insight; “good” means that the class material has been understood clearly; “average” means that the class material has been generally understood, but gaps in understanding remain; “poor” means that there are identifiable gaps in the understanding of class material; “failure” means that there is poor understanding of the class content by term’s end; and/or gaps in the successful completion of work; and/or a lack of responsibility toward the class ensemble.

When the raw average of all assignments falls between two grades, the final grade will reflect the positive end of the scale for students whose attendance, participation and responsibility to the class have been good, but will reflect the negative end of the scale when attendance, participation, and/or responsibility toward the work in class have been lacking.

If you have a pattern of repeated absences, a lack of participation in class discussions/exercises and late submission of assignments/papers, your final grade will be lowered further by as much as one half to one full grade.

Grading Timeline

Every effort will be made to turn back work in a timely fashion. Grades and Feedback will be available through Brightspace.

Additional Course Policies

1. If you need any learning accommodations, be sure to contact the Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS; see **Support Systems** below) and present a letter with your approved accommodations to Dr. Carnicke in the first weeks of the semester and before any assignments are due.
2. If you are not a native speaker of English and/or you are an international student, make an appointment with Dr. Carnicke in the first two weeks to determine whether language accommodations might be necessary.

3. If you have a religious holiday or any other conflict, inform Dr. Carnicke during the first two weeks.
4. Any work that does not fulfill the required assignment is an automatic F.
5. If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W.
6. I will be happy to discuss your work at any time during the semester, and I encourage each of you to meet with me at least once before the scheduled exam.
7. For USC Policies, see below.

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.

Academic dishonesty has a far-reaching impact and is considered a serious offense against the university. Violations will result in a grade penalty, such as a failing grade on the assignment or in the course, and disciplinary action from the university itself, such as suspension or even expulsion.

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 or CA if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

AI Generators

This course aims to develop creative, analytical, and critical thinking skills. Therefore, 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. You should also be aware that AI text generation tools may present incorrect information, biased responses, and incomplete analyses that are not acceptable in scholarship or in professional work. Therefore, **using AI-generated text, code, or other content is prohibited in this course**, will be identified as plagiarism, and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Course Schedule: Important Dates

Please add the following important dates in your calendar and plan your semester accordingly.

The date of your assigned in-class presentation.	
Jan. 17	Your Choice of Monologue
Feb. 4	First Graded Monologue Performance and Report
Feb. 25	Second Graded Monologue Performance and Report
March 13	Third Graded Monologue Performance and Report
March 27-April 8	P/NP Sequence of four classes
May 8	Final Examination

Course Schedule: Overview

- All dates are subject to USC/SDA changes
- For each unit of in-class contact time, USC expects, on average, two hours of out of class student work per week over a semester. This course is 4 units of in-class time with an expected eight hours on average of out of class work per week.

YOUR WEEKLY BREAKDOWN

Tu Jan. 14: Course Introduction

Meet and greet; discussion of the goals for the course; assignment of Presentation Topics/Dates

- **Reading:** The Syllabus

Fri Jan. 17: **DUE no later than noon--An email with your choice and text of monologue.**

MODULE I: Coquelin and Gestural Acting

Th Jan. 16/ Tu Jan. 21: Painting the Character's Portrait

- **Readings:** Selections on Coquelin, Garrick, Clairon, and Delsarte, and drawings from 19th century acting text books in the *Course Reader*.
- **Coordinated Presentations** on Gestural Acting including Non-Western traditions.
- "How to Rehearse" via Coquelin's Method

Th Jan. 22/Tu Jan. 28: In-class rehearsals

REGISTRATION NOTE: This course will be closed at the end of the second week.

Th Jan. 30: Gestural Performance and the Audience (1 hour); Repeat your in-class rehearsal (voluntary)

- **Reading:** Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* in the *Course Reader*

REGISTRATION NOTE: Friday, Jan. 31, is the last day to audit or select the "P/NP" option.

Tu Feb. 4: **FIRST GRADED PERFORMANCE AND REPORT USING COQUELIN'S METHOD**

Th Feb. 6: Physical/Gestural Acting in Film and Contemporary Theatre

- **Readings:** Chapter 17 on SITI Company in *Actor Training*; chapter on John Wayne in *Course Reader*.
- **Coordinated Presentations** on historical and contemporary approaches to physical acting including Non-Western traditions.

MODULE II: Early Stanislavsky and Inner Acting

Tu Feb. 11: Nemirovich-Danchenko's Approach to Inner Monologue

- **Readings:** Selections on Salvini and Nemirovich-Danchenko in the *Course Reader*; and the chapter on Stanislavsky in *Actor Training*
- **Coordinated Presentations** on Inner Acting
- Discussion on the roots of the Stanislavsky System and its early practice

Th Feb. 13: Early Stanislavsky Workshop

- First Studio Exercises
- "How to Rehearse" via the Moscow Art Theatre's inner monologue

Week of Feb. 18/20: In-class rehearsals

Tu Feb. 25: **SECOND GRADED PERFORMANCE AND REPORT ON NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO'S INNER MONOLOGUE**

Th Feb. 27: Inner Monologues in film-acting

- **Reading:** "Elizabeth Taylor: My Kind of Acting" in *Course Reader*.
- **Coordinated Presentations** on current film actors, majority and minority, who excel in inner monologue.

REGISTRATION NOTE: Friday, Feb. 28, is the last day to drop a course without "W" or change to a letter grade.

MODULE III: Mid to Late Stanislavsky—Action and Active Analysis

Tu March 4: Focus on Action

- **Readings:** Re-read the chapter on Stanislavsky in *Actor Training*; excerpts from *An Actor Prepares* in *Course Reader*
- "How to Rehearse" using Playable Verbs

Th March 6/Tu March 11: In-Class rehearsals

Th March 13: **THIRD GRADED PERFORMANCE AND REPORT ON STANISLAVSKY'S PLAYABLE VERBS**

SPRING RECESS – NO CLASSES ON MARCH 18 AND 19!!!

Tu March 25: Active Analysis through the lens of Maria Knebel

- **Reading:** Part I of *Dynamic Acting through Active Analysis* and the chapter on Maria Knebel in *Actor Training*

THE P/NP SEQUENCE OF CLASSES – MARCH 27 to APRIL 8

Th March 27: #1 -- In-Class Exercises on Active Analysis (Scenarios)

- **Reading:** Part II, Lesson 1 in *Dynamic Acting through Active Analysis*

Tu April 1/Th April 3: #2 and #3 The Active Analysis of a Chekhov Scene (Etudes)

- **Reading:** Part II, Lessons 2 and 3 in *Dynamic Acting through Active Analysis*

Tu April 8: #4 Etudes and Conclusions on Active Analysis

MODULE IV: The American Method

Th April 10: The Moscow Art Theatre's Tours to the US and the Roots of the American Method

- **Coordinated Presentations** on the Roots of the Method

REGISTRATION NOTE: Friday, April 1, is the last day to drop a course with "W."

Tu April 15: The Debate on Emotion in the Method

- **Readings:** chapter on The Method in *Actor Training*; and in the *Course Reader* Archer, *Masks or Faces*, and Strasberg, "A Dream of Passion"

Th April 17: Focus on Strasberg

- **Reading:** Chapter on Strasberg in *An Actress Prepares*
- Exercises from Strasberg

Tu April 22: Focus on Adler

- **Reading:** Chapter on Adler in *An Actress Prepares*
- Exercises from Adler

Th April 24: Focus on Meisner (1 hour); The System or The Method

- **Reading:** Chapter on Meisner in *An Actress Prepares*
- Exercises from Meisner
- Discussion on the differences between Stanislavsky and the leading proponents of the Method

Tu April 29: Contemporary Acting Approaches in the United States

- **Readings:** David Wiles and “Why Johnny Can’t Act” in the *Course Reader*
- **Coordinated Presentations** on Contemporary Teachers and Black Acting Techniques

Th May 1: Course Conclusions

- **Reading:** Ed Hooks in the *Course Reader*
- Concluding Discussion

Final Examination Date: Thursday, May 8, 2-4 pm (See above for details.)

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 SDA events, 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

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.