

Verbatim Performance and Its Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

Verbatim performance catalyzes critical engagement in audiences while fostering empathy in ethnoactors and audiences. As an arts-based research modality, verbatim performance asks an audience to critically engage with data from interviews and media artifacts via a presentational acting style that can include portraying across identity. Ethnoactors make empathic connections to the real people they portray through close analysis and replication of speech and gestural patterns. This article situates verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool and connects it with ethnodrama and ethnotheatre while distinguishing it from verbatim theatre. Verbatim performance and associated terminology are defined and linked to the artistic practices and theoretical writings of Anna Deavere Smith and Bertolt Brecht. The article describes the origin and creation of NYU Steinhardt's Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL), shares VPL's mission, and offers three examples of VPL projects from the last five years: The Kavanaugh Files, The Serena Williams Project, and Whatever You

Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall.

As an arts-based methodological tool, verbatim performance invites actors and audiences to engage with qualitative data in powerful ways that can shift assumptions and biases. Through an actor's close study of speech and gestural patterns and then precise replication of those patterns for an audience, verbatim performance creates possibilities for empathy and critical engagement, two states of mind we desperately need more of in our contemporary society. By sharing my personal history with the form, defining key terminology, connecting artistic practices and research modalities, and offering examples of projects from NYU's Verbatim Performance Lab, I make the case that verbatim performance offers unique and disruptive possibilities for artists, researchers, and audiences alike.

ORIGINS

I first encountered what I have come to call verbatim performance in 1995 as a graduate student pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Theater with a concentration in dramaturgy and directing at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (UMASS). I was a teaching assistant for a large introductory theatre course for non-majors taught by Harley Erdman. On the syllabus for the course, Erdman included Anna Deavere Smith's play *Fires in the Mirror*, which I had never heard of, but read in preparation for the lecture Erdman would give. I noticed how Smith had formatted the play's text, like poetry on the page, rather than the usual prose I read in more traditional scripts. Erdman also arranged for the class to screen the teleplay adaptation Smith had filmed for PBS's American Playhouse series (American Playhouse, 1993). As I sat in the back of the lecture hall watching Smith's performance, I was stunned by her virtuosity as she moved through multiple nuanced portraits of the 20-plus people she had interviewed about the incidents that unfolded in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, following the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum in August 1991. I had never experienced a performer with this much dexterity, nor had I been compelled to reflect so deeply on so many different perspectives in one performance. The analytical part

of my brain fired throughout the screening, and I made immediate connections to my undergraduate thesis work on Bertolt Brecht, his epic theatre, and *Verfremdungseffekt*.

The following semester (spring 1996), I enrolled in a graduate seminar, *World Drama: Contemporary Movements*, taught by Roberta Uno, the founder and artistic director of New WORLD Theater at UMASS (1979-2010) and a faculty member in the Department of Theater. New WORLD Theater presented and produced work by and about people of color, and Uno curated a series of visits to our class from artists she had programmed for New WORLD's season. Uno also included Anna Deavere Smith's work on the course and gave us an assignment that changed my life: conduct an interview with someone and transcribe it the way Smith transcribed her interviews in the published version of *Fires in the Mirror*. I had chosen to focus on queer theory and queer theatre movements in that class, so I interviewed a gay friend-of-a-friend about his experiences. I loved everything about this assignment. I loved the interviewing process, the transcribing, and the precision of documenting every vocal sound and cadence break. And the appearance of the transcription on the page appealed to me, as it seemed to map out the thought patterns of the speaker, not so different from the way Shakespeare's text provides the same clues.

Twenty-seven years after conducting that first interview, I now identify as an artist-researcher whose work lives at the hyphen between those two identities. Larger questions I have about the world have always driven my artistic work, so while many artists might not think of themselves as researchers, I do. I create live performances and video projects from interview-based data, found media artifacts, and historical events, and my work falls under the broad umbrella of arts-based research (ABR). Leavy (2020) establishes that:

ABR *practices* are a set of methodological tools used by researchers across disciplines during any and all phases of research, including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (p. 4, italics in original)

Within ABR, I categorize my work as ethnodrama, defined by Saldaña

(2011) as “a written play script consisting of dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and media artifacts” (p. 13). The performance of an ethnodrama, known as ethnotheatre, “employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance of participants’ experiences and/or the researcher’s interpretations of data” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 12).

WHAT IS VERBATIM PERFORMANCE?

My preferred methodological tool within ethnodrama and ethnotheatre is *verbatim performance*, which I define as “the precise portrayal of an actual person using their exact speech and gestural patterns as a data source for investigation, literally word for word and gesture for gesture” (Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). I use “verbatim” as an adjective to describe the performance style and embrace its literal dictionary definition meaning: “using *exactly* the same words that were originally used” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023, italics my emphasis). I include gestures as they were originally used whenever possible because I disseminate my research findings through embodied performance. I use verbatim performance to share data collected from interviews that I conduct about a particular topic. I also use verbatim performance to present discoveries drawn from investigations of found media artifacts like recordings of political debates, hearings, testimonies, and even exchanges during sporting events.

While verbatim performance as a form relies on the precise and strict adherence to the words and gestures of the source material, *verbatim theatre* tends to be defined more openly. For example, Clare Summerskill (2021) defines verbatim theatre as “a dramatic production based on spoken experiences shared by people who have been interviewed about a particular subject or theme” and acknowledges that verbatim theatre manifests differently depending on the artist and the context within which they work (p. 8). Other practitioners identify verbatim theatre as a technique allowing more liberties with the source material. For example, verbatim theatre playwright Robin Soans states, “Just because I write about real people and seek to portray them honestly, is there an embargo on editing creatively?” (Hammond and

Steward, p. 35, 2008), and I counter that yes, there is (Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). When discussing verbatim theatre as a technique, Hammond and Steward (2008) write that:

The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records, such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged, or re-contextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used. In this sense, verbatim is not a form, it is a technique, it is a means rather than an end. (p. 9)

In response, I posit that using the term “verbatim” to describe a technique that does not stay true to the definition of “using exactly the same words that were originally used” is problematic and creates confusion for theatre makers, researchers, and audiences alike. Hence, this article attempts to resolve that potential for confusion by establishing verbatim performance as a methodological tool for artist-researchers that stays true to the definition of “verbatim.”

My verbatim performance practice emerged from my initial encounters with Smith’s work, the inspiration it provided, and my subsequent training and experiences as a theatremaker. While I never studied with Smith directly, I studied and read her work extensively and saw her performances on video and in person. As a result, I developed my methodological approach to creating verbatim performance using the knowledge and insight gained from those experiences. Like Smith, I interview participants about a historical or cultural moment or phenomenon, transcribe selections from those interviews, and craft them into a performance script. However, whereas Smith typically performs her work as a solo artist, I enlist a company of actors to perform the script selections verbatim. The actors construct their performances using three pieces of data: a scored transcript notating the cadence of the original speaker, the audio or video of the interview, and written field notes collected following the interview. Through a close study of these three data pieces, actors work to replicate each participant’s original speech and gestural patterns with as much precision as possible in their performances (Salvatore, 2018, 2020;

Vachon & Salvatore, 2022). The verbatim replication draws on Smith's (1993) awareness "that by using another person's language, it was possible to portray what was invisible about that individual" (p. xxxii). Because my verbatim performance practice focuses on analyzing an individual's speech and gestural patterns and using that knowledge to reveal "the invisible," it demonstrates a significant capacity as an investigative arts-based research tool.

My verbatim performance practice also draws inspiration from Smith's portrayal of her interview participants. In her one-woman performances, Smith plays all interview participants selected for inclusion in her script. As a result, she frequently portrays someone of another race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, age, ability, or orientation different from her own. Traditional theatre practitioners might refer to this as "casting against type," but I refer to it as *portraying across identity*. My use of "across" draws inspiration from Smith's (1993) articulation of the spirit of theatre and the potential of the actor:

If only a man can speak for a man, a woman for a woman, a Black person for all Black people, then we, once again, inhibit the *spirit* of theater, which lives in the *bridge* that makes unlikely aspects *seem* connected. The bridge doesn't make them the same, it merely *displays* how two unlikely *aspects are related*. These relationships of the *unlikely*, these connections of things that don't fit together are crucial to American theater and culture if theater and culture plan to help us assemble our obvious differences. The self-centered technique [of acting] has taken the bridge out of the process of creating character, it has taken metaphor out of acting. It has made the heart smaller, the spirit less gregarious, and the mind less apt to hold on to contradictions or opposition. (pp. xxviii–xxix, italics in original)

Extending Smith's metaphor of the bridge, verbatim performance becomes a pathway for an actor to potentially empathize with someone else's perspective, thus expanding their worldview. Gaining empathy for someone's perspective does not mean suddenly agreeing with them or having more positive feelings toward them. However, an actor might gain additional awareness, sensitivity, or understanding of another person's perspective. The actor does not become an expert on

that person's experience, nor can they suddenly proclaim to speak for that person. However, verbatim performance can potentially expand the actor's views about a perspective different from their own. Through his own experiences with the form, Indigenous performing artist and scholar Blayne Welsh referred to the verbatim performance process as "learning lines to understand" rather than learning lines only to perform (Blayne Welsh, Wailwan people of North West New South Wales, Australia, personal communication, June 17, 2020). Welsh's articulation of that distinction between *understanding* and *performing* highlights the investigative nature of verbatim performance and further supports my case for its use as an arts-based methodological tool.

As verbatim performance requires a close study of speech and gestural patterns, rather than simply saying that an actor performs or portrays a role, I assert that the actor *investigates and performs* the words and gestures of the person they portray. I also refer to an actor who works in verbatim performance as an *ethnoactor*,¹ a term coined by drama therapist Darci Burch (2019) that nods to ethnodrama, ethnotheatre, and the larger field of ethnography. Burch writes:

The [ethnoactor] is challenged to create a portrayal that maintains the dignity of and respect for the interviewee while maintaining room for new discovery of knowledge and understanding. They must be conscious in their choices to avoid caricature, misrepresentation, or falsehood in their performance. The [ethnoactor] is charged with the ability to have empathy for the person/role they perform in order to truthfully render the performance of the individual. (Burch, 2019, p. 29)

Because an ethnoactor engages in the detailed observation and careful study required by verbatim performance, they then translate their new awareness into a precise performance of speech pattern, and they are likely to begin to breathe like the person they are investigating and performing. Speaking and breathing like another person brings the ethnoactor closest to achieving the clichéd walk in someone else's shoes. That shift away from their own breathing pattern and towards someone else's has physiological implications that

¹ Burch hyphenates this word as "ethno-actor," whereas I choose to drop the hyphen to align it more closely with the terms *ethnodrama* and *ethnotheatre* which are not hyphenated.

can offer the ethnoactor new knowledge about the person they are portraying. The ethnoactor must also embrace the possibility of gaining new understanding and empathy for a new perspective they could disagree with. I encourage ethnoactors engaging in verbatim performance to *enter with curiosity*,² to remain open to what they might discover about the person they are investigating and performing, and also to what they might learn about themselves, their preconceived notions, and their implicit biases.

Verbatim performance can also bridge art-making with sense-making for audiences, as its primary goal is to catalyze critical engagement and heighten awareness in audiences rather than achieve the emotional catharsis characteristic in more traditional theatrical performances that rely on realism and representational performance styles. An audience's heightened awareness relates to Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* or "defamiliarization," a technique that uses theatrical devices to act as a "political intervention into the (blindingly) familiar" to disrupt an audience's emotional catharsis (Mumford, 2018, p. 61).

Verbatim performance asks an audience to critically engage with data from interviews and media artifacts via a presentational acting style that can include portraying across identity. Verbatim performance also features moments where the ethnoactors engage with the audience as themselves, making the audience aware of the investigative and analytical intentions of the performance. For example, a live verbatim performance may feature an ethnoactor announcing the chosen identifier for each participant as they begin to speak for the first time. The ethnoactor portraying that participant dons a costume piece in full view of the audience that represents the participant. We refer to this costume piece as a *talisman*. The audience maintains an awareness of the theatricality of the moment because they have witnessed the ethnoactor's transformation via their donning of the talisman. Another approach to catalyzing a critical mindset is establishing *rules of engagement* with an audience from the top of a performance (Salvatore, 2018). In this case, the ethnoactors might introduce the performance as an investigation and deploy a focus question for the audience to consider as they experience it. In a recorded verbatim performance, information about the investigation,

² This phrase comes from Jonathan Angelilli, my longtime trainer, teacher, and coach.

including the focus question, can be conveyed using title slides and voiceover tracks. Ethnoactors may also use a talisman to move in and out of their portrayals in a filmed verbatim performance, depending on the project and its intentions. Regardless of the format, verbatim performance strives to achieve one of Brecht's key goals:

What we are looking for is a kind of representation in which the familiar is striking, the normal amazing. Everyday things should appear strange, and much that seemed natural should be recognized as artificial. If you give an unfamiliar quality to the actions, then all that they lose is a familiarity that is derived from fresh naïve observation. (Brecht, quoted in Barnett, 2015, p. 76)

By presenting an audience with a precise replication of the original source material but through the voice and body of another, verbatim performance can evoke, provoke, and disrupt an audience's preconceived notions and understandings (Leavy, 2020). The ability to catalyze critical engagement in audiences while fostering empathy in ethnoactors and audiences makes verbatim performance a powerful methodological tool filled with possibilities.

NYU'S VERBATIM PERFORMANCE LAB: A SITE OF POSSIBILITIES

Verbatim performance is the primary methodological tool used for the arts-based research conducted in the Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL), a project of the Program in Educational Theatre in the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. VPL investigates and performs words and gestures collected from found media artifacts and interview-based data. Found media artifacts refer to video or audio clips of important contemporary or historical moments. Interview-based data refer to interviews we conduct with participants about a particular topic. A central research question grounds each VPL project and its verbatim performance inquiry. Regardless of the source material, VPL aims to disrupt assumptions, biases, and intolerances across a spectrum of political, cultural, and social narratives.

VPL uses the word "narratives" intentionally because we believe

that much of the media we consume is constructed, mediated, and manipulated. As a result, audiences may not always be entirely clear about what they are experiencing. We also believe that the same holds true for how we consume individuals in our daily interactions. Social media has trained us to scroll and click through information quickly, and that rapid data consumption has carried over into our day-to-day, real-time interactions. Through its verbatim performance investigations, VPL tries to disrupt that consumption process by slowing it down. Slower consumption forces actors and audiences to pay closer attention to what is said and how it is said so that they can see, hear, and process the actual content rather than jumping to pre-conceived opinions and conclusions grounded in assumptions and implicit biases. In his 2019 Spencer Lecture for the American Educational Research Association entitled “Rhetoric and Social Science in a Polarized Society,” sociologist Mario L. Small (2019) defined qualitative literacy as “the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence” and named its importance in relation to polarization, social science, and public discourse. Small argued that contemporary society exhibits a deficiency in qualitative literacy, as demonstrated by the struggle to determine the difference between fact and opinion because of how those different forms of information are presented and interpreted. VPL promotes qualitative literacy amongst actors and audiences through arts-based research investigations and performances.

VPL emerged following the success of *Her Opponent*,³ a verbatim performance of excerpts from the 2016 U.S. presidential debates with gender-reversed casting, wherein Donald Trump was portrayed by a woman and Hillary Clinton by a man. I co-created that piece with economist Maria Guadalupe (INSEAD) (Guadalupe & Salvatore, 2017). The project premiered in January 2017 at NYU’s Provincetown Playhouse and then moved to an Off-Broadway run at The Jerry Orbach Theater in New York City. The production received a nomination for an Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Unique Theatrical Experience (2017). In addition, it garnered national coverage from NPR, *The New York Times* (Soloski, 2017), *The Guardian* (Jamieson, 2017), Fox News, MSNBC, and ABC News, among others, and was referenced again in media coverage of the

³ An archival version of *Her Opponent* can be viewed at www.heropponent.com

2020 presidential and vice-presidential debates (Gupta, 2020; Kurtzleben, 2020). After each performance, audiences engaged in a facilitated discussion to share what they experienced. We discovered that the verbatim performance methodology of word-for-word and gesture-for-gesture replication by the ethnoactors and the gender reversal allowed for a deeper critical analysis of the debates and subsequent election results.

The experiences with *Her Opponent* inspired me to create the Verbatim Performance Lab in August 2017.⁴ Since its inception, VPL has created over 25 video and live performance projects exploring a range of events and topics and facilitated outreach and education programs throughout the United States. As a result, VPL has become a space to experiment with a sustained verbatim performance practice focused on research and audience engagement to approach societal challenges like media literacy, implicit bias, and political polarization. Using the methodology developed through years of interview-based projects, I have transitioned that knowledge within VPL to create more projects that use media artifacts as source material, emulating the style of verbatim performance established with *Her Opponent*. Below I offer three examples of projects, two with media artifacts and one with interviews, that VPL has created over its first five years. Within these short case studies, I have hyperlinked the project titles for ease of locating videos and additional information about the projects on VPL's website and YouTube channel.

The Kavanaugh Files

In September 2018, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford came forward with allegations that she had been sexually assaulted by then-Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh when they were both teenagers. The allegations prompted a second set of hearings conducted by the Senate Judiciary Committee on September 27, 2018 (Stolberg & Fandos, 2018). In Fall 2018, VPL collaborated with NYU-TV to create [*The Kavanaugh Files*](#) (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2019), a series of five investigations of moments from the hearings using gender-flipped verbatim performance. Those moments included excerpts from the opening statements of Dr. Ford and Judge

⁴ The author thanks NYU Steinhardt's Associate Dean Lindsay Wright for this thought-partnering moment and for her ongoing support of the Verbatim Performance Lab.

Kavanaugh, a sequence of Dr. Ford being questioned by attorney Rachel Mitchell, an excerpt of Senator Lindsay Graham's comments to Judge Kavanaugh, and an exchange between Senator Amy Klobuchar and Judge Kavanaugh (C-SPAN, 2018). The completed VPL series premiered online beginning on January 14, 2019, with a new clip released each day leading up to the 2019 Women's March on January 19, to instigate continued awareness, contemplation, and action and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the implications gender violence has on our day-to-day interactions and our larger political, cultural, and social worlds.

Geva Theatre Center, located in Rochester, New York, presented a live version of *The Kavanaugh Files* as part of its Hornet's Nest series on May 20, 2019. Following the performance, audience members participated in a facilitated dialogue with Geva's Literary Director and Resident Dramaturg Jenni Werner, myself, VPL associate director Keith R. Huff, and performers Heleya de Barros, Daryl Embry, Analisa Gutierrez-Morán, Suzy Jane Hunt, Scott Michael Morales, and Robert Thaxton-Stevenson.⁵ The live performance lasted 35 minutes, and the Geva Theatre audience members engaged in a dialogue for over an hour until the host finally called the evening to an end. The performance and the conversation once again demonstrated the capacity for verbatim performance to catalyze an audience to engage with complex and controversial material critically. The live performance of *The Kavanaugh Files* received two additional public performances on NYU's campus: as part of a Constitution Day celebration in September 2019 and a program sponsored by the Birnbaum Women's Leadership Network at NYU Law School in March 2020.

The Serena Williams Project

On September 8, 2018, Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka played in the U.S. Open Women's Tennis Final. The match was marked by controversy when chair umpire Carlos Ramos awarded code violations to Williams for coaching, racket abuse, and verbal abuse. While arguing with Ramos and other officials, Williams stated that she was treated differently because she was a woman. After Williams received a point penalty and a game penalty, Osaka went on to win the match

⁵ Rachel Tuggle Whorton and Stephanie Anderson have also performed in iterations of *The Kavanaugh Files*.

6-2, 6-4 (Waldstein, 2018). Williams was subsequently fined \$4,000 for receiving coaching, \$3,000 for racket abuse, and \$10,000 for verbal abuse (Fendrich, 2018). Following the match, media coverage raised many questions (Abad-Santos, 2018). Was Williams treated differently because she's a woman? Was she treated differently because of her gender and her race?

[The Serena Williams Project](#) (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2019), co-created by myself, Keith R. Huff, and Tammie L. Swopes, in collaboration with NYU-TV, examines two moments from the U.S. Open Final when Williams interacted first with the chair umpire Carlos Ramos and then with two other officials for the match, Brian Earley and Donna Kelso. In the first interaction, Williams contests the point penalty due to the coaching violation and racket abuse. In the second interaction, she contests the game penalty for verbal abuse. (ESPN, 2018). A white male actor, a white female actor, and a Black male actor studied the speech and gestural patterns of Serena Williams. Then they performed those patterns verbatim in three separate recorded versions of the exchanges with actors matching the identity characteristics of Ramos, Earley, Kelso, and the sports commentators and doing the same. The project featured Amalia Ritter Adiv, Connor Bond, Akili Brown, Jack Dod, Analisa Gutierrez-Morán, Ian McCabe, Mackie Saylor, and Andy Wagner. A Diversity Innovation Grant from NYU Steinhardt supported the creation of this project.

VPL has used *The Serena Williams Project* as an anti-bias training tool in various settings, from middle and high school classrooms to university classrooms to corporate training venues and professional development workshops. For example, in June 2022, VPL used the project to facilitate an anti-bias workshop for NYU's 65-member athletic department as part of their annual academic year planning retreat.

Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall

In October 2022, VPL premiered [Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall](#) (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2022), a project investigating political polarization in the United States. In his book *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein (2020) attempts to identify a framework for understanding the ongoing challenges of polarization but offers few solutions. While Klein read and analyzed scores of academic studies for his book, VPL sought to identify the causes of political polarization by gathering stories from ordinary people. The idea emerged from an

ongoing VPL interview-based project, *Portraits US* (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2022), which aims to gather the experiences and viewpoints of people living and working throughout the United States during historical events and happenings. VPL uses the word “portrait” to name a verbatim performance of an interview participant. An ethnoactor can perform a portrait as a monologue, or they might perform it in a constructed “conversation” with other portraits in the form of a duet, trio, quartet, etc. (Salvatore, 2018, 2020). Previous *Portraits US* topics for exploration have included Election 2020, COVID-19, cancel culture, and the January 6 uprising. *Portraits US: Polarization* explored the causes of extreme political polarization in the United States, leading up to the 2022 midterm elections. The project also considered how geographic location influences opinion on issues of national importance and the assumptions that audiences might make about where someone comes from based on their opinions.

Using 50 excerpts from over 100 interviews conducted with volunteers from across the United States between October 2021 and August 2022, VPL’s associate director Keith R. Huff and I worked with ten ethnoactors to create the verbatim performance that became *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One: A Portraits US Town Hall*. The title comes from a line from a participant’s interview. The project performed live at the Pless Hall Black Box Theatre at NYU, October 20-30, 2022,⁶ and NYU-TV broadcast four of those performances live as well, allowing the event to reach online audiences in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and seventeen countries beyond the U.S.⁷

The ten ethnoactors used scored transcripts, video recordings of the interviews, and collected field notes to create their verbatim portraits of five different excerpts from five different participants from five different geographical regions in the U.S.: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West (National Geographic). Each ethnoactor received a mixture of participants to investigate and perform. Of the five they were assigned, some matched their identity in some way, while others required them to play across identities. Each performance featured five ensemble members, so the company of ten ethnoactors rotated performances as two smaller ensembles.

Before the performance began, audience members completed a

⁶ The [event's digital program](#) lists the creative and performance teams.

⁷ Thanks to Nora Lambert of NYU-TV for these analytics.

poll asking basic demographic questions about their age range, where they currently lived, where they called home, and their political affiliation. We used PollEverywhere, a popular online polling application, as it was easily accessed on smartphones. A host greeted the audience and explained the rules of engagement for the event (Salvatore, 2018), then tapped the audience to randomly select ten portraits, two for each of the five ethnoactors in that particular performance. The ethnoactors then worked backstage to arrange the portraits into four scenes that featured different configurations: a solo, a duet, a trio, and a quartet. Because there were 50 portraits as possibilities, the number of random combinations offered a different performance each time. Between each of the four configurations, the audience completed polling questions using PollEverywhere. The questions asked them to consider where an interview participant might be from, whom they agreed with the most, how often they engaged in a conversation like the one they just experienced, and whom they might want to continue conversing with over a beverage of their choice.

Once the verbatim performance of the portraits was completed, the event shifted to a town hall format. The host engaged the audience in a conversation about what they had experienced and shared the polling results via screens mounted in the theatre. The ethnoactors also joined the town hall conversation to offer insights and reflections about the process and their observations from that particular performance. In addition, the town halls provided space for audiences and the ethnoactors to share their responses to the unique combination of the ten portraits from that performance and to discuss their experiences with portraying across identities and hearing and seeing those portrayals.

In the final moment of the town hall, the host invited the audience to complete one last polling question that asked them to consider three words or phrases that they would carry with them out of their experience of the event. The audience's real-time responses populated a word cloud projected onto the screens in the theatre and the broadcast, leaving them with a final image of potential learning and an answer to one of the questions driving the project: What can we do about political polarization over the next five years? Words like *listen*, *listening*, *empathy*, *patience*, *understand*, *understanding*, and *compassion* appeared the largest in each word cloud, indicating that

the audience shared those words the most in their responses.⁸ In anecdotal conversations following the production run, the ten ethnoactors also identified *listening* as the most productive action they could take to disrupt political polarization, alongside recognizing that all people are trying to live and see change and that we all should offer up more grace and empathy when dealing with people whom we might disagree with.⁹

The Future

Whatever You Are, Be a Good One represents a culmination of five years of experimenting with verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool that impacts the ethnoactors who engage in the technique and the audiences who engage with the performances. For both groups, verbatim performance helps to disrupt biases through close analysis and critical engagement. As VPL enters its next five years, three current projects offer new spaces for continued exploration to refine verbatim performance as an arts-based methodological tool.

First, an interview-based project called *That's Not Supposed to be Happening* seeks to shed light on the issue of housing in New York City through the process of locating it, securing it, paying for it, and the obstacles of dealing with landlords, leasing companies, and governmental agencies. The event's structure features verbatim portraits arranged in solos, duets, and trios, similar to the structure of *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One*. However, in between each of those scene constructions, the actors engage the audience in game show-style activations that relay facts, figures, and policies about the New York City housing market. The project premiered in April 2023 and marked VPL's first collaboration with NYU Tisch Drama's Festival of Voices.

A second project called *We're Not There Yet* uses media artifacts and published transcripts from the second hearing of Judge Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination in the wake of accusations of sexual harassment by Professor Anita Hill in October 1991. With the

⁸ Thanks to Martina Novakova and Yuqing Zhao for their analysis of these audience responses and word clouds.

⁹ Thanks to Averil Carr for identifying these recurring themes through informal conversations with the ensemble members of *Whatever You Are, Be a Good One*.

recent 50th anniversary of the passing of Title IX and the continued conversation around the implementation of its policies relating to sexual violence on college and university campuses, the project asks participants to revisit excerpts of these hearings over 30 years later and reflect on how we build more equitable processes that protect the rights and privacy of the alleged parties in situations that arise from an accusation of sexual harassment. To stimulate that reflection, the project uses small-group discussions grounded by curated groups of prompts that invite audiences to choose a prompt and then use it to interrogate the term “believing” and what it means to say, “I believe you.” VPL piloted this project in April 2023, intending to remount a more fully realized version in Fall 2023.

We also approach the culmination of a three-year project with Elisabeth King, Professor of International Education and Politics at NYU Steinhardt. The project uses gender and race-flipped versions of a moment from the 2020 Vice Presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence to explore whether verbatim performance as an arts-based intervention can disrupt partisan bias. This collaboration¹⁰ marks the first attempt at using a randomized controlled trial to measure and analyze the impacts of verbatim performance on audiences. An extension of this collaboration seeks to explore the effects of verbatim performance on the development of empathy in ethnoactors and to identify whether verbatim performance could be used as a tool for conflict resolution in crisis zones.

In each of these projects, we have worked to be more intentional about gathering audience responses, whether through comment cards and graffiti walls at the end of a performance, pre-performance surveys via a QR code, or more formalized Qualtrics surveys. Regardless of the method, this data collection helps measure verbatim performance's impact and establish its efficacy as a research tool.

CONCLUSION

As we continue to press forward through times of discrimination, divisiveness, and distrust, verbatim performance offers artists, researchers, and audiences a tool by which we can gain greater clarity

¹⁰ The research team includes Sorana Acris, Amanda Blewitt, Laura Cabochan, Arja Dayal, Keith R. Huff, Elisabeth King, and Joe Salvatore.

around the content of what is being said by increasing our understanding of how a message is being shared. The coding of speech and gesture, the performance of those discovered patterns, and the shifting of identity characteristics in those doing the performing combine to reveal what we frequently fail to hear and see. Through continued experimentation with the technique and a sharpened focus on generating data about an audience's experience with verbatim performance, VPL will work to expand its understanding of this arts-based methodological tool and its ability to catalyze greater political, cultural, and societal cooperation and understanding.

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