

# AARON F. BRATEMAN

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## SAMPLE COURSE SYLLABUS AND PERFORMANCE SEASON

### Abstract

This curriculum and performance season is designed for a high school theater class in a performing arts school called *The Actor's Role in Contemporary American Theater*. Over the course of the year students will engage in four units—Longform Improvisation, Contemporary Theater, Technique and Scene Study, and Workshop, while participating in productions tied to their coursework.

### Personal Statement and Artistic Philosophy

Following a recent theater pop culture boom, actor training programs have popped up at universities all over the country. Some of those programs offer their students excellent training, equipping their graduates with concrete tools that allow them to become masters of their craft. Other programs, while I'm sure well-intentioned, fall short of that goal. Still, regardless of the success of the theatrical skill training these programs provide, students in both types of programs often walk away with little to no information about how the *business* of showbusiness actually functions, and in situations where students have been given a more thorough preparation, they, unfortunately, have often been prepared for a theatrical landscape that no longer exists. In high school and college, students have spent their time reading classic works, performing in Golden Age musicals, and working with teachers who have been disconnected from the industry for a number of years. In today's landscape, actors are being asked to do *everything*—write, direct, design, produce, compose, and of course, act. The idea of showing up to an open call and booking work is more of a longshot now than it ever was, and in this time where social media has given every one of us the power to be a *creator*, the industry is seeing more and more success stories that have been fueled by a philosophy of artists creating their own work. I, for

one, believe we should embrace this idea with open arms. It is incredibly inspiring to the actor, who no longer needs to sit around waiting for their opportunity, but we also must equip our students to succeed in a world where their best shot of working comes from being involved in the inception of new work, or forging it themselves. Therefore, this curriculum seeks to not only teach essential acting skills that can be applied in any theatrical situation, but to also immerse students in the world of contemporary theater and the process through which plays are created and produced.

### **Intended Participants**

This curriculum and performance season is designed for high school theater students in a performing arts school. Though this is not an introductory class, it represents a more primary level of training within the broader scope of this sort of performing arts program. Therefore, it is best suited for sophomores who have significant prior theatrical experience. It is expected that students have participated in multiple theatrical productions, and have a working knowledge of basic script analysis skills, acting techniques, and theater vocabulary. Students will also be expected to have a basic understanding of the theatrical landscape as a whole—familiarity with Broadway, general theater history, and the various different jobs that exist in theater. The curriculum is designed for a class of no more than 20 students. Students in the performing arts school would be required to take this class, having auditioned to get into the program. It is expected that such a performing arts school would be situated in or near an urban center, and as a result it is expected that the student body will be widely diverse.

Instruction for this curriculum will take place in a black box theater space. The space has a totally flexible floor plan, theatrical lights, plenty of chairs, acting blocks, tables, and standard rehearsal props. Risers can be set up to create audience stadium seating if desired. Students

have access to laptop computers for research and the room has a smartboard that can be stored away as needed. There is a large theatrical library that features numerous plays and a variety of contemporary theatrical texts. The school also has teachers that specialize in other areas of theatrical creation and who provide assistance on student productions in their areas of expertise.

Since the school is a performing arts school, the arts training it provides is considered pre-conservatory training. The classwork prepares students to succeed in conservatory style university programs with the understanding that many students will choose to not pursue a life in the arts or even a college program in the arts. Still, the school has very high aesthetic expectations from its students and faculty, and the work created is held to high professional standards.

### **Overarching Understandings and Performances Tasks**

As a result of taking this course, students will be able to actively participate as actors in the creation of contemporary theatrical works, having developed a clear sense of themselves as theater artists through a deep exploration of dramatic material, rigorous acting training, and intensive participation in scene and production work. Work in the class is used to enhance the performance season, which has been specifically designed for the sophomore class and culminates in a fully student run One-Act Festival. In the Longform Improvisation unit, students will engage in a historical and practical study of modern improvisation through reading, research, videos, and participation in a variety of theater games and exercises. They will then apply this knowledge to the performance of longform improv, particularly the *Harold*. Throughout the unit, students will be responsible for completing a research project on improv history, performing on a *Harold* “team”, and submitting a journal that documents ongoing learning—accomplishments, frustrations, insights, questions, etc. In the Contemporary Theater

unit, students will engage in an exploration of contemporary theater through readings, videos, and live performances. They will examine what issues today's theater artists are wrestling with, and how they have gone about addressing them. Through this mixed study of content and form, which will include a focus on various production elements, students will think about what kind of theater they would like to see in our world at this moment in time. Students will read a variety of plays throughout the unit, attend a live performance, and present a production proposal for a piece of their own choosing. In the Technique and Scene Study unit, students will activate the plays they encountered in the previous unit. They will strengthen their script analysis abilities to open the path to committed acting performances that build on the skills learned in the Longform Improvisation unit. Students will be assigned scene work that they will rehearse and perform in class. Additionally, they will continue to submit journal reflections that document ongoing learning, including a strong focus on self-assessment.

The learning in this semester will be used to set students up for success as they move onto the second semester which includes units on workshopping a new play and self-producing a one-act festival. In the workshopping unit, students will learn how to apply the considerations of contemporary material and their acting skills to the process of working on a new play that they will create with a professional playwright. Alongside the playwright, they will explore the intricacies of developing a new piece of theater from all sides of a production. This process will in turn prepare students to tackle an entirely self-produced one-act festival at the end of the year while they learn to deal with the considerations of self-producing in class.

## Performance Season- A Community Heals

### 1. Improv Nights

Cast Size: 16 (2 teams of 8 students)

Students in the sophomore class will perform a weekly hour-long improv comedy show that is split between two teams. Improv is one of the fastest growing forms of modern theatrical performance, with theaters and training programs popping up all across the country over the last 20 years. Improv performance is entirely generated by the performers, which primes students to start thinking about and undertake the self-generated work they will create later in the season. Furthermore, improv performance is directly reflective of a community and its issues and has always been an art form created by and for *the people*. These performances will, of course, provide performance practice for the skills learned in the Longform Improvisation unit.

### 2. Contemporary Play

Title: *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play*

Author: Anne Washburn

Cast Size: 8 (5f,3m) (Could be double-cast)

Anne Washburn created *Mr. Burns* in collaboration with the actors at the Woolly Mammoth Theater Company. They used a process that is similar to the one students will ultimately engage in during the workshop production. Additionally, *Mr. Burns* was widely produced by regional theaters across America and serves as a prime example of the type of contemporary play students might encounter in the professional world. The play was chosen because of its post-apocalyptic themes and stories of a community trying to keep it together following a world-changing moment, which will resonate with students following the Coronavirus

pandemic. The play directly ties into the contemporary theater unit students will be involved with in class.

### **3. Contemporary Musical**

Title: *Come From Away*

Authors: Irene Sankoff and David Hein

Cast Size: 16 (12 Characters+Ensemble-6f,6m)

Like, *Mr. Burns*, *Come From Away* was workshopped before it made its way to New York.

The show was originally presented on Broadway in the “poor theater” style, which is an effective way of working for students to learn about as they begin thinking about generating their own theater on a tight budget. Additionally, when the rights are released, regional theaters across the country will surely present the musical, giving students another opportunity to engage in work that they might actually encounter in the professional world.

The musical, which is about the best of humanity and a community coming together in a time of crisis, will directly reflect on the experiences of students and their communities during the global Coronavirus pandemic and continue the healing and reflection this season intends to promote. Students will be able to apply their acting skills from the Technique and Scene Study unit directly to this experience.

### **4. Workshop of a New Play**

Title: TBD

Author: Jess Honovich

Cast Size: 16

In the second semester, working with a professional playwright, students will workshop a new play. This experience will require them to synthesize the skills and theories they have

been developing throughout the curriculum. They will explore the intricacies of developing a new piece of theater from all sides of a production. Students will have input about what they would like to create a play about, and they will work with the playwright, in constant conversation, as they create the piece.

## **5. One-Act Festival**

Titles: TBD

Authors: TBD

Cast Size: Various

Students will write, direct, design, act in, and produce a festival of one-act plays. Building on their experiences with contemporary theater texts and workshopping a new play, students will now transfer that learning to a context where they are entirely in charge. Truly putting into practice the ideas of self-generated theater, students will create a bold new theatrical experience that is entirely their own.

**SYLLABUS FOR  
THE ACTOR'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY THEATER  
2021-2022**

**Teacher:** Mr. Aaron F. Brateman  
**Email:** mraaronfbrateman@nameofschool.edu

### **Course Objectives**

In this class, we will learn to actively participate as actors in the creation of contemporary theatrical works, having developed a clear sense of ourselves as theater artists through a deep exploration of dramatic material, rigorous acting training, and intensive participation in scene and production work.

The course will be broken up into four sections:

#### **1. Improv**

We will engage in a historical and practical study of modern improvisation through reading, research, videos, and participation in a variety of theater games and exercises. We will then apply this knowledge to the performance of longform improv, particularly the *Harold*.

There will be select readings from:

- *Improvisation at the Speed of Life* by T.J. Jagodowski and David Pasquesi with Pamela Victor
- *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* by Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh
- *How to Be the Greatest Improviser on Earth* by Will Hines
- *Improv Nation* by Sam Wasson

In this section, you will be responsible for completing a research project on improv history—that may be about an organization, a person, a technique, etc. You should articulate the way that piece of history has shaped modern improv performance. You may present your findings in any way you choose—a written report, a video, a song, a visual art piece, etc.

You will also participate in a variety of theater games and improv exercises which will build our improv skills and allow us to tackle longform improv and the *Harold*. Working as a team, we will strengthen our awareness of our own work, as well as the work of our peers.

Additionally, you will submit a weekly written reflection that documents ongoing learning—accomplishments, frustrations, insights, questions, etc. This is time for you to codify your own thinking. This is not a place to give what you think I want to hear. I am more interested in the genuine reactions you are having to the work you are doing. If every day makes you angry, and you're not learning anything, tell me about it! I encourage you to actually take



the time to make this meaningful for yourself. At times, we may use these reactions in larger group discussions.

## 2. Contemporary Theater

Together, we will engage in an exploration of contemporary theater through readings, videos, and live performances. We will examine what issues today's theater artists are wrestling with, and how they have gone about addressing them. Through this mixed study of content and form, which will include a focus on various production elements, we will think about what kind of theater we would like to see in our world at this moment in time.

In class, we will read a variety of contemporary plays out loud. Possible plays include:

- *The Wolves* by Sarah DeLappe
- *Bike America* by Mike Lew
- *A Bright New Boise* by Samuel D. Hunter
- *The Cake* by Bekah Brunstetter
- *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen
- *An Octoroon* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins
- *The Flick* by Annie Baker
- *Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play* by Anne Washburn
- *Failure: A Love Story* by Philip Dawkins
- *Choir Boy* by Tarell Alvin McCraney
- *Oslo* by J.T. Rogers
- *Flyin' West* by Pearl Cleage
- *Eurydice* by Sarah Ruhl
- *Dark Play, or Stories for Boys* by Carlos Murillo
- *Hir* by Taylor Mac
- *Defacing Michael Jackson* by Aurin Squire
- *Guards at the Taj* by Rajiv Joseph
- *Notes from the Field* by Anna Deavere Smith
- *In the Heights* by Lin Manuel-Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes
- *Fun Home* by Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron

You are expected to attend **two live performances** during the quarter, either with the class (I will arrange those opportunities), or on your own (if you don't like what I've picked out!) Theater is a living, breathing thing, and we will learn the most about it by experiencing it. If you choose to see a show on your own, feel free to support a theater and purchase a ticket (visit [www.broadwayforbrokepeople.com](http://www.broadwayforbrokepeople.com) for the cheapest way to get Broadway tickets), but you can see many shows for free by volunteering to usher at one of their performances. You will help give out programs and get people seated, and then get to watch the show with everyone else. Here are some organizations you can get in contact with if you choose to take this route:

## **BROADWAY**

### Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC)

Call the Freidman Theatre Volunteer Usher line at 212-399-3000 ext. 5463 or email [volunteer@mtc-nyc.org](mailto:volunteer@mtc-nyc.org).

### Roundabout Theatre Company

American Airlines Theatre- Email [AAVolunteer@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:AAVolunteer@roundabouttheatre.org) with three dates you are available.

Studio 54- Sign up in person at The Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre. Check in with security and ask to register as volunteer usher.

### Second Stage Theater

Email house manager [RPonce@2ST.com](mailto:RPonce@2ST.com) with your full name, phone number, and productions in which you are interested.

## **OFF-BROADWAY**

### Atlantic Theatre Company

Email [ushers@atlantictheater.org](mailto:ushers@atlantictheater.org).

For more information go to [www.atlantictheater.org/faq](http://www.atlantictheater.org/faq).

### Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC)

Stage I and Stage II at New York City Center- Email [mtchousemanager@nycitycenter.org](mailto:mtchousemanager@nycitycenter.org).

### Playwrights Horizons

Email [usher@phnyc.org](mailto:usher@phnyc.org) with “ADD TO LIST” in the subject line.

### Rattlestick Playwrights Theater

Email [usher@rattlestick.org](mailto:usher@rattlestick.org) with “USHER” in the subject line.

For more information visit [www.rattlestick.org/get-involved/work-with-us](http://www.rattlestick.org/get-involved/work-with-us).

### Roundabout Theatre Company

Laura Pels Theatre- Sign up in person at The Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre. Check in with security and ask to register as volunteer usher.

### Second Stage Theater

Email house manager [JSchliefer@2ST.com](mailto:JSchliefer@2ST.com) with your full name, phone number, and productions in which you are interested.

You will also be asked to submit and present a production proposal for a piece of your choosing. It may be a piece we looked at together, or one of your own choosing. This proposal should reflect your own interests and style. You will need to defend your proposal to the class.

### 3. Technique and Scene Study

In this unit, we will activate the plays we encountered in the previous unit. We will strengthen our script analysis skills to open the path to committed acting performances that build on the skills learned in the improv unit. You will be assigned scene work that you will rehearse and perform in class. We will focus on taking ownership of our work throughout the rehearsal process.

You will be expected to read:

- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder, Lee Michael Cohn, Madeleine Olnek, Nathaniel Pollack, Robert Previtio, and Scott Zigler

As well as selections from:

- *True and False* by David Mamet
- *An Actor's Companion* by Seth Barrish

You will have rehearsal time in class, but you will need to do preparation outside of class as well in order to be successful in this unit—this may require you to spend time reading your play, learning lines, and possibly getting together to rehearse with your scene partner. Scenes presented in class will receive feedback from me, as well as your peers. We will work putting the theories we have read about into practice so that you walk away feeling like you have a reliable process.

You will continue to submit a weekly written reflection that documents ongoing learning—accomplishments, frustrations, insights, questions, etc. As always, this writing should be authentic, and a real documentation of your experience. This writing may serve us in discussion, as well.

### 4. Workshop

Our class will culminate in the workshop of a new play with a professional playwright. This experience will require you to synthesize the skills and theories you have been developing throughout the year. Working with the playwright, we will explore the intricacies of developing a new piece of theater from all sides of a production.

This project will require you to be at some rehearsals outside of normal class time.

As the workshop process will involve constant collaboration and assessment, you will not be required to keep a written record of the process, though you, of course, are welcome to.

After the workshop process has concluded, you will be required to write a 4-5 page essay reflecting on your experience in the workshop, and the class as a whole. As always, this writing should reflect an honest evaluation borne out of meaningful thinking. What have you

learned about yourself as an artist and what will that mean to you as you move forward?  
What comes next?

## **Class Expectations**

You are expected to be on time and ready to work when class begins. Being late will affect the time we all have to do our work, not just you. You should bring any materials you need to be an active participant in class that day, ie. Readings for discussion, scripts, etc. Electronics like phones and laptops may be brought to class, but should not be taken out or used during class time without my permission. In order to maintain an environment where we can take risks, it is essential that we do not film each other during class time. If you violate this policy, you will be asked to delete the video in front of me, and put the device away. If it happens again, I will be forced to confiscate the device, which will then be returned to your caregiver through the process outlined in the student handbook.

I understand that your days are full and busy, and that life sometimes gets in the way. That's okay. We are on the same team, and I will do everything I can to help you have a great time and succeed. This goes two ways though, and I expect you to maintain an open dialogue with me about any needs you may have that day. Accommodations can be made, but not if I don't know about an issue.

Finally, acting can be hard, and it requires bravery and support. We will often be stepping out of our comfort zones, seeking to achieve the unachievable. It is important that we do everything we can to be there for each other. A lot of times, we will fall flat on our faces. I don't expect you to always succeed, but I do expect you to try your best and to keep trying even when things are challenging. There *will be* the other side. I hope as we work together, I can earn your trust, and that as a group we will all do some really amazing things.

## **Class Materials**

- Notebook
- Folder
- Pencil
- Highlighter
- Texts/Readings/Handouts
- Scripts
- Props/costumes

## **Absences and Assignments**

It is essential to your success that you are actively participating in class. Therefore, it is expected that you will be present in all classes. If for some reason you miss class on a day an assignment is due in person, you are expected to turn in the assignment the next day you are present. If the assignment is due electronically, it should still be turned in on time.

## Late Work

You are expected to submit all work by the assigned due date. You will lose one letter grade for each day after the deadline that an assignment is turned in. Deadlines are important, and I expect you to meet them, but I also understand that your life is bigger than school. As such, you will receive **one** late assignment pass at the beginning of each semester, which you may use on any assignment that you are supposed to complete on your own. If other students are dependent on you to complete that work, though, you may not use the pass on that assignment (ie. Knowing your lines in a scene you do with someone else). The pass will grant you an extension of **three** days on that assignment (this includes weekends, if applicable). After that, the late work will lose one letter grade for each day it is late.

## Grading Policy

You will *not* be graded on how “good” an actor you are, though you will always receive feedback about your growth from me on any performances you do. Rather, you will be graded on the work and discipline you bring to the process, your engagement in making meaning, and what kind of ensemble member you conduct yourself as. In other words, you will be graded on your participation, preparation, projects, and written assignments. **Three or more** unexcused absences will affect the student’s participation grade.

35%	Daily Participation/Preparation
35%	Projects
30%	Written Assignments

Grades will be given on this scale:

A	90-100%
B	80-89%
C	70-79%
D	60-69%
F	0-59%

Please sign, tear off, and return this slip to indicate that you have read through the syllabus.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Thanks a bunch! Looking forward to a wonderful year with you.

-Aaron F. Brateman