

Drama 103 / Winter 2025
Theater & Mental Health

Instructor: Dr. Minu Park (minwoop2@uci.edu)

Date/Time/Location: M/W 10:00-11:20 am, CAC 3100B

Office Hour: After class and by appt. (Wed 4-5 pm, sign-up at <https://calendly.com/minupark0/103-office-hour>)

Course Description

This course explores how the concept of Mental Health is constructed, represented, and reimagined through theater. Using a diverse selection of plays, films, critical readings, and performances, we will interrogate the modern and colonial origins of “mental health” as a framework while exploring alternative—artistic, creative, decolonial—approaches to understanding and confronting these issues. Through themes such as institutional critique, selections of mental health states such as depression and anxiety, the relationship between gender and madness, and Indigenous approaches to healing, we will uncover the unique ways in which theater offers space for reflection, experimentation, and community connection.

Throughout the course, we will grapple with fundamental questions about what “mental health” means and examine theater’s unique relationship to mental health experiences and discourse. Rather than accepting mental health as a fixed concept, we will approach it as a complex and elusive framework that carries different meanings across cultures, times, and contexts. Through creative engagement and critical analysis, students will have opportunities to reflect on their own relationships to and definitions of mental health, culminating in a final project that allows for personal exploration of these themes.

Note: while this course is open to creating a space for healing, its primary aims are for learning and critical reflection, and thus is not a therapeutic program.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Understand key themes and critical debates surrounding mental health as a modern construct.
2. Examine how theatrical practices engage with and represent mental health, trauma, and healing.
3. Explore experimental dramaturgies and the radical possibilities of theater as a site for confronting and reimagining mental states.
4. Develop analytical and creative skills through written reflections, group presentations, and creative projects.

Assignments

1. Weekly Reflective Letters (30%)

Each week, students will submit a 150-200 word reflective letter responding to the upcoming week’s materials (We will talk about the “letter” format during Week 1). Letters can address themes, readings, or performances and may take the form of correspondence to oneself, a

character, or another chosen recipient. Due each Sunday at 11:59 PM. Grading is based on completion. The lowest two scores will be automatically dropped. Note: There are no reflective letter assignments for Weeks 1, 7, and 10.

Sample Prompts:

- Letter to self at the beginning of the course to future self at the end of the course; read at the end of the course and reflect
- Letter to loved one who you think would like to or needs to learn lessons from this course
- Letter to self (past, present, or future) at the end of the course about what you've learned and why it matters
- Letter to the author about something that has resonated with you from their work
- Letter to the university, explaining things you've learned from the course that you think the university needs to know
- Letter to an anonymous "reader"

2. Group Presentation (15%)

In small groups, students will analyze a selected play from the syllabus, focusing on its portrayal of the world in experimental and creative ways. Examine elements like stage design, lighting, acting, costumes, makeup, narrative construction, dialogue, use of colors, etc. Discuss how these elements differ from conventional approaches, their innovative contributions, and their effects on conveying the work's message and shaping the audience's experience. Grading is based on the level of detail provided by the presenters through examples.

I will demonstrate a sample presentation on *Every Brilliant Thing* during Week 3. Students will sign up for their preferred presentation date/play during Week 2-3. Sign-ups will be open from Monday, Week 2 (Jan 13), to Wednesday, Week 3 (Jan 22), on the Canvas Discussion board.

3. Final Creative or Analytical Project (35%)

Students have two options:

- Research Paper: Write a 2,000–2,500 word analytical paper exploring themes related to the course.
- Creative Portfolio: Develop a project reflecting your own engagement with mental health, such as a website, video, playwriting, screenwriting, drawings, or other forms of artistic expression (i.e. a tarot card deck). Include a dramaturgical description connecting your ideas, themes, aesthetic choices, and the final output. A reflective statement (500–750 words) must accompany creative projects.

Final assignments are due **March 18, 2025, at 11:59 PM**. Midterm check-in and final project overview will take place during Week 7.

The final project may be completed individually or in groups of students; if working as a group, please note that the project scope will be adjusted accordingly and each member will submit a brief reflection on their contributions. Collaborative approaches are recommended when aiming for richer insights and meaningful connections within our class community. Group work allows you to share diverse perspectives, build on each other's strengths, and develop essential teamwork skills.

4. Attendance and Participation (20%)

This includes attending class, engaging in discussions, and providing thoughtful feedback to peers. Two absences are allowed without requiring an explanation. Please use these absences wisely, as I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. Starting in Week 3, I will distribute attendance cards at the beginning of class. Students will identify at least one keyword or concept from that day's session and conduct a brief brainstorm on how it could inform their final project. The format is flexible: it can include a word, a sentence, an idea (such as project formats like creative writing, tarot card design, etc.), a casual question, or a stream-of-consciousness write-up of brief thoughts. Please submit the cards at the end of class to record your attendance.

5. Extra Credit: Contribution to Class Archive (5%)

Throughout the course, I will compile an archive on "Theater and Mental Health." Students can earn extra credit by contributing three or more resources **that they identify as theater** in some way. These could include plays, films, creative writing, paintings, photography, or informational materials (e.g., articles, books, drama therapy programs, or non-profit organizations). Submissions should reflect a clear connection to theatrical ideas, forms, or practices in relation to mental health.

For each submission, provide:

- A 2-3 sentence summary of the resource
- A brief explanation of its relevance to mental health

Course Policies

Communication

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions, concerns, or thoughts about the course. I typically respond to emails within 24 hours during weekdays and within 48 hours over weekends/holidays.

Content Warnings

The course material engages with challenging themes, including trauma, death, and mental illness. Students are encouraged to practice self-care and communicate any concerns to the instructor.

Late Work

Extensions may be granted in exceptional cases if requested in advance. Late submissions without prior communication will incur a grade deduction of 5% per day.

VPN

Please familiarize yourself with using the UCI VPN for accessing library resources off campus (<https://www.lib.uci.edu/connect>). This will give you access to library materials, necessary to complete course readings/viewings.

Academic Integrity

All work submitted must be original and appropriately cited. Plagiarism will result in disciplinary action according to university policy.

Respect and Inclusion

The classroom is a space for mutual respect and learning. Disrespectful behavior, including language that is discriminatory or dismissive, will not be tolerated.

Accommodations

Students with disabilities or other learning needs should communicate with the instructor at the start of the course to discuss accommodations.

Weekly Schedule

W1: Self-care and Drama Therapy

- Jan 6 Introduction
Jan 8 Mimi Khúc, *dear elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss* (2024), p. 1-15
Augusto Boal, excerpt from “The Theater of the Oppressed”

W2: Indigenous Approaches to Mental Health

- Jan 13 “Theatre as Medicine with CJ Ochoco” from Building Our Own Tables S4: Ep3
Jan 15 *Crazywise: Rethinking Madness: Psychosis and Spiritual Awakening* (2017, dir. Phil Borges)

W3: Depression and Anxiety: Coping with Death

- Jan 20 No Class: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Jan 22 Duncan MacMillan, *Every Brilliant Thing* (2013)
Optional: *Melancholia* (2011, dir. Lars von Trier)

W4: Institution, Modernity & Horror: Mental Health as modern condition

- Jan 27 Sara Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* (2000)
Jan 29 Michel Foucault, “Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason”
Preface (p. 6-9), *The Great Confinement* (p.50-57)

W5: American Musical and Mental Health

- Feb 3 Michael R. Jackson, *A Strange Loop* (2020)
Feb 5 Aleksei Grinenko, “Introduction” (p. 1-15) in *Seriously Mad: Mental Distress and the Broadway Musical* (2023)

W6: Women and Madness

- Feb 10 María Irene Fornés, *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977)
Feb 12 Penny Farfan, “Feminism, metatheatricality, and mise-en-scene in Maria Irene Fornes’s *Fefu and Her Friends*” (1997)

W7: Artist Mental Health

- Feb 17 No Class: Presidents’ Day
Feb 19 ~~Guest Lecture: Crystal Kim~~ Simon Stephens, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*
Final Project overview

W8: Disability and Mental Health

- ~~Feb 24 Simon Stephens, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2013)~~
Feb 26 Marla Carlson, “Chapter 3. Performing as Autists.” In *Affect, Animals, and Autists: Feeling*
24 *Around the Edges of the Human in Performance* (2018)
Optional: *Mary and Max* (2009, dir. Adam Elliot)
Feb 26 Guest Speaker: Crystal Kim

W9: Crime and Mental Health

Mar 3 Paula Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive* (1997)

Mar 5 Herren Graley, “Narrating, Witnessing, and Healing Trauma in Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*” (2010)

Optional: *M* (1931, dir. Fritz Lang)

W10: Immersive Theater

Mar 10 Discussion on immersive theater and game playing (no reading)

Mar 12 Office hours (optional)

Final Week

Final project due: **Tue, March 18, 2025**, at 11:59 PM