School for New Learning
DePaul University

Course Syllabus: AI 296 Stage Playing
Spring 2015-2016

Faculty: John Starrs
1033 W. Loyola, #704
Chicago IL 60626
773-761-5724
jstarrs@depaul.edu

Location: Loop Campus

Dates/Time: 03/28/2016 to 06/04/2016
5:45 P.M. to 9:00 P.M.

Credit Hours: 4

Plays for reading will be assigned as we go, but the first will be Edward Albee’s Zoo Story. Students are asked to obtain and read this text by the 2nd class. A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry, is the assignment for the third week. Other scripts will be assigned week by week. Each group will have reserved reading material. Each student will be assigned to a group by competency. The student will choose material which helps illuminate the essence of the competency.

Course Description: We begin this course by getting to know each other through theater games and exchange of facts about ourselves; a sense of comfort and commonality among players is crucial to a fruitful theatrical setting. Each week, we will read a play, beginning with Edward Albee’s classic American one-act, The Zoo Story, and continuing — perhaps to Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, Samuel Beckett, Eugene O’Neill, or others — according to stories and
forms that most interest the students. After each play we read, we compose an “inner monologue,” a piece of writing in the voice of a character we have discovered in the script. Each week, we will read these sketches aloud in class and discuss them. Further along in the course, students will attend a production of a play in the city. The culminating activity of the class is the collaborative creation and staging of a play of our own invention: students have the opportunity to experience playwriting, acting, producing and directing in a theatrical setting, and learn the role of many workers in the creative process. The primary focuses of this course are the reading and interpretation of theatrical texts, developing comfort and experience in performative settings (theatrical and not), and discovering how the creative and imaginative elements of theater enrich and inform our larger lives.

**Faculty Biographical Sketch:** John Starrs is an actor, playwright, director, storyteller, and spoken word writer and performer. His graduate study in theater took place at the Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. He has played roles including Richard III and Tiresias, and has performed with the National Players in D.C., the New York Shakespeare Festival, The Body Politic, Wisdom Bridge, and The Goodman, among others in Chicago. He also hosts venues in spoken word in the city.

**Competences Offered**

**A-5: Can define and analyze a creative process.**

1. Can define the concept of creativity.
2. Can identify, analyze, and describe the components of a creative process in one or more fields of human endeavor.
3. Can explain how engaging in a creative process affects one’s perception of the world.

Students will read plays and examine their structure and characters in order to see the varieties and possibilities of creative imagination at work in the theater of past and present. Our own undertaking, of creating and staging a play together, is a creative process, and in doing it we move through the steps of creative development and practice, which we will find apply widely to other creative efforts in the world.
**H-3-E: Can speak effectively in public settings.**

1. Understands the principles of effective public speaking.
2. Engages in more than one type of public speaking (narrative, inspirational, instructional, persuasive, etc.).
3. Assesses effectiveness based on established criteria.

We begin the course by interviewing and then introducing our peers to the larger group, an act of narration and conveying information to one another. When we bring our “inner monologue” character sketches to class, we perform them for the group and discuss their content. In the course’s culminating activity, students develop their public-speaking skills by appearing in the play they have helped to create; the class will discuss techniques and approaches for effective speaking, reflecting on what they have observed in themselves and each other.

**A-2-X: (Creative Expression) Can create a work of art in the theater.**

1. Demonstrates an understanding of the steps leading to a staged theatrical work
2. Collaboratively creates a unique, performative artwork with classmates

The student first learns what some of the art in the theater is, by reading scripts, seeing plays, improvising and beginning to construct a play. The students learns what a play is by acting in a play — a creative act. The student directs a staged reading of his or her play.

**A-1-X: (Interpreting the Arts) Can define and analyze the relationship between the art of the theater and the student’s experience.**

1. Can read and interpret a theatrical text
2. Articulates aspects of his/her own life which are enriched or informed by the text

In Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater*, she writes: “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise . . . If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach. ‘Talent’ or ‘lack of talent’ have little to do with it.” As in art, so in life: we learn how to acquire and hone new skills by first discussing and defining them amongst our peers, and then putting them into practice in other settings. We will discover the broad applicability of
theatrical skills and analytical views to diverse settings, including business, public service, and family life.

**Outcomes by Competence**

**A5: Can define and analyze a creative process**

We are more concerned in this course with process than we are with product. Our creative process starts with the reading of the play (script) and ends with the production — or, in our case, a dramatic reading of the play. In between, we attend a play, write a review of it, write inner monologues for characters of each play we read (which is to say, we “act on paper”), then read these monologues aloud in class. We also write our own plays, cast them, and put on dramatic readings under each writer’s direction. As an outcome of this process, students learn how professional makers of theater go about creating and producing their work, and working with others. Students can then take their knowledge of this development process into their own theatrical projects. More generally, students experience a process which includes working together toward specific ends.

We will form a group and work to make sense of readings for you to choose and peruse, in order to discuss and form the group's approach to the creative process, and for each individual in the group to interest the others in her or his interpretation of the material discussed. A selection of readings for this competence are as follows:


And a few quotes, for your interest:

He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise.

—William Blake

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves.

—Carl Jung

“Only when he no longer knows what he is doing does the painter do good things.”

—Edgar Degas

when god decided to invent
everything he took one
breath bigger than a circustent
and everything began

when man determined to destroy
himself he picked the was
of shall and finding only why
smashed it into because

—e.e. cummings

And lastly, from a review of Nachmanovitch’s Free Play: “This book is important not only because it delves into the creative process, but also because Nachmanovich [sic] creates the opportunity for the reader to get in touch with her/his creative possibilities and abilities. (Harvard Educational Review)

**H-3-E: Can speak effectively in public settings**

“By indirections find directions out.” —William Shakespeare
When we are doing many things at once, as we often do in theater, we tend to learn things that perhaps are not explicitly included in those many things. While we are “acting on paper,” we are actually beginning to act onstage. While acting onstage, speaking to another player, we are also speaking to an audience. When we are speaking to an audience, we are unselfconsciously in a public setting. We learn public speaking by doing something that seems a little different, but is speaking from a similar platform.

A group for this competence will read Sims Wyeth's lovely little book, The Essentials of Persuasive Public Speaking (New York and London, W.W. Norton and Co., 2014). They can then put together how the course materials “by indirection find direction out”: how the reading aloud, performing, acting, directing, and the examining of stage experiences which make up the essentials of the Stage Playing course all prepare the individual for public speaking in a way that the direct approach may not be able to. Members of this group might also contest this indirect approach, and challenge the course as it is conceived and facilitated.

Here are a few quotes from the book:

“Public Speaking is the number one fear of an American.”

“Your work becomes your play.”

“Tickling and soothing anxieties is the test of a speaker's impact and technique.” (Cicero)

“A speaker should be a dramatist capable of capturing and holding attention tickling, then soothing audience anxiety.

N.B. All other competences will find small groups useful for their examination, as well as the use of parallel time while others are in group session.

**A-2-X: Can create a work of art in the theater that relates to the student’s other professional pursuits**

Because we don’t emphasize product, that doesn’t mean that we don’t arrive at a culminating activity. In fact, we enjoy the fruits of our labor. In the theater, many of these “products” are very entertaining. We have fun making art onstage; we enjoy the making. We also enjoy the art. Students demonstrate this proficiency by creating and producing works of theater in the course of this class. Acting,
directing, and understanding of production values are all outcomes of our process. Working with groups while creating theatrical productions develops skills that aid in group-oriented work processes in many sectors, such as business, non-profit, government entities, and schools.

**A-1-X: Can define and analyze the art of the theater and the student’s experience**

The outcomes may differ with each student. Theater is a group art. The work together goes through many stages, to reach certain goals. Students analyze texts and characters within them, with an eye toward breaking down the process in order to proceed with it. They do this together as well as apart, helping each other and being helped. This kind of process is valuable to many workplace environments, as it is in theater. Analysis takes place by critiques, discussions, and in at least one written review of a play attended this quarter. These forms of analysis carry over into workplace situations.

**Learning Experience**

**Resources and Experience:** We will begin our play-reading with *The Zoo Story* (Plume, $11) by Edward Albee, and proceed each week with a new script, to be determined by the class. We will discuss the works in class, but students seeking further analytic insight might find the book *How to Read a Play* by Ronald Hayman (Grove Press, $14.95) to be of use. In addition to the play scripts, our source material will include a group trip to view a play staged in Chicago. We may examine the “Theory and Foundation” section from Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater*, which will illustrate the effect and importance of the theater games with which we begin our work together. Individual writing assignments and group work on our collaborative play will be the main “assignments” of the course, along with participation in class discussion.

In the event of an absence, please let me know ahead of time. Contact a classmate ahead of time to be your “tutor” for the missed session. Assignments and due dates will be sent out in group emails.

Participation is all-important. We can’t rehearse if we’re not there. We can’t workshop, read aloud our work, etc., if we are not there. The papers are important because these first-person inner monologues reveal character, which is primary.
(Please re-read your own papers as a kind of editing; unedited work is hard to read.) Reading these papers aloud in class puts your voice in your characterization.
Evidence the Students will Submit:

The results of the workshop are the writing and in-class reading of the Inner Monologue Character Sketches (one per week, to accompany each play studied), and a written review of the play the class attends together. The culminating activity for each student is the staged reading of a play written by the student. By competences:

A-5: The student writes weekly “character sketch” assignments, and participates in class discussions about dramatic form and content. The student participates in the group staging of student-written plays.

H-3-E: The student participates in theater games with the group, and reads aloud his or her “character sketch” assignments in class, an exercise in “acting on paper.” The student participates in the reading of plays including one play each (short) written by participants in the class. Each student acts in her or his own play and in plays written by some of the other students.

A-1-X: The student participates in class discussions about plays we read. The student writes the “character” sketch assignments, brief papers which are also read aloud in class. The student participates in the collaborative staged reading of a play.

A-2-X: The student participates in the collaborative staged reading of a play. The student demonstrates the ability to function in a team — a skill translatable across many platforms and work environments — by working with the group on this project.

DePaul University Academic Integrity Policy

DePaul University is a learning community that fosters the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas within a context that emphasizes a sense of responsibility for oneself, for others and for society at large. Violations of academic integrity, in any of their forms, are, therefore, detrimental to the values of DePaul, to the students’ own development as responsible members of society, and to the pursuit of knowledge and the transmission of ideas. Violations include but are not limited to the following categories: cheating; plagiarism; fabrication; falsification or sabotage of research data; destruction or misuse of the university’s academic resources; alteration or falsification of academic records; and academic misconduct. Conduct that is punishable under the Academic Integrity Policy could
result in additional disciplinary actions by other university officials and possible civil or criminal prosecution. Please refer to your Student Handbook or visit http://studentaffairs.depaul.edu/homehandbook.html for further details.

N.B.: John Starrs will uphold the University’s guidelines on academic integrity.

Criteria for Assessment:

Grades Will Be Determined Based on the Following Factors:

30% Inner Monologue Assignments (written for a character in each assigned text)
20% Composition of Short Plays
15% Personal Progress in Critical Skills and Analysis of Works
15% Performance of Inner Monologue Assignments
10% In-Class Discussion of Assigned Texts
10% Performance in Short Plays Written by Other Students

Students self-evaluate based on these criteria in terms of each competence. We will use the SNL Assessment Form as a partial guide. For those of you not familiar with this form, we will go over it together. Self-assessment is a look at one’s part in the process; an overview and a meta-processing.

Class Schedule

Week One: An introduction to the subject matter and procedure of the course, including assignment of the Inner Monologue paper and how to proceed. Introduction of students and author of the course by pairing up and interviewing both partners, with at least two questions: “Why did you come to SNL?” and “Why this course?” Each then introduces the other in each pair to the rest of the class. A student will introduce one other person by first name, and so on around the room. We then line up by first letter of last name, “A” near the door, “Z” near the back wall, while the author of the course explains a few general ideas regarding the process of the course. Students fill in a sheet which will serve to identify the
class. We then play a game of “Win, Lose or Draw” (or Pictionary) to break the ice. The instructor assigns the first play script, *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee, and suggests we read *A Raisin in the Sun* for the following week (Week Three). Assignments of scripts read for class will be sent via D2L email.

**Week Two:** We each read aloud from our papers: a character sketch or first person Inner Monologue, picking a character from *The Zoo Story*, bringing our monologues alive. (The instructor will also participate in this writing exercise, and will elucidate the workings of this assignment until it is clear.) Students will hand in a hard copy of this assignment. We will discuss *The Zoo Story*, talk some about where the course may be heading, and act out scenes from the play.

**Week Three:** Discuss criteria and goals for the course, breaking it down by competences. We read monologues from our next play (possibly *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry), then pass in papers (Inner Monologue/Character Sketch assignment as before). We discuss the script, the play, talk about the course. Act out scenes from the play, discuss them; choose next week’s script and, perhaps, a fourth.

**Week Four:** Read monologues from scripts to be chosen in Week Three. Discuss the script, the play; act out scenes from the play and discuss them. Pass in character writing assignments. Choose two more scripts for further reading. Workshop improvisation using theater games helps us bridge into dialogue.

**Week Five:** Read monologues from the script chosen the previous week. Discuss, pass in papers. A workshop in which we will find how to get to production values.

**Week Six:** Read Inner Monologues, discuss, and pass in papers. Workshop to tie in character with where we are and what we are doing there. Somewhere in here (week six) we begin to compare our concept of what an “inner monologue” is, to what it was at the class’s beginning.

**Week Seven:** Read monologues, discuss, and pass in. By means of a workshop, we look for character from the actor’s point of view.

**Week Eight:** Field trip. We attend a play we have chosen. We write a review for the next week.

**Week Nine:** We read aloud our reviews, discuss the play. Go over what will make up the short scripts we are writing, and ways to direct a staged reading.
Week Ten: Staged readings of plays. Discussion between each play, and after all of them have been read. Self-assessment. The staged reading is the culminating activity of this course.

Addenda

For Students Who Need Accommodations Based on the Impact of a Disability
Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the instructor privately to discuss their specific needs. Please contact your instructor as early as possible in the quarter, preferably within the first week or two of the course. All discussion will remain confidential. Please be sure to contact the following office for additional information:

Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD)
Lincoln Park Campus: Student Center 370. (773) 325-1677
Loop Campus: Lewis Center 1420. (312) 362-8002
csd@depaul.edu

Writing Help
For help with organizing your ideas, grammar, citing sources, avoiding plagiarism, sample SNL assignments and much more, see the Writing Guide for SNL Students at http://snl.depaul.edu/writing/index.html. For on-campus and online tutoring, see the DePaul University Writing Centers at http://condor.de