

Camera and Improvisation

USC School of Dramatic Arts

Spring 2025

Course: THTR 250

Instructor: Wayne Brady

Email: Waynebra@usc.edu

Units: 2

Location: Dramatic Arts Building, B5

Class Hours: Monday,

Class A 12:00 PM – 1:50 PM

Class B 2:00 pm -3:30

Office Hours

Email to schedule office hours via Zoom

Course Description

In this course, students will learn to harness the art of improvisation to create compelling characters, react truthfully in the moment, and deliver authentic, dynamic performances on film. Taught by Wayne Brady, an Emmy-winning television actor and Broadway Star with over 35 years of improvisational experience, this class draws from Wayne's extensive background in improv-based character-building, including his celebrated work on *Whose Line Is It Anyway* and his deep knowledge of spontaneous creation for both stage and screen. Students will be guided through exercises that develop their ability to "live in the moment" on camera, whether they're creating a comedic, dramatic, or multi-dimensional character. In addition to honing improv techniques, this course will provide students with the tools to succeed in film and television auditions, where improvisation skills are often essential. The course will culminate in a final project where students perform an improvised audition scene, integrating everything learned throughout the semester.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Develop a solid understanding of improvisation techniques and their application in front of the camera.
2. Use improvisation to create authentic, memorable characters.
3. Adjust their performances to suit the demands of film and television, delivering spontaneous yet truthful moments.
4. Cultivate the ability to live in the moment, staying open and responsive to the scene and other actors.
5. Prepare for auditions by practicing fast, strong, and original improvisational choices in a high-pressure environment.
6. Develop the confidence and adaptability needed to succeed in professional auditions for film, TV, and commercial projects.

Required Materials

- Notebook and writing utensils
- Comfortable clothing for movement-based activities
- Access to a smartphone or camera for recording class exercises (optional)

Reading

1. Impro by Keith Johnstone
2. Ensemble by Dan O'Connor
3. UCB Comedy Improv Manual by the Upright Citizens Brigade

Note: The only required reading is Impro by Keith Johnstone. However, It is suggested that you read Ensemble and the Improv Manual as well.

Required Viewing

1. Whose Line Is It Anyway
2. Curb Your Enthusiasm
3. Waiting For Guffman

4. This Is Spinal Tap
5. Robert Altman's Nashville
6. The Office

Note: Many of these shows you can digest during the week in clips. You will not be required to watch full episodes, but you are expected to be familiar with the styles and material of the above.

Classroom Expectations and Etiquette

This class will follow the rules of improvisation i.e., listening, being open and accepting to suggestions and conversation, and creating an environment of trust where creativity can breathe. There will be no "shutting down" of ideas. Everyone will be expected to conduct themselves as the professional they aspire to become and will be treated as such. There is a no-tolerance policy toward hate speech as well as aggressive and/or disruptive behavior.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

You will need to know the basics of editing on software like iMovie or Capcut. You will also need your phone or other recording device to film your scene.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is crucial since the class only meets once a week. A student's grade will be lowered by one letter grade per absence unless there are extenuating circumstances and the professor approves said absence. Class starts on time. Three instances of lateness will result in an absence. Three absences will result in a grade drop. If you are not in class, you cannot participate, and it will affect your participation grade.

SDA PRODUCTIONS, ISPS, AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

SDA productions, ISPs, and extracurricular activities* will not excuse you from any classwork. 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 of 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.

Course Schedule & Topics

Week 1: Introduction to Improvisation for Camera

- Overview of the course and expectations
 - Fundamentals of improvisation: “Yes, and…” and staying in the moment
 - Introduction to improvisation on camera: what’s different from stage?
 - Camera presence and how to adjust for a film/TV setting
 - *In-class exercise*: Spontaneous Scene Work
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Week 2: Improv Auditioning for Film and TV

- Learning to access immediate choices for commercial and scripted auditions
 - Creating backstories for characters during a Film/TV call
 - Improvising past the written page
 - *In-class exercise*: mock commercial auditions
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Week 3: Truthful Performance and Spontaneity

- The importance of truth in improvisation
 - Learning to create your “who”, “where”, and “why”
 - Adjusting for different performance styles (comedy, drama, etc.)
 - *In-class exercise*: Emotion-based improvisation with camera work
 - *Homework*: Record a 2-minute improvisational monologue on film
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Week 4: Improvising in Shakespeare (The Classics with Dan O'Connor)

- Introduction to improving in the style of classical literary authors
 - Exploring the language and structure of Shakespearean text in improv
 - Using rhythm, iambic pentameter, and imagery to enhance creativity
 - *In-class exercise*: Improvised Shakespearean scenes
 - *Homework*: Create a Shakespeare-inspired improvised monologue
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Week 5: Musical Improv (Bar for Bar)

- Basics of musical improvisation: rhythm, melody, and lyrical structure
 - How to think musically in character and on camera
 - Working with tempo and rhyme schemes
 - *In-class exercise:* Improvising a group musical number
 - *Homework:* Record a short improvised musical solo
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Week 6: Shake What Yo Mama Gave You (Using Your Special Skills)

- Identifying and incorporating your unique talents into improvisation
 - How to showcase special skills (dancing, singing, accents, etc.) on camera
 - Using physicality and voice to create dynamic characters
 - *In-class exercise:* Improvise scenes that highlight personal strengths
 - *Homework:* Develop a scene showcasing one of your special skills
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Week 7: Big Kid Pirate Party (The Art of Make-Believe)

- Embracing the playfulness and imagination of improvisation
 - Creating vivid imaginary worlds and staying committed to them
 - Using props and environments effectively in an improvised scene
 - *In-class exercise:* Improvising fantastical scenes with heightened stakes
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Week 8: I Got Your Back with Jonathan Mangum (Trust on Camera)

- Building trust with scene partners in high-pressure settings
 - Exploring vulnerability and collaboration in front of the camera
 - Techniques for supporting your partner's choices while staying grounded
 - *In-class exercise:* Partnered trust-building improvisation
 - *Homework:* Pair up and create a recorded scene showcasing trust and spontaneity
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Week 9: Midterm: Whose Line is it Anyway Mock Audition

- Students will participate in their own mock "Whose Line is it Anyway" audition
- Activities include scene and game work tailored for the camera (e.g., Props, Scenes from a Hat)

- Evaluations based on creativity, adaptability, and camera presence
 - Feedback from peers, instructor, and guest evaluators
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Week 10: Improvisation in Different Genres (Comedy, Drama, etc.)

- Adapting improvisational skills for various genres of film, TV, and famous directors
 - *In-class exercises:* Comedic improvisation, dramatic improvisation, and hybrid styles
 - Genre-specific improvisation techniques and challenges
 - *Group improv performance:* Feedback and adjustments
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Week 11: Jeopardy (Mr. Know-it-All)

- In order to improvise effectively, it pays to know a little about a lot
 - How to convincingly play “the expert” in improvisation
 - Incorporating wit, facts, and absurdity into character work
 - We’ll test your general knowledge and how it can be applied to characters and situations
 - *In-class exercise:* Improvised "Jeopardy" scenes as various characters
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Week 12: Introduction to Mockumentary Challenge

- Overview of the final project: Creating a mockumentary as a group
 - Introduction to mockumentary style and its unique improvisational requirements
 - Brainstorming group concepts, premises, and character archetypes
 - *In-class exercise:* Small group improvisations to explore story ideas
 - *Homework:* Begin outlining story structure and character beats
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Week 13: Mockumentary Development

- Finalizing group premises, story outlines, and character beats
 - Developing scene outlines with room for improvisation
 - *In-class exercise:* Rehearsal of key scenes and character interactions
 - Peer and instructor feedback on early run-throughs
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Week 14: Mockumentary Rehearsals

- Refining scenes and beats based on feedback
 - Practicing improvisation within structured beats
 - Filming test scenes to review and adjust performances
 - *In-class exercise*: Full mockumentary run-through with peer critiques
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Week 15: Final Performance – Mockumentary Showcase

- Groups present their improv-based mockumentary projects
- Evaluations based on originality, cohesiveness, and execution of improvisation within story beats
- Feedback from peers, Professor Brady, and more industry professionals
- Class wrap-up and reflection on growth and application of improvisational skills

Grading Breakdown

- Class Participation: 50%
- Homework Assignment: 10%
- Midterm/Final: 40%

Grading Timeline

Students can expect to receive their final grades a week after submission.

The above syllabus is subject to change at any given time by Professor Brady.

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

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion + Intimacy in Theatre 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>

Statement 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.