

Wesleyan University - Winter Session 2025
Course Syllabus

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Host Department: **FILM448Z**
Course title: **Directing Actors for the Camera**
Instructor: **David Kendall**
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MTWRF 10am-12pm, 1pm-4pm

Course Description:

Arguably the most important instrument in the Director's arsenal for storytelling is the Actor. This workshop course aims to give students a set of tools to draw on when facing the actual task of telling a story through a lens with performers. Through discussions and exercises, we'll cover script analysis, casting, rehearsing, staging, framing, editing, and more. Emphasis will be on creating strategies for getting the desired performance. Students will be acting in scenes as well as directing them. The goal throughout is to **demystify** all elements and for each student to understand better what kind of Director they want to be.

The instructor has been a member of the Directors Guild of America since 1990 and a member of the Writers Guild of America since 1985. As Director, Writer, and Producer; he has credits on over 600 episodes of television. Classes will also feature guest appearances (via Zoom) by professionals in the field.

Assignments: Students will complete (as Director) the production of three short scenes (shooting and editing them). An additional final project will be a Pitch Meeting where each student will prepare/analyze a feature film script and pitch themselves as its Director, emphasizing their understanding of the script and what they would bring to realizing it as a film.

Expectations: As this is a short but intensive course, prompt attendance to every class is required. Participation in class discussions and exercises is essential. **Production of student scenes will involve working on the WEEKENDS.**

Context of Screenings and Readings: We will be viewing video clips as examples from a variety of sources, including the instructor's own work, to illustrate challenges and practical solutions. We will also be reading a variety of screenplays and watching a range of movies and television shows, not all will have the sensitivities to social and cultural issues that we have today. The goal is to consider each work in the context of when it was created, gleaning what can be learned from them despite, in some cases, material that we know today is offensive.

Pre-Class Work:

Students will complete a "Get To Know" form **ON VIDEO** asking them, among other things, to name a selection of films and television shows that have influenced them.

Screening: "Michael Caine: Acting In Film", YouTube video

Reading: "Judith Weston: Top 10 Ideas for Directing Actors", online article

Reading: *Elia Kazan: Kazan on Directing* - pages 237 - 289

Reading: *David Mamet: On Directing Film* - pages 1 - 7, pages 103 - 107

Podcast: Mike Nichols: Museum of the Moving Image, Pinewood Dialogues (1990)

Reading/Screening: read *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* play script (written by August Wilson), then the screenplay (by Ruben Santiago-Hudson), then view the film (directed by George C. Wolfe).

Reading: screenplays: *The Matrix*, *Eighth Grade*, *The Social Network*, additional feature screenplay TBA

Research and Prep: Select the screenplay of a feature film (or longform TV pilot) that you connect with deeply and prepare to discuss what drew you to that work. Identify a scene (2 to 4 pages) that is heavy on dialogue (with 2 or 3 characters) as you will be directing a scene from this script during the course of the class (**Scene Assignment 2**). Drama or comedy or anything in between!

**Course schedule will be adjusted to meet the day-to-day needs of the class.
Screenings and readings are tentative and subject to change.**

Day 1 Tuesday January 7

"Think Global, Act Local"

OVERVIEW: THE SCRIPT, THE SCENE, THE SHOT

- The job of the Director and the craft of the Director
- Discussion of Pre-Class readings and Pre-Selected scripts

Assignment of your "Flat Scenes" (in class): This is a scene with "flat" dialogue that can be interrupted in different ways and will be Scene Assignment #1.

Homework:

Preparing two different approaches to your Flat Scene

Screening: *Dracula* (1931) English language version AND *Drácula* (1931) Spanish language version

Day 2 Wednesday January 8

"Faking the Truth"

ACTORS & DIRECTORS, CASTING AND DIRECTOR CHOICES

- The importance of casting
- "The Method" and different acting approaches, creating characters

Scene Assignment #1 (in class): Production of Flat Scenes, using classmates as cast and crew

Homework:

Edit **Scene Assignment #1** and submit two different versions of your Flat Scene

Reading: "The Definitive Guide to Uta Hagen's Acting Technique", online article

Screening: *The Strange One* (1957), feature film drama directed by Jack Garfein

DAY 3 Thursday January 9

"Forget about the Camera"

THE DIRECTOR'S PROCESS IN SCENE WORK

- Screen and discuss Flat Scenes assignments and the Directors' choices
- Reflections on casting: meeting actors where they are

Preparation (in class): Choosing scenes from the Pre-Selected Script (Scene Assignment #2) and formulating how to shoot them

Homework:

Reading: "Framing: Joe Menendez on Steven Spielberg's Framing", online article

Screening: One feature film and several TV pilots, TBA

Day 4 Friday January 10

"Everything's for the Camera"

BEING ON SET: STAGING, COMPOSITION, CAMERA MOVEMENT, COVERAGE FOR EDITING

- Staging with the camera in mind, drama staging vs. comedy staging
- Shooting for the edit: strategies to protect yourself in the editing room

Introduction of Final Assignment (in class): Selecting a screenplay for the Pitch Meeting, which will also contain the scene for Scene Assignment #3

Weekend Homework:

Shooting, editing and **submitting** your Pre-Selected Screenplay Scene (**Scene Assignment #2**)

Reading: *Melissa & Joey* multi-camera script

Day 5 Monday January 13

"Best Seat in the House"

MULTI-CAMERA: CLOSER TO THE ACTORS, CLOSER TO THE AUDIENCE

- Situation Comedy, Melodrama, Staged Plays
- Staging for the proscenium
- Overview of situation comedy production, top to bottom (with video examples)

Homework:

Prepare your Pitch Meeting on the Selected Screenplay

Prepare your scene from that same Selected Screenplay (Scene Assignment #3)

Reading: Multi-camera scenes from scripts TBA

Screening: One feature film comedy and two comedy/drama TV pilots, TBA

Day 6 Tuesday January 14

"Embracing the Limitations"

MULTI-CAM PRODUCTION, IN CLASS

- In class production of multi-camera scenes
- Going through the process: Staging, rehearsing, camera blocking, shooting

Homework:

Prepare for the Pitch Meeting and Scene Assignment #3.

Screening: *Good Time* (2017), feature film directed by the Safdie Brothers

Day 7 Wednesday January 15

“Autocrat or Diplomat”

COLLABORATION PART 1: THE DIRECTOR’S TEAM

- Directing a Movie or Television Pilot vs. Directing an Episodic TV Episode
- Working with a Producer or TV Showrunner
- What happens in pre-production: Imagining the look
- Captaining a Team: Director of Photography, Assistant Director, Editor, and the crew
- The postproduction process

Homework:

Continued preparation for the Pitch Meeting and Scene Assignment #3

Screening: Feature film TBA

Day 8 Thursday January 16

“Deep Dive into Prep”

COLLABORATION PART 2: TOOLS FOR PREP

- Shot Lists, Storyboarding, and Previsualizations
- Stunt Coordinator & Choreographer
- Special Effects (created on set) and Visual Effects (created in post-production)

Homework:

Shot-list or Storyboard your upcoming scene (Scene Assignment #3).

Screening: *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2020), feature film directed by Shaka King

Day 9 Friday January 17

“The Poetry of Prep vs. The Prose of Production”

PREPPING FINAL PROJECT

- Leadership as a Director
- Preparing your Pitch Meeting, what a Producer wants to hear

In Class & Homework:

Final prep for **Weekend Shooting of Scene Assignment #3**

Day 10/11 Monday & Tuesday January 20/21

“Wrap”

SHOOTING/EDITING & PITCHING

- Complete the production of Scene Assignment #3
- Individual Pitch Meetings

Edited Scene Assignment #3 due Wednesday January 22

Evaluation:

10% Scene Assignment #1

15% Scene Assignment #2

25% Scene Assignment #3 & Pitch Meeting

50% participation in discussions/exercises.