
American Funny Course Outline

Description: In American Funny, we'll consider various examples of American comedy and the historical context in which it was produced, whether in 1776 or 2026. We will read/watch/listen to a wide variety of comedic texts and performances, including standup, storytelling, live theater, sketch comedy, and more; developing our comedy brains to suss out the tools and techniques used so as to better apply them to our own work. With that goal in mind, the course will combine a more traditional academic approach to the material with creating comedic work inspired by it.

Learning Outcomes: This course is designed to enable you to:

- Describe the evolution of live comedy throughout American history.
- Identify how American comedy has been shaped by the experiences and creative work of marginalized Americans in particular
- Identify the comedic techniques used in American comedy, past and present.
- Apply those techniques to develop your own comedic work
- Evaluate your own work and point of view in the context of the history of American comedy to determine your comedic lineage: the artists that have come before you that have paved the way for you to do this work.

Assignments:

Grades will be calculated based on the following work:

- Final Paper & Performance (30%) - The final will consist of a 5-page paper and a 3-4 minute comedic performance to be performed on the day of the final
- Performance Projects (40%) - There will be four performance projects throughout the term. These will be related to the content we are covering and will generally be 1-3 minutes in length.
- Short Assignments (30%) - Throughout the term, I'll ask you to do short assignments. These might include, but are not limited to, brief reflections, feedback on work of your fellow students, and in-class presentations. Some short assignments will be assigned as classwork, and some will be assigned as homework. These will be graded as completed/not completed.

Course Flow

Although we will be looking at comedy through American History, we will not be doing so chronologically but rather thematically, considering elements of comedic work and the American experience. We'll be tackling the following modules:

A Revolutionary Mindset - How comedy has been used to foment revolution in general and the American Revolution specifically

Capitalism - How comedy participates in and (sometimes) subverts capitalist systems

New Blood - How immigrants and first generation Americans have left their mark on comedy

Gimme the Jokes! - How the construction of comedy itself has evolved and changed

Nothing About Us Without Us - How marginalized folks, often the target of comedy, have come to own and control their identity in comedic work

Is This Even Comedy? - How the definitions and “rules” of comedy have expanded and been challenged

These themes overlap and intersect, and as a result you’ll gain a sense of the bigger picture of the history and practice of comedy in America

Day-to-Day Breakdown

Class 1: Tablesetting

- Meet the students and review the syllabus
- Break down processes for dealing with conflict or harm in the classroom
- Break down grading: final, performance projects, and short assignments. Present the specifics of the **final project and paper**, which the students should be working on throughout the term.
 - Write a 5-page paper that answers these questions: Who are my comedic inspirations/predecessors? What is my comedic lineage? How is my work an evolution of their work or in conversation with their work?
 - You should investigate these questions by using the themes of the class: having a revolutionary mindset, how comedy exists in capitalism, how immigrants and first generation Americans shaped comedy, how jokes are structured, how we own our identity and material, and how the definitions of rules of comedy have changed and expanded.
 - On the day of our final, you will also perform a 3-4 minute comedic piece that is inspired by the connections that you explored in your paper.
- Discuss Content Warnings and historical humor
- Discussion: What is comedy?
 - Explore classic comedy formulas: Comedy = truth + surprise, Comedy = tragedy + time
 - Present the equation of Peter Derks (now-retired psychology professor at William & Mary):
Humor = salience (trait + state) x incongruity + resolution
 - Trait - fixed personality type
 - State - transient mood
 - Incongruity = surprise
 - Resolution = forces us to look at something differently
 - Present some of the neuroscience concepts in Scott Weems’ *Ha!*: humor is a process of our brains constructing, reckoning, and resolving
 - Constructing - our brains use context and life experience to come up with the expected outcome/scenario/script
 - Reckoning - our brains discover that we’re wrong!

- Resolving - our brains integrate the new information, causing us to laugh
- Exercise: Create your own comedy equations
 - In groups of two or three, construct an equation to explain your group's conception of the relationship of humor, laughter, and your audience. It can be as complicated or as simple as you like
 - Share these equations with the class, explaining your variables and the reasons you chose them
- Homework:
 - Post two comedy clips under two minutes that represent your comedic tastes on D2L. Comment on two other classmates' posts. This will count as a **short assignment**
 - Read *The Blockheads* by Mercy Otis Warren

Module 1: A Revolutionary Mindset

- *How comedy has been used to foment revolution in general and the American Revolution specifically*

Class 2: Comedy as a Revolutionary Act

- Debrief short assignment. Did students learn anything new about each others' taste in humor? If so, what?
- Lecture: The background of theatre in America (first theaters, banning of live performance), Mercy Otis Warren, *The Blockheads*, types of satire
- Discussion: Theater and live performance as an essentially revolutionary act
 - How can something that was hugely revolutionary at the time feel ordinary (or at least not transgressive) today?
 - Relationship between parody and satire
- Exercise: Find the Humor!
 - Divide the class up into groups and assign them scenes from *The Blockheads*
 - Their job is to locate the humor in the original and translate it into a modern sensibility
 - Present the new versions to the class
 - Discussion: what are the similarities and differences in humor, and how does our current culture change what we find funny? How is that related to satire and revolutionary purpose?
- Homework:
 - One-page reflection on how comedy can be a tool for revolution in your own life, as a creator and consumer of comedic art: **short assignment**
 - Listen to Lenny Bruce's *Carnegie Hall Concert*
 - First performance project is due in class 4.
 - Instructions: Repurpose an existing comedic form toward a revolutionary purpose. Performance should be 1-3 minutes long, and be accompanied by a paragraph detailing your performance goals

Class 3: Breaking the rules

- Show: Clips from George Burns and Bob Hope
 - Discuss what “classic standup” is (reference roots in Vaudeville but don’t get into the weeds on it, we’ll get into it further later in the term)
- Discussion: Lenny Bruce in the context of classic standup
 - Talk about Joe Ancis, the comedian that inspired Lenny Bruce
- Show: Clips from Moms Mabley, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Dick Gregory, George Carlin
 - How were each of these comics revolutionary?
- Exercise: Elements of Revolutionary Comedy
 - Break down how things can be revolutionary: Form, Content, Intention, Identity, Venue/Audience
 - Have students add their own elements that can be manipulated
 - Pitch session: have students pitch comedic ideas that marry one traditional element with one revolutionary element
 - Develop one or two of these ideas further in a writers’ room session
- Homework:
 - Read *On the Real Side* by Mel Watkins (pages 45-49)

Class 4: Humor among American enslaved people

- Discussion: *On the Real Side* reading (heavy CW, manage this discussion closely). Make sure the following points are hit
 - Code switching in its prototypical form, + subversive humor
 - Importance of image of mirthful enslaved people to slave owners
 - wordplay/punning/etc
 - Roots of verse/song criticism of power structures in African traditions - wittiness and wordplay etc; also *griots* - African oral historians who were also musicians and comedians
 - Deliberate misdirection by enslaved people in humor/humorous performance for whites
- Small group discussion
 - Who is comedy for?
 - What function does it serve in society?
 - What is its relationship to privilege and power?
 - How does it function inside of societal groups?
- Exercise: Comedy from Shared Experience
 - Create visual memes that come from your experience as a DePaul TTS/Comedy Arts student at this time
 - Show contemporary Native American memes as an example
 - Discussion: How are memes and in-group humor used as an outlet for groups with shared experiences?
- Homework:
 - Read *On the Real Side* 80-133

Module 2: Capitalism

- *How comedy participates in and (sometimes) subverts capitalist systems*
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Class 5: Moving from revolution to capitalism

- **Performance Project #1 Presentation:** repurpose existing comedic form toward a revolutionary purpose
- Discussion: How did students approach their revolutionary performance assignment? What were their objectives and how did they determine whether or not they'd achieved them?
- Discussion: The rest of the class should be dedicated to discussing the *On the Real Side* reading about minstrelsy (heavy CW, manage this discussion closely)
 - Really take time and care with this discussion, unpacking the art form, both as performed by white performers and by Black performers
 - Ask students to consider its impact on comedy in America
- Homework:
 - One-page reflection on one other student's performance project that they found effective (**short assignment**)

Class 6: Participating in and subverting capitalism

- Lecture: Brief historical context for the nance character
- Discussion: *The Nance* by Douglas Carter Beane
 - Initial reactions
 - Is there anything subversive about The Nance character in the context of its time, or is it, in fact, just a betrayal of Chauncey's identity?
 - Comedic characters that constantly make jokes - what are they deflecting? How do they differ from comedic characters that mean what they say?
 - Trope of a broken/sad funny person - comedy that lives on the line/goes back and forth between drama and comedy.
 - What are the techniques in burlesque sketch that we could build on?
- Exercise: Rhythm-based comedy
 - Based on the burlesque routines in *The Nance*
 - Break students into groups of 2-3
 - Create a 30-second rhythmic comedy exchange
 - This should be a conversation about a low-stakes scenario inspired by the students' real life that they are treating as high stakes
 - Have the students perform these routines for each other
 - Debrief: What techniques drew the audience in? What made them laugh? How can we use these techniques in creating comedy
- Discussion: How are modern queer comedians the descendants of historical figures like the nance? What has changed and stayed the same?
 - Tension between transgressing against capitalism and assimilation
- Homework:
 - Watch *The Nance* by Douglas Carter Beane

- Second performance project is due in class 9. You should create a comedic piece that both participates and subverts capitalism. Performance should be 1-3 minutes long, and be accompanied by a paragraph detailing the following:
 - How does my piece participate in capitalism?
 - How does my piece subvert capitalism?
 - What comedic techniques did I utilize to accomplish those goals?

Class 7: Artistic collectives and organization under capitalism

- Exercise: Design a comedy company!
 - In groups of 3-4, students should design a company around the creation and performance of comedy. In twenty minutes, they should answer these questions:
 - Decide on a primary medium (eg live theater, online, television, basement projector movie night, ham radio)
 - Decide on a methodology of content creation (eg producing individual playwrights/writers, writers room, devising work through improvisation/writing exercises etc)
 - Decide on mission/purpose (Lookingglass is committed to collaboration, invention, and ensemble - particularly physical theater, The Second City does satirical sketch comedy created by the resident ensemble, Eclipse commits each season to a single playwright etc)
 - Decide on how it's going to exist in capitalism (or if it's not going to, how it's going to navigate that)
 - Who is your intended audience - who is going to experience this work?
 - Decide on the people - who do you need to make this work? What roles do you need filled?
 - Tell me WHY THIS COMPANY SHOULD EXIST. What need does it serve?
 - Find a way to upend the expectations of this assignment/subvert it to a revolutionary purpose.
 - Share out and briefly discuss
 - In the same groups, take ten minutes to design their inaugural creative event
 - Title it.
 - What is it? What are we watching/hearing/experiencing? How is it developed/created?
 - Who's going to see this event?
 - WHY IS THIS YOUR FIRST THING?
 - Discussion: How did the groups grapple with the issue of sustaining themselves and building audiences under capitalism?
- Lecture: Briefly present the history of improvisation and improvisation-based sketch comedy - students should already know some of this material from reading in previous classes, so hopefully it is a recap
- Exercise: Design an applied improvisation exercise for sociological use
 - Inspired by the work of Jane Adams and Neva Boyd, take an existing improv game (provide a list if students find that helpful) and create an applied improv exercise based around the mechanics of that game

- Students should be able to identify the intended audience for the exercise as well as the specific problem they are trying to solve - encourage them to keep their focus narrow in scope
- Share out exercises and, if there is time, have them do a demonstration using other students as the intended audience
- Debrief: Did the exercises accomplish what you intended?
- Homework:
 - Reflection: How do we measure success as an artist if success in capitalism isn't the measure? Or do you believe it *should* be the measure? (**short assignment**)

Class 8: Capitalism wrap-up

- **Performance Project #2 Presentation:** create a comedic piece that both participates in and subverts capitalism
- Discussion: How did students approach their capitalism performance assignment? What were their objectives and how did they determine whether or not they'd achieved them?
- Discussion: How do we measure success as an artist if success in capitalism isn't the measure? Or do you believe it *should* be the measure?
 - Have students share out points from their reflection
 - Has anyone's ideas around this changed based on their classmates' pieces?
- Homework:
 - One-page reflection on one other student's performance project that they found effective (**short assignment**)

Module 3: *New Blood*

- *How immigrants and first generation Americans left their mark on comedy*
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Class 9: Immigrant influence on 20th and 21st century comedy

- Show: Clips of Marx Brothers, Nichols and May, Sid Caesar, Joe Wong, Hasan Minhaj, Margaret Cho, and Julio Torres
- Lecture: Give brief background on those comedians
- Discussion: How do these comedians use their backgrounds in their work?
 - Dealing with the topics directly vs. letting it inspire tone/style/etc vs. ignoring it completely (and can you actually do that?)
 - Who is the intended audience and how does that affect the material?
 - Put this in the context of the arc of American comedy over the 20th century and into the present - where are we at right now?
- Exercise: Using identity and personal experiences in your work
 - Each student creates two scenic premises based in some way on their personal identity and experiences
 - Should *not* be recreating a past event on stage
 - One should deal directly with identity/personal experience, and one should use it as context but not be directly about that
 - Share out scenic ideas

- If there's time, having a few students improvise through their ideas (some of these will be possible based on identity and some will not be)
- Debrief: What was your experience in creating these premises? Where does your own comedic voice lie in regards to the exercise?
- Homework:
 - Watch and/or read *The Man Who Came to Dinner* by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart and *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven* by Young Jean Lee

Class 10: Complexity of immigrant experiences

- Lecture: We're moving into the third module! Remind them of Jane Adams and Neva Boyd, and briefly speak about the work of immigrants and first-generation Americans in the 20th century. Specifically delve into the backgrounds of George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, and Young Jean Lee
- Discussion: *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*
 - Compare and contrast - make a master list of the comedy techniques the students spotted in these two plays
 - What techniques from the previous week's comedians did you see employed in these?
 - How might the background of the writers lead them to different kinds of comedic devices and content?
 - Ask students about their experience in sketch writing and playwriting classes. What do we need for a scene? How have these plays constructed their comedic scenes?
 - How do absurdity and relatability play into comedy? How does context affect those two tools?
- Exercise: Absurdity vs. Relatability
 - Split the class into groups of 2-3
 - Have them come up with two scenic ideas
 - They should use the same setup
 - One should lean hard into absurdity and the other should be supremely relatable for the audience
 - Have them create beat sheets for the scenes
 - If there's time, have the groups perform the scenes
 - Debrief: How are absurdity and relatability related? How do they work together and how can they be at odds with each other? How does that relate to the two plays we read for today?
- Homework:
 - Read *On the Real Side* pages 137-180
 - Reminder that performance project #3 will be performed in class 14. Perform a 1-2 minute joke-based solo piece. This can be standup, storytelling, solo sketch, whatever you like as long as it employs jokes.

Module 3: Gimme the Jokes!

- *How construction of comedy itself has evolved and changed*
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Class 11: Vaudeville and beyond

- Discussion: *On the Real Side* reading

- How does minstrelsy evolve into vaudeville and beyond?
- Show: clips of Abbott & Costello, Paul Lynde one-liners, Steven Wright, Wanda Sykes, Ellen Degeneres, Spy from *Black Lady Sketch Show*
- Discussion: How do jokes function?
 - What joke types were more common based on identity and on time period?
 - What is the effect of emotion on jokes?
- Lecture: Where can jokes come from?
 - Character Point of View
 - Location/Environment
 - Pattern Disruption
 - Benign Violation (a character doesn't understand the rules of a world)
 - Physical Bits
 - Misdirect
 - Inappropriate Response
 - References
 - Recognition of a Truth – or a new articulation of a truth
 - Clash between dialogue and subtext
 - Puns & Wordplay
 - Specificity
- Exercise: Scene Punch-Up
 - In groups of two, hand out vague scene
 - Students should punch up the scene using any and all of the joke types we've been discussing
 - Perform these scenes for each other
 - Debrief: What kinds of jokes worked best for this exercise? Were you willing to change as much as necessary? Did you feel constricted by what was on the page?
- Homework:
 - Joke wall (**short assignment**)
 - Hand out ten headlines. Students should write two jokes per headline
 - Use the following as inspiration: Read the headline and ask the questions *If this is true what else is true?* and *If this is true why is this true?*
 - Watch most recent episode of SNL for class

Class 12: Modern sketch comedy

- Exercise: Joke Wall Shareout
 - Share jokes from the homework in groups of 3-4
 - Based on the response, choose three of your twenty jokes to share with the entire class
 - Debrief: Which were most successful in the room? Were they the ones you expected? What made this assignment hard or easy to do? What tools did you use to help you finish it?
- Lecture: Briefly explain timeline and workflow for SNL
- Discussion: What was successful and unsuccessful about the SNL episode?
- Exercise: Fix SNL!
 - Set the class up as a writer's room
 - Act as head writer as the class pitches fixes for scenes, for jokes, for the RO, etc.

- Encourage students to think like a director: it's not just specific jokes or scenes. What does the show need? What does it have too much of? How can the host be better utilized?
- Debrief: What does it feel like to be part of a writer's room, where some of your ideas might be shot down? What does it mean to be part of a whole, and find a way to make your individual talents shine while serving the voice of an existing show?

Class 13: Modern Sketch Comedy part 2

- Exercise (full class): SNL Pitch Session
 - In groups of 4-5, pitch ideas for the following slots
 - Opening sketch - must be political in nature, and use a recognizable setup (debate, press conference, etc).
 - Celebrity monologue (three sketches must use guest) - pitch concept
 - Morning show/TV news sketch - must have anchors & cutaways
 - Commercial parody - pretape
 - Relationship/human behavior scene
 - Weekend Update - 3 topical jokes, 2 character pitches
 - Pretape#2 - could be a song, a backstage bit, whatever is available to add variety
 - 10-to-1 - weirdo sketch
 - Have groups share out their ideas to the class
 - Choose a piece for each slot (try to spread out evenly between the groups) and have them make a beat sheet for it
 - Perform: run through the version of the show that they've created
 - Debrief: What was it like to work at this speed and with this much structure? What did you discover about your process?

Module 4: *Nothing About Us Without Us*

- *How marginalized folks, often the target of comedy, have come to own and control their identity in comedic work*
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Class 14: Comedic identity

- **Performance Project #3 Presentation:** Solo joke performance
- Discussion: How did it feel to focus so heavily on jokes? How can you feel more comfortable with joke writing?
- Exercise: Comedic Identity (this is a good prep for their final project, as well as setting up the new module)
 - Come up with three adjectives to describe your sense of humor based on the performance and on what they've seen from you before
 - Break into groups of 3-4
 - Go around and each student will have the other participants tell them descriptors they've observed about their comedic style
 - Debrief: Did you feel they were accurate? Were they in line with the adjectives that *you* chose? If yes, what other comedians (past and present) are in line with those

descriptors? If not, where is the dissonance coming from? Do you want to do anything about that?

- Homework:
 - Watch/listen to *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*
 - Read *On the Real Side* pages 526-563
 - Read *We Killed* pages 209-236

Class 15: Nothing About Us Without Us

- Discussion: Richard Pryor
 - Richard Pryor is cited by comedians more than anyone else as being their comedic inspiration. What about his work do you think makes people think of him that way?
 - Specific techniques he uses
 - WHO IS THIS FOR? Who is his intended audience? How does he navigate it?
 - Had a pretty extensively abusive childhood - how does that manifest here? - compare to how Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* handles trauma
 - Unpack the Hemingway myth/tortured artist etc
- Discussion: Women in Standup
 - What were the disparate routes women took to becoming standups in the 20th century? What were the challenges?
 - How did they expand the traditional forms of standup comedy?
- Homework:
 - **Short assignment:** Each of four groups will do a brief presentation in the next class based on a different play: *Bootycandy* by Robert O'Hara, *The Thanksgiving Play* by Larissa Fasthorse, *Hir* by Taylor Mac, and *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* by Kristoffer Diaz. Presentations should answer the following questions (these can be divided between the students):
 - What is the basic story of the play?
 - How does the play engage with the author's marginalized identity?
 - How does it use humor to do so?
 - Would you classify this play as a comedy? Why or why not?

Class 16: Owning Identity

- Each group gives their presentation on their assigned plays
- Discussion: What are the differences between how comedy in traditional plays, in sketch comedy, and in standup handle identity?
 - What are the differences in the audiences for those art forms? How are comedic techniques used in each?
 - How might your own comedic voice function in these different milieux?
- HOMEWORK:
 - Remind them of performance project #4: Present a one-minute story twice, in two different modes. One should be a simple telling that utilizes five-point structure (beginning/middle/end). The second should use a different kind of narrative structure.
 - Read *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* by Charles Busch

Class 17: Commenting on Identity

- Lecture: Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Charles Busch and the Limbo Lounge, references for the parody of *Vampire Lesbians*, history of drag
- Discussion: What is camp? How does it relate to queer identity?
 - John Waters
 - Intentionality vs. Accidental (see: *Mommie Dearest*)
 - Notes on Camp (Susan Sontag)
 - Judith Butler
- Exercise: Camp Scenes
 - Assign students short scenes from classic American dramas
 - Have them neutrally cold read them once in front of the class
 - Give them twenty minutes to work on camp versions of the scenes. They are welcome to change text, but the scene must stay recognizable.
 - Have them perform the transformed scenes
 - Debrief: During these scenes, what was your relationship to the text? What did you draw inspiration from? What made your performances or the performances of your classmates “campy?”

Module 5: *Is This Even Comedy?*

- *How the definitions and “rules” of comedy have expanded and been challenged*
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Class 18: Expanding the idea of story

- Lecture: Take a day to immerse them in story theory
 - Before/After
 - Freytag Pyramid and 5-point sketch structure
 - Examples: *A Christmas Carol*, Melissa McCarthy Pizza Business sketch, John Mulaney Prostate Exam, *Golden Girls*: Season 2, Episode 5
 - In media res
 - Hero's Journey (break down using *Lord of the Rings*)
 - *Kishōtenketsu* - Show a typical comic panel and the Super Mario video
 - Le Ronde
 - Non-linear
 - Structure growing from content (biomimicry, organic, inspired by other art forms such as sonataform) - Beckett is a good example
- Homework:
 - Watch clips of Andy Kaufman, Eric Andre, Tim & Eric, UNHhhh
 - **Short assignment:** Post to D2L a paragraph breakdown of a story that was important to you as a child

Class 19: Anti-Comedy

- Discussion: What is anti-comedy?
 - How do you consider the audience while performing anti-comedy?
 - Does it find its own structure? How does that function in the examples we watched?
- Exercise: Thinking Outside the Box
 - Split class in groups of two

- Choose one of the following (under one minute):
 - An existing short scene
 - An existing piece of prose text (from anywhere: an essay, an instruction manual, wikipedia)
 - An existing song
- Choose a method of performing it that breaks the original form. Scenes should not be performed as is, prose should not be read, songs should not be sung.
 - Find a way to insert some original text of your own into this.
 - Find a way to physicalize and/or add other design elements (costume/lighting/sound/something).
- Perform for the class
- Debrief: How did these break the original form? What were the challenges of working in this way?
- Homework:
 - Watch *Canceling* by Contrapoints

Class 20: Beyond comedy

- **Performance Project #4:** Present a one-minute story twice, in two different modes. One should be a simple telling that utilizes five-point structure (beginning/middle/end). The second should use a different narrative form.
- Discussion: Break down the structure of the Contrapoints video together
 - How is variety introduced?
 - What is edutainment? How do we manage point of view inside of a comedy form?
 - Finding the balance between humor and point of view
- Exercise: Design an event that uses comedy toward a non-comedic purpose
 - Decide on a primary medium (eg live theater, online, television, basement projector movie night, ham radio)
 - What is the message/purpose? Are you educating? Communicating a statement?
 - Who is your intended audience - who is going to experience this work?
 - TITLE IT
 - Share them out
 - Debrief: What was your experience of generating this? What are other reasons you might use comedy in a non-comedic setting?
- Remind the class of the parameters of their upcoming final and answer any questions

Final Performance & Paper - You made it!