Writing the TV Comedy

FTV 33/Writing the Unconventional TV Comedy/ Summer Session 2017

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COURSE DESCRIPTION & GOALS

Course Objective: The goal for this class is for students to learn how to create an original half hour pilot suitable for TV’s current landscape.

In the last few years, TV comedy has made the exciting transition from broad to personal. Viewers no longer just look for shows to watch with the entire family, but rather specific viewpoints that suit their tastes. With new shows like Atlanta, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, Arrested Development, and Baskets breaking out of traditional TV comedy molds, the lines between comedy, drama, animation, and sketch are becoming blurred. High concept subject matters, alternative worlds, and unusual voices are bringing new life to the tried and true TV comedy format. At the same time, traditionally structured sitcoms like Black-ish have introduced a fresh face to network sitcoms. In “Writing the TV Comedy” we will look at traditional TV structure and explore the modern TV comedy landscape, while students develop the first act of their own original comedy pilots.

Things we will cover in this course:

- Surveying the transition from sitcoms to current TV comedies via in class screenings and discussions.
- Telling emotional stories with a comedic lens.
- Creating unique and rich characters.
- Writing jokes that service character and story.
- Developing an original series.
- Breaking a pilot story.
- Working within a mock writer’s room giving and receiving notes.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS/READINGS

TV Outside the Box: Trailblazing in the Digital Television Revolution- By Neil Landau

The TV Writer’s Workbook: A Creative Approach to Television Scripts- By Ellen Sandler

RECOMMENDED TEXTBOOKS/READINGS

The Artist’s Way- By Julie Cameron

TV: The Book- By Matt Zoller Seitz and Alan Sepinwall
WEEKLY COURSE SCHEDULE

(All of the below screenings will be shown in class.)

WEEK 1:

LECTURE 1 - “What is an ‘unconventional’ comedy?” Introductions. Go over the syllabus. Discuss pitch documents. What are the differences between single cam and multi cam? Network, cable, and streaming? Comedy vs. dramady? Auteur comedy vs. broad comedy?

*HOMEWORK: 5 topical jokes. Write one full-page (double spaced) pitch for your original series and one “pocket” pitch.

LECTURE 2- Watch and compare Silicon Valley and Malcolm in the Middle pilot. Answer any pitch document questions.

DISCUSSION 1- Present jokes. Go over pitches in class and select a series. (If we do not select a pitch in class, you and I must communicate and pick one before the next class).

*HOMEWORK: Read Chapter 4 in The TV Writer’s Workbook.

WEEK 2:

LECTURE 3- “Who am I and why am I here?” Discuss personal voice in TV comedy. Compare the Rosanne and Atlanta pilots. Discuss reading.

*HOMEWORK: Character bios for two main characters. 5 jokes.

LECTURE 4- Go over the main characters/pilots of Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt and Mary Tyler Moore. Go over subgenres on contemporary comedies: sketch, animation, hybrids, mockumentary, satire, etc.

DISCUSSION 2- Present jokes. Go over character bios.

WEEK 3:

LECTURE 5- “To premise pilot or not to premise pilot?” Discuss the different types of pilots. Go over examples of premise and prototypical pilots. Focus on what your characters are DOING.

*HOMEWORK: 5 jokes. Read chapter 10 in The TV Writer’s Workbook. Write the two-page story for your pilot. In plain prose- what happens in the pilot episode? What are we seeing?

LECTURE 6- Discuss Three Act TV comedy structure. ABC stories.
DISCUSSION 3 - Present jokes. Discuss pilot story documents.

WEEK 4:

LECTURE 7 - “Down to the nitty gritty” Go over what a proper beatsheet is and what it looks like. Discuss the Do’s and Don’ts of TV comedy pilots.

*HOMEWORK: Read pages 199-218 in TV Outside the Box. Email your beatsheet to your discussion section by Wednesday night at 11:59pm.

LECTURE 8 - Watch and compare Frasier and Baskets pilot. (or Master of None.)

DISCUSSION 4 - Go over beatsheets. Assign outlines for your first act. (If you’re interested in completing a FULL PILOT you must ask me by the end of week 4 and I must approve before moving forward.)

*HOMEWORK: Continue on to outline unless noted by the instructor. Outlines for the first act due to your discussion section Sunday night by 11:59pm.

WEEK 5:

LECTURE 9 - “How to make your cold open, hot!” Watch teasers and cold opens from shows such as Hotwives of Orlando, 30Rrock, Last Man on Earth, and Girls

*HOMEWORK: Unless otherwise noted by your instructor. Go to pages!!! Bring your cold open to discussion class on Friday.

LECTURE 10 - “A big class about mini-bibles.” Discuss what type of additional documents can be useful for your pilots.

DISCUSSION 5 - Read everyone’s cold opens/ first 5.

*HOMEWORK: Complete your first act by Wednesday night at 11:59pm.

WEEK 6:

LECTURE 11 - Discuss the 5 things to do to your first draft! Go over what happens in staffing season, diversity fellowships, and script competitions.

*HOMEWORK: Add 5 jokes to your script.

LECTURE 12/DISCUSSION 6: First acts due! FINAL READ THROUGHGS with actors!

ADDITIONAL COURSE INFORMATION

This class has a tight schedule so communication with me is key. Please email me with questions about any assignments or notes you have received. The turn around will be quick- - just like the industry! That means there is no time for late assignments. Late assignments will not only hurt your grade, but your progress in the class. Attendance is
also key. Any more than two unexcused absences will result in a failing grade.

All work should be typed and double-spaced unless otherwise noted on the assignment. Scripts must be in script format. Please proof read all work, especially your scripts.

**STATEMENT OF GRADING**

Grading Breakdown -

- Attendance/Class Participation: 20%
- Homework assignments: 10%
- Beatsheet: 15%
- Outline: 15%
- Final Script: 40%

90% and above = A +/-
80% and above = B +/-
70% and above = C +/-
60% and above = D

Anything below a 60% = F

The following is the grading scale for Graduate Students in TFT: A = Superior Achievement B = Satisfactorily demonstrates potential for professional achievement C = Passed but work does not indicate potential for professional achievement F = Failure S = Satisfactory (achievement at grade B level or better) U = Unsatisfactory I = Incomplete IP = In Progress (for multiple-quarter courses) DR = Deferred Report

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Please also refer to the UCLA Rules of Student Conduct at the below website:

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