Verbatim Bodies
for a theater that emerges
from the physicality of the performers

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Presented at ABLE Assembly on April 9 & 10, 2022

Hi. My name is Trà Nguyễn, I'm a theater maker. I'm finishing my MFA in Dramatic Writing at Carnegie Mellon University. It's my honor to present at ABLE Assembly today.

In this video I would like to share with you my working hypothesis called **"Verbatim Bodies"**. It is a tool for theater-making, for theater to emerge from the physicality of the performers. I'd love to hear your thought on it!

So, **Verbatim Bodies**, as a notion, as a theater-making tool, posits that the body embeds fictional characters and the play happens when the characters interact.

Let me go back a little to talk about the notion of "character".

So when we say "character" what do we mean? Hamlet? Godot? Joan d'Arc? What makes them the characters that we know them of?

Hm. Can't be their name, we remember Jack Nicholson so much more than whoever he plays in The Shining. Who might also be called Jack.

Or, in what narrative is Hamlet Hamlet? That he's an unfortunate prince? That his love interest is Ophelia? That he revenged his father? We would have to go at length detailing their actions, their plot points, ect…, in order for us to construct a hopefully not so flimsy Hamlet - he can't be just a prince, or the prince of Denmark, or the prince of Denmark of whom the father is murdered. We have to extend these plot points into covering at least a fair amount of what Shakespeare gave us. What's the line past which we don't have to add anymore? Hm… The time frame for this presentation unfortunately doesn't allow a full coverage so I'd just summarize it: we don't know how much is enough.

Yes another Shakespearean.

What about stage presence? Now we know that stage presence is something both transient and repetitive. When does a character emerge, do they go to sleep at curtain? In case of Juliet does the character dies when Juliet dies? And re-appear the next performance?

And so on and so forth. We all know practical ways through which a character is not there, so what now?

Apparently I claim that the body has a zillion characters in it. Let's look into it and bring the characters out for ourselves.

We do this by giving the body a truthful look. Not one to find things out, or to inquire, a look that opens its own pathway into the person, and thus leading us to the character.

This is 3P's, one of my earlier works, "The Performers Performing the Performed", in which a piano player barely plays four notes and a ballet dancer achieves about a half of a move. In twenty minutes.

So is twenty minutes enough for us to really look at someone?

Perhaps? Perhaps not? Perhaps if the person operates in what we understand as a theatrical world, we might weave the visual into the expectation and our own social reading into unlocking the fictional space around such person?

There's a dramatic pause here.

And just like that we have the first tool, the slowing down, a deliberate manipulation of time between the real, the social and the dramatic. We'll look at the second tool via these two examples.

We know her, don't we? Marina Abramovich, "The Artist is Present", and Tilda Swinton, "The Maybe".

Performance art. The performance only happens as the artist stays themselves. The performance artist brings their own body into the equation, so it makes sense that they don't retrieve it earlier than when the problem is solved - that is when the performance is done. You think?

You might think ok artists delegate all the time now. Yes. They do. But say, if Marina delegates this performance to someone, that someone isn't to play Marina, they'd need to do it as themselves. Yes?

Well this is a pre-recorded session, so I'll go on assuming you've given it somewhat a nod.

I would like to observe that Marina in the performance is still a character that differs from Marina everyday. They might do very similar gestures, they would sit, they would be silent, they would look at someone, they would stop looking at someone, etc, so on and so forth. But they are two different entities. The performing Marina, I might say, let emerge a character Marina.

From here, bridging with the idea of a character in dramatic story telling, I want to posit that the performing body allows the emergence of fictional characters without moving away from itself. Marina did not have to become a certain other Marina. The character stays in the betweenness. It dwells there. In the Verbatim Bodies.

Verbatim! I did borrow this from verbatim theater in which the words from real people are used as the basis of the theatric diction (dialogue, monologue, prologue, epilogue, the logues, you know, you name them). The idea is that what needs to be conveyed stays true to the person conveying it. But here it has to do with the bodies. A lot more than the text. But the text. The text. You say, the text is so important.

It is important and it is the third tool of this method.

You know when you you read things, or you speak things, there's a certain pattern that comes with your saying it out loud right? There's a certain musicality with it. Often we can't follow this musicality too much because we are busy interpreting the words. We can't help doing that. A thing spoken is a thing interpreted. So we follow our own reading of the play quite literarily. And my observation is that we are so focus on the following, that we forget the staying. We take what's offered as granted, so we forget what's offering. We forget the body in favor of the words. We still get a story, but I'd think, by rendering the bodies invisible.

In a time that it is critical to think about who we are, who we need to communicate with, and how to do so, I would think, to listen is as important as to speak, if not even more urgent, for who do we speak to if everyone speaks and nobody listens?

The text in this method would not just be the words, but the sonic, the atmospheric scape of the play.

I'd like to propose the third tool for this method: a kind of rhythm, sound scape, textual materials that corresponds to the pacing of the performance and not one that writes it up. I propose to let silence speak, and let the text be the buoys in the sea rather than the highway in the dessert. This proposal answers a long lasting question of what theater could do in our time. It could be the space for discourses, and as well, it could be the space that listens. That observes, truthfully.

To illustrate, I'd like to once again unabashedly show you an excerpt of my earlier mentioned work, 3P's. This is the 3rd iteration with the dialogue taken directly from the performers

"twenty"

That's it! That's the current tool set to make theater using "Verbatime Bodies". You have the secret now. You might have noticed that there's no mention of "acting". This method doesn't call for acting in the sense of transferring the body towards a character. It advocates that the body holds its ground for the characters to emerge.

What I would like to propose through this method, especially in the context of ABLE Assembly is this: a theater work can be driven by many things: text, movement, a message, a pedagogic moment, an experience, etc… bodies are one of the ways. The physical legacy contains in it more materials than we could verbally deliver. The language is there, as well as the stories, the musicality, and the space for togetherness, for understanding, as well as challenges and resistance. This theater need the graph, not the lyrics, for its musicality to be heard. I hope you give this a thought and experiment with it. Please do let me know if you try it out and what you thought of it! I'll share my screen one more time so that you have my contact. And let's discuss!

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So thank you once again for your attention. I really hope to hear from you! Bye!