

Comedy and Performance THTR 197g
4 Units
Spring Semester 2025 – Mon, Wed – 330-520pm
Location: LVL 17

Instructor: Zach Steel

Office: JEF 208

Office Hours: Thursdays, 1230-130pm

Please email for appointments. If you can't meet during this office hour, we can schedule an alternate time.

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USC Slack: @Zachary Steel

Teaching Assistant: Matilda Schulman

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Hours of Service: 7am-10pm PST

Contact Info: 213-740-5555 or consult@usc.edu

"Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." -Mel Brooks

Course Description

This GE course will provide students with an overview and understanding of the history and performance of comedy. Using examples from as far back as Greek Theatre and as current as *Black-ish* and *I think You Should Leave*, students will be encouraged to identify and understand the distinctive features, techniques and themes of comedy performance. Through many manifestations including the Commedia dell'Arte of the Renaissance, the age of silent comedy in cinema, standup, and the advent of television, comedy in performance has evolved in multiple forms as a response to prevailing conditions while maintaining many primary functions, including satire, celebration, and social commentary. The course explores in depth many of the most important and influential periods and differing strains of comic performance, addressing the discipline in terms of creation and execution as envisaged by writers, actors, clowns, comedians, and directors.

Learning Objectives

1. To distinguish between comedic forms, theories, techniques, and styles.
2. To compare the comedy of different periods, identifying the social, political and cultural contexts in which the work was created and performed.
3. To analyze the various forms and content of comic material across a range of historic periods.
4. To evaluate the purpose of comedy and the role it plays in our various cultures and societies.

Prerequisite(s): N/A

Co-Requisite(s): N/A

Concurrent Enrollment: N/A

Recommended Preparation: N/A

Course Notes

Although this is a lecture style course, group and full class discussion will be heavily leaned on as modes to share and analyze the material. I will also set up Slack or some alternative as a live chat room to participate in during class.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

For required reading and viewing please see breakdown of class schedule. All viewing and reading should be carried out **PRIOR** to the class for which is it indicated.

Description of Grading Criteria and Assessment of Assignments

Each assignment will receive a grade out of 100.

Grading Scale for SDA:

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

A = work of excellent quality; clear understanding of class material coupled with original and creative insight

B = good quality; class material has been understood clearly

C = average quality; class material generally understood, gaps in understanding remain

D = below average quality; identifiable gaps in the understanding of class material

F = inadequate work; gaps in completion of work, poor understanding of class material

Further Grading Notes:

When the GPA 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 excellent or good and toward the negative end of the scale for those with average or poor attendance and participation.

If your work in class is unsatisfactory, you will be warned before the deadline for dropping the course with a grade of W. I will be happy to discuss your work at any time.

Assignment Submission Policy: All assignments to be submitted via Brightspace. Due dates are as follows:

Assignment 1 (Group Test): In-Class, Sept 17th at 2pm

Assignment 2 (Performance Analysis): October 15th at 11.59pm

Midterm (Annotated Bibliography): November 12th at 11.59pm

Assignment 3 (Satire Group Project): November 19th at 2pm

Assignment 4 (**Final – Critical Paper**): December 12th at 4pm (**note the earlier time**)

Participation –

Your participation grade is the effort you put into actively being a part of class discussions and activities.

This means commenting, asking questions relevant to the discussion, writing relevant comments in the chat, etc.

Grading Breakdown

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Participation/Attendance	100	15
Assignment 1 (Group Test)	100	15
Assignment 2 (Performance Analysis)	100	20
Midterm (Annotated Bibliography)	100	5
Assignment 3 (Satire Project)	100	20
Assignment 4 (Final – Critical Paper)	100	25
TOTAL	600	100

Assignment Rubrics

Please see Brightspace for assignment rubrics.

Grading Timeline

Please allow one week after the due date for assignment grades and feedback to be submitted.

AI Policy

I expect you to use AI (e.g., ChatGPT and image generation tools) in this class. Learning to use AI is an emerging skill, and I welcome the opportunity to utilize it in your class work in a way that supports your growth and education. Keep in mind the following:

- AI tools are permitted to help you brainstorm topics or revise work you have already written.
- If you provide minimum-effort prompts, you will get low-quality results. You will need to refine your prompts to get good outcomes. This will take work.
- Proceed with caution when using AI tools and do not assume the information provided is accurate or trustworthy. If it gives you a number or fact, assume it is incorrect unless you either know the correct answer or can verify its accuracy with another source. You will be responsible for any errors or omissions provided by the tool. It works best for topics you understand.
- AI is a tool, but one that you need to acknowledge using. Please include a paragraph at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining how (and why) you used AI and indicate/specify the prompts you used to obtain the results what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of academic integrity policies.
- Be thoughtful about when AI is useful. Consider its appropriateness for each assignment or circumstance. The use of AI tools requires attribution. You are expected to clearly attribute any material generated by the tool used.]
- For more information on how to cite or credit AI, visit <https://libguides.usc.edu/generative-AI>.

Sharing of course materials outside of the learning environment

USC policy 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 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

- Please arrive promptly for class. Late arrivals disturb the learning of the whole class.
- There will be no unexcused absences. You are required to be in attendance for each class period.
- *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.*
- No social media posting about class.
- You may use your computers in class for note taking and quick, relevant research. This is mostly on the honors system but every so often, I will run up the center aisle to see if I can catch people surfing the web willy-nilly.
- If you are required to quarantine, we will come up with a solution so your educational experience will continue until you return to class.

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

This is subject to change based on the specific pace and needs of the class.

		Topics/Daily Activities	Readings and Homework	Deliverable/ Due Dates
Block 1 – What is Comedy?				
Week 1	Monday 1/13	Wayne Federman Class Visit		
	Wednesday 1/15	Wayne Federman Class Visit		
Week 2	Monday 1/20 NO CLASS			
	Wednesday 1/22	Class Intro and Comedy Share A general discussion on forms of comedy, comedy terms, devices, mechanical inelasticity	Reading, Henri Bergson, Chapter 1 from Laughter (The Comic Forms in General—The Comic Element in Forms and Movements—Expansive Force of the Comic) (available on ARES)	Be ready with links to your favorite comedy bits.
Week 3	Monday 1/27	The Psychology of Humor <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jokes • Forms of humor • History of humor 	Reading: The Psychology of Humor, pgs. 1-30 (ARES)	

	Wednesday 1/29	Comic Theories <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superiority Theory • Incongruity Theory • Relief Theory 	Reading: John Morreall, <i>Comic Relief</i> pages 1 – 26 (ARES)	
Week 4	Monday 2/3	Counter Theory <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play Theory 	Reading: Jesse David Fox, <i>Comedy Book</i> , Chapter 1 “Comedy” (PDF on Brightspace)	
	Wednesday 2/5	Is Comedy Funny?	Reading: Jesse David Fox, <i>Comedy Book</i> , Chapter 3 “Funny” (PDF on Brightspace)	
Week 5	Monday 2/10	Comic Devices	Reading: Jason Zinoman, What’s the Deal with Water Bottles? (New York Times, 7/28/22)	
	Wednesday 2/12	How to Analyze Comedic Performance	Reading: Louise Peacock, Joan Rivers – Reading the Meaning (on Brightspace)	
Week 6	Monday 2/17 NO CLASS			
	Wednesday 2/19	In-Class analysis activity		DUE: Analysis written component to be posted on Brightspace at the end of class.
Block 2 – Comedy, Identity, and Ethics				
Week 7	Monday 2/24	In-Class Group Test and Comedy Share		Be ready with links to your favorite comedy bits.
	Wednesday 2/26	The Ethics of Comedy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can comedy cause more harm than good? What can/should comedy do?	Reading: Sharon Lockyear and Michael Pickering: <i>You Must be Joking</i> . (PDF on Brightspace) In Class Research task: Find and read an article which deals with comedians being criticized for offensive material. Your example should be as recent as possible. Ideally, you also have a link to the comedic material in question.	
Week 8	Monday 3/3	Comedy and Race	Reading: The Hidden Truths in Contemporary Black Sitcoms from <i>The Sitcom Reader: America Re-viewed, still skewed</i> . (ARES)	

	Wednesday 3/5	Comedy and Gender	Reading: Nothing Suits me like a suit: Performing Masculinity in <i>How I met your Mother</i> (PDF on Brightspace)	DUE: Performance Analysis Assignment @11:59pm PST
Week 9	Monday 3/10	Comedy and Culture	Reading: 3 small chapters (“The 1491s in Their Underwear,” “The 1491s Reluctantly Agree to do a Shakespeare Festival,” “The 1491s get a Standing Ovation...”) from “We Had a Little Real Estate Problem” by Kliph Nesteroff (ARES) Viewing: The 1491s (see Brightspace) Research: Find comedy from the non-dominant cultural voices.	
	Wednesday 3/12	Comedy and Sexuality	Reading: Alfred L. Martin, Jr., Chapter 3 from <i>The Generic Closet</i> (ARES)	
SPRING RECESS 3/16-3/23 NO CLASS				
Block 3 – The Comic Tradition				
Week 10	Monday 3/24	Clown and Commedia dell’Arte	Reading: Nuar Alsadir, “Animal Joy” pg. 1-16 (PDF on Brightspace) Viewing: Zach’s Clown Youtube Playlist	
	Wednesday 3/26	Silent Comedy	Reading: Adam Gopnik, Buster Keaton Book Review (PDF on Brightspace) Viewing: On YouTube, Buster Keaton’s Steamboat Bill Jr	
Week 11	Monday 3/31	Shakespeare’s Comic Devices		
	Wednesday 4/2	Shakespeare’s Comic Devices	Reading: Twelfth Night (available online)	
Week 12	Monday 4/7	Farce	Reading: David Gram, Contemporary Farce on the Global Stage, Chapter titled, “Entrances”	DUE: Midterm (Annotated Bibliography) @ 11:59pm PST
	Wednesday 4/9	The Importance of Being Earnest	Reading: The Importance of Being Earnest, full text available here: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/844/844-h/844-h.htm	
Week 13	Monday 4/14	Satire: Social and Political	Reading: Nicholas Holm, ‘The Political (un)consciousness of American Satire’ (on Ares)	

	Wednesday 4/16	Comedy Share Part 3 An even less general discussion on forms of comedy, comedy terms, theories, this time with a focus on SATIRE	Viewing: The Yes Men on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmuF3SjhWI4	Be ready with links to your favorite comedy bits.
Week 14	Monday 4/21	SATIRE Group Project Share		DUE: SATIRE Group Project
	Wednesday 4/23	SATIRE Group Project Share		
Week 15	Monday 4/28	The Contemporary Sitcom	Reading: Christina Vecchia, Of Peerenting, Trophy Wives, and Effeminate Men: <i>Modern Family's</i> Surprisingly Conservative Remediation of the Family Sitcom Genre (available online) Viewing: Modern Family	
	Wednesday 4/30	The Contemporary Film: The Forty Year Old Version	Viewing: The Forty Year Old Version (NETFLIX)	
FINAL				DUE 5/7 @ 4PM PST FINAL PAPER

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 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.

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.