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SAMPLE SYLLABUS

Film Chemistry: A Course for Directors in Working with Actors in Film

The focus of this course is helping film directors get the most out of their actors. By learning from an experienced professional screen actor, young directors get critical insight in how to build effective and compelling screen performances. Students will gain experience in helping actors to be open and responsive in listening to stimuli, to be simple and passionate, to work within real human space, and to stay connected to the basic truths of a scene. By filming scenes in a workshop format, students practice crucial skills in creating productive work environments and giving insightful, quick, and effective adjustments to actors. This course does not address the technical elements of shot-making or cinematography, nor does it encourage directors to give line readings or direct the playing of emotions. Student directors in this course will practice working closely with actors, learning to approach different acting styles, build engaging and intelligent drama, stay mindful of the circumstances in a scene, recognize truthful moments, understand specific expectations of contemporary filmmaking environments, and develop heartfelt, truthful, and persuasive performances.

1. Introduction. Course Overview. Learning to Bottom-line a Scene. What does it mean to be truthful to the circumstances? Identifying the priorities of what you hear. The role of words and of the text: what do you see when you look in a text?
2. Filming: scenes using 2 actors and 1 director. Blocking using the Bottom Line.
3. Review filmed scenes and Blocking. Encouraging actors to work together; each actor focuses on what he or she needs to accomplish with the other actor. Keeping actors working with positive drive, actively pursuing what is needed.
4. Filming: Tape new scene with 1 actor and 1 director. Performing scenes with no words and using props. Following and playing out the drive to the end of the scene.
5. Review filmed scenes. Committing to “yesterday’s world,” the importance of life before a scene starts. Opening up the top of the scene.
6. Filming: scene with 2 actors and 1 director. Close-ups using the Bottom Line and Selective Listening. Physical and emotional focus changes based on the Bottom Line.

7. Review filmed scenes and Close-ups. An actor's drive. Basic Listening: "I am getting what I want;" "I am not getting what I want."
8. Filming: new scene with various formats. What constitutes drama in a scene? Going away from the drama. Going against the playing of a profession. Going away from the playing of a type. Building a balance between truthful and entertaining performance.
9. Review filmed scenes and the strength of choices. The difference between performing out and inviting an audience in. The strength of a silence.
10. Filming: 2 scenes of 2 actors with 1 director. Six setups and coverage, including adjustments, in 30 minutes.
11. Review filmed scenes. Discuss challenges and successes.
12. Using the Essence exercise. Each director uses the Essence exercise in a casting scenario. Going against type. What to look for in a reading.
13. Filming: new scene in various formats. Giving adjustments efficiently. Rhythm and bracketing.
14. Review filmed scenes. Discuss adjustments.
15. Filming: new scenes with pairs of actors. Talk-backs and other exercises to bring what is needed out of actors. Dealing with the obstacle out loud during filming.
16. Review filmed scenes and talk-back.
17. Working with actors before highly emotional scenes. Each director will work with at least 1 actor to prepare before an emotional scene. (Combat exercise. Directors practice helping actors get connected to specific dynamics in a combative scene.)
18. Final project preparation.
19. Filming: Final Project scenes. Each director uses up to 4 actors and films up to eight setups and coverage, including adjustments, in 30 minutes.
20. Review filmed final project scenes.

Texts:

Barr, Tony. *Acting for the Camera*

Lumet, Sidney. *Making Movies*

Mamet, David. *On Directing Film*

Mamet, David. *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*

Mamet, David. *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*

Weston, Judith. *Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film & Television*

Films:

Coming Home

The Door in the Floor

Fatal Attraction

Glengarry Glen Ross

Looking for Bobby Fisher

The Miracle Worker (1962)

Ordinary People

Ray

They Don't Shoot Horses, Do They?

Vera Drake

When Harry Met Sally