Measuring a Verbatim Effect with High School Students 12 Hours Away and Across the World

ALEX ATES

WESTTOWN SCHOOL

DAVID FENG

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

SAM HU

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

EMILY ZHANG

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

ABSTRACT

Three recently-graduated Chinese-International high school students and their American theater teacher engage in reflective analysis on their digital verbatim performances of American presidential politicians in If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*, produced by the Verbatim Performance Lab at NYU Steinhardt's Program in Educational Theatre (2021). In Part One, the context and conditions of the project are outlined. In Part Two, the students engage in reflective analysis on*

their participation. In Part Three, the teacher synthesizes the students' insights using pedagogical analysis and reflective practice. In Part Four, a "Verbatim Effect" is measured to consider the impact of the project. The following takeaways are noted:

1) *Political verbatim performance allowed the students to exercise emotional release from mounting international tension; however, this release could not be realized through caricature. Instead, catharsis was found in the innate aesthetic conflict of the performance.*
2) *As a discipline, verbatim performance demanded that the students consider the precise details of their characters, which created a tension between requirements and choices.*
3) *This mode of performance allowed the students to analyze and interpret political events that were directly impacting their lives.*

INTRODUCTION

In this collaboratively written paper, we will engage in a reflective analysis with three former high school theater students whose circumstances suspended them within an extreme tension of time and distance in the structure of digital theater education.

David Fung, Sam Hu, and Emily Zhang were seniors at Westtown School, an independent Quaker boarding and day school in West Chester, Pennsylvania with a K-12 student population. These students, co-writers of this paper, digitally participated in educational theater projects from a twelve-hour time zone difference in their home nation, China. This paper is co-written with their theater teacher, Alex Ates, an American. For David, Sam, and Emily, not only were the conditions of time and distance extreme, but global political conditions were dialed to the highest stakes possible.

PART ONE: THE CURIOUS CONTEXT OF AN EXTRAORDINARY SITUATION

A Year of Digital Learning

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, like most other schools, the Fall

2020 and Spring 2021 semesters at Westtown School were conducted online for international students, a surreal anomaly for an institution founded in 1799.

David, Sam, and Emily were students in the class Advanced Theater Topics, which focused on ethnography theater (or, "ethnotheater"). Johnny Saldaña defines ethnotheater 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 media artifacts such as diaries, blogs, e-mail correspondence, television broadcasts, newspaper articles, court proceedings, and historic documents. (Saldaña, 2011).

Students used ethnotheater as a means of researching the conditions that created such a peculiar school year (i.e., politics and public health). The course revolved around four projects and two guest artist residencies.

One such project was a Political Lip-Sync. Inspired by the TikTok comedy of Sarah Cooper, who rose to internet stardom by subversively lip-syncing speeches from Donald Trump, students theatricalized audio of an American politician.

Sam Hu performed a clip of Trump delivering a xenophobic speech where he repeatedly referred to Covid-19 as "the China virus." In the performance, Sam turned Trump's iconic red tie into a Chinese flag. The red tie-flag dominated the foreground while an American flag lurked in the background.

Image 1: Sam Hu performing Former President Donald Trump in a Political Lip-Sync project at Westtown School during the 2020 Fall semester.

Emily Zhang performed both Trump and then-candidate Joe Biden in a September 2020 debate clip. Emily filmed her embodiment of Biden and Trump separately and then synced the two clips together.

Image 2: Emily Zhang performing Donald Trump (L) and Joe Biden (R) in the Political Lip-Sync project at Westtown School during the 2020 Fall semester.

David theatricalized the audio of Trump suggesting sunlight or bleach as a potential therapy for Covid-19, as if he were a scientist delivering breakthrough research using a PowerPoint presentation at a conference. David's use of dead-pan irony emphasized the absurdity

of Trump's unedited words.
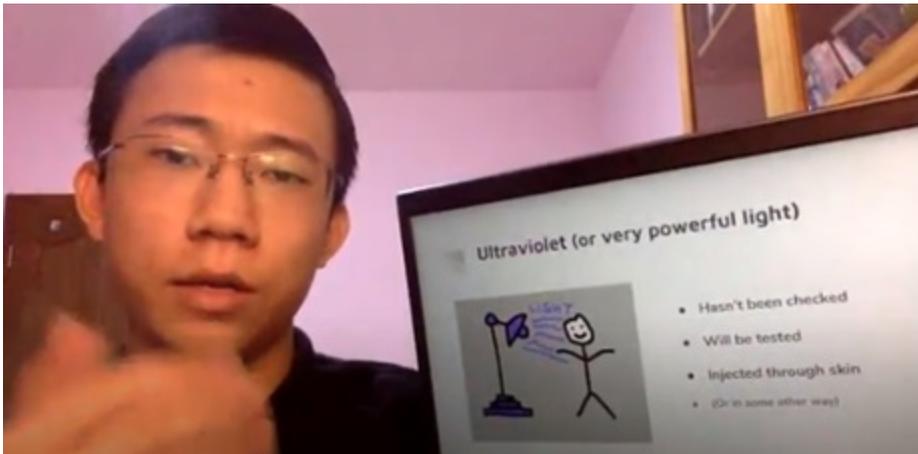
Image 3: David Feng theatricalizing Donald Trump in the Political Lip-Sync project at Westtown School during the 2020 Fall semester.

David, Sam, and Emily's performances in the Fall 2020 Political Lip-Sync prepared them for a Spring 2021 project in partnership with the Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL) housed at New York University's Steinhardt School.

If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could

After the chaotic September 2020 debate where Trump attempted to sabotage the proceedings by persistently interrupting Biden and moderator Chris Wallace, provoking Biden to deliver the infamous "Will you shut up, man?", onlookers widely interpreted the behavior as child-like. The fallout from the debate raised two research questions for an arts-based investigation, pursued by the non-partisan VPL:

1. What do young actors discover about these candidates and the moderator when they take on their speech and gestural patterns through verbatim performance?
2. What happens to an audience's perception of the interactions between the adults during this debate when younger and different bodied actors take on these roles? (VPL Website, project description of *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*).

For this investigation, the VPL used its technique of "verbatim

performance," which the lab defines 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.'" (VPL website, project page)

Twelve middle and high school institutions around the United States participated in the project, including Westtown. Because David, Sam, and Emily had explored either Trump or Biden (or, in the case of Emily—both) in their Political Lip-Sync, the three students were proposed as Westtown's participants for an April 17, 2021 digital showcase produced by the VPL. The project was titled *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*, paying homage to a sarcastic line Wallace exasperatingly said during the height of mayhem during the debate.

The Digital Process

Because David, Sam, and Emily were in different regions of China (Tianjin, Chengdu, and Ningbo) and each student had varying internet infrastructures, the ensemble utilized the method that Emily pioneered in her Political Lip-Sync, pre-record their individual performance asynchronously and use editing to "harmonize" (if you will) each individual piece together into a trio.

The students developed a protocol where they broadcast the audio of the debate clip (the artifact) into their ears via wireless Bluetooth headsets. Performing in front of a single camera on their laptop, they would count into hitting "play" on the audio from a separate device (usually a cellphone)—"3, 2, 1, GO!"—to help sync the clips in post-production editing.

The students used the audio artifact (the "soundtrack" of the debate) to listen for their cues. Before recording a take, students studied and coded the body language of each character using a scored transcript of the debate clip supplied by the VPL, written in the style of their technique (Salvatore, 2017).

Students rehearsed at 7:00 p.m. in China and 7:00 a.m. in United States Eastern time on Saturday mornings with their teacher, Alex. Before each rehearsal, students uploaded a draft video file of their take to a shared online folder. Together, using screen-sharing, the students watched each submission, participated in a self-critique, and then received a critique from their teacher. During rehearsals, the ensemble cross-referenced their takes with the original artifact to check timestamps, gestures, body language, and rhythm. Rehearsal time

was spent devising protocols for aligning the three characters (i.e., scene work) and troubleshooting tech conundrums. Character names were changed to proxy names by the VPL. The proxy names had the same amount of syllables and served as a tool to provide some distance between the investigation and the stigma of the political figures. The casting was as follows:

- Emily as Sue Thompson (Joe Biden)
- Sam as Walter King (Donald Trump)
- David as Jeff Fariss (Chris Wallace)

Costuming was strategically selected to give the students a "talisman" (Salvatore, 2017, p. 284) to help them source the energy of their character. Below are screenshots of each student's final performance:

Image 4: Emily as Sue Thompson (Joe Biden)

Image 5: Sam as Walter King (Donald Trump)

Image 6: David as Jeff Fariss (Chris Wallace)

Then, each performance was layered in one at a time in post-production editing:
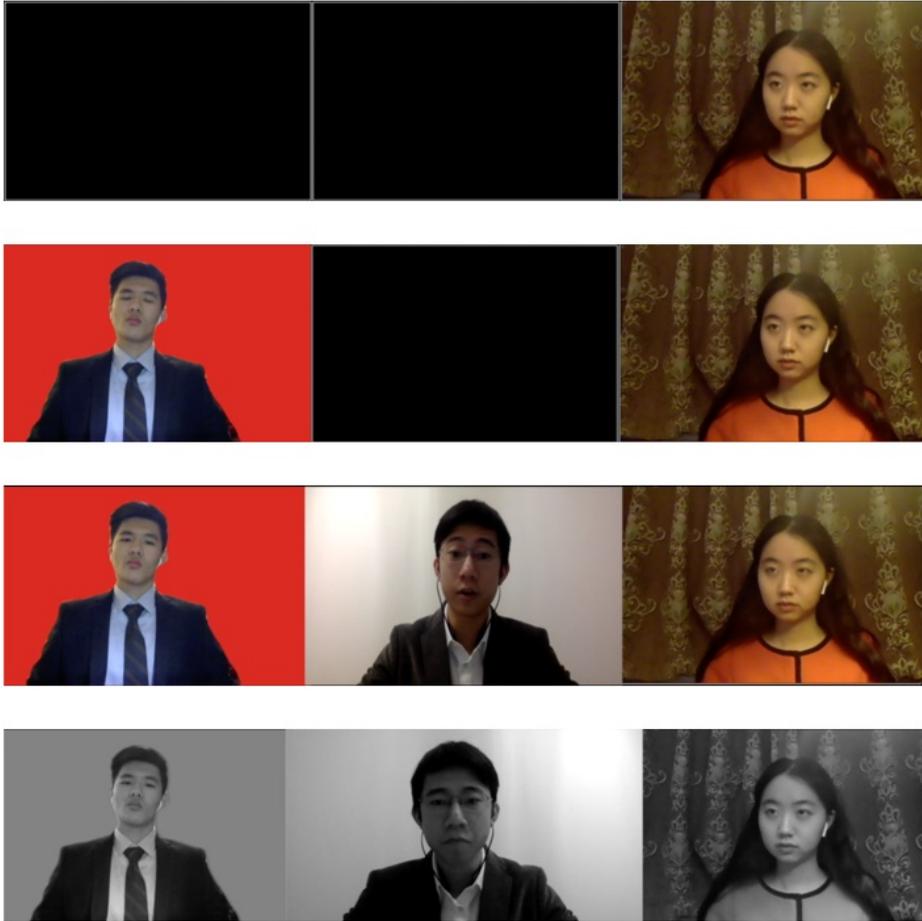
Image 7: Twelve images in a sequence that conveys how the three individual color recordings are combined into a black-and-white tryptic.

Finally, the aesthetic choice was made to make the video black and white to unify the videos and to draw more focus onto the facial expressions and physical gestures of the characters.

PART TWO: TESTIMONIES FROM THE STUDENTS

Verbatim Performance and Confucian Virtue

Sam: I signed up for my first theater class at Westtown hesitantly. By then, I had embraced stoicism as a token of being a grown-up. Being an international student from China, where a Confucian gentleman's virtue is to be prompt in action but prudent in speech, I could never

envision myself standing up, pouring my heart out in front of a crowd. How awkward and ridiculous would I seem? However, I saw stark differences between verbatim theater and what I used to learn about theater. Verbatim performance is so precise, acute, and analytical to a point that it almost feels more like social science than an art.

Political Rhetoric and Belonging in the United States

Emily: I followed the 2020 presidential election closely, as I was making the hard decision of whether to stay in the U.S. for college. It was hard to feel safe under Trump's constant xenophobic and anti-China stance. Thus, while watching the debate, I felt the absurdity—and even amusement—as an outsider, but also a deep concern. Trump and Biden are not isolated politicians distant from my life, nor are their policies.

Acting as an Emotional Outlet for Political Anxiety

Sam: The hardest part in the entire process for *If You Wanna Switch Seats* was to create an authentic and unbiased impression of Trump. I remember watching the debate clip on repeat for half an hour, yet failing to locate the line between creating a character and creating a caricature of Trump. In its foundation, verbatim still needs *personality.*

Aesthetic Conflict

Sam: No audience will treat my work as a perfect documentary of the debate. The audience sees an Asian teen, speaking and acting unlike any other Asian teen—thus, they find conflict between visual and aural stimuli, and conflict creates space for thought—simple as that. The "Trump" that was presented verbatim is just a superposition of him and myself. Hence, I should not force myself into becoming a miniature Trump, nor find reconciliation with his outrageous comments. I instilled my personality into his speech and gesture to create something that wasn't scientifically precise, nor spiritually harmonic, but nonetheless thought-provoking. It is conflicted and chaotic and uncomfortable and strange.

Process for Digital Verbatim Performance

Emily: I started by watching the video clip repetitively. Like analyzing a script, I tried to make sense of Biden's objective and obstacle: I

simplified that objective to being heard, and the obstacle to being interrupted. Then, I tried to analyze the emotion and motivation behind each move, Biden's frowns especially.

Requirements and Choices in Verbatim Performance

David: In past school productions, I was encouraged to come up with a detailed backstory for my role, even when it was insignificant. As a result, I learned how even the most trivial fictional character can have a complex life. When the endless details of a real-life character were placed in front of me, however, I was overwhelmed. Eventually, I came to the realization that it is impossible to truly understand Chris Wallace and *be* him—I was wrong from the start. My acting strategy had always been satisfying all the basic requirements and then making the boldest choices available. However, there is a real Chris Wallace, and the verbatim acting can be judged based on its accuracy. Some verbatim performances are more objectively correct than others. In this particular project, there were an unattainable number of requirements and no room for choices.

PART THREE: ANALYSIS FROM THE TEACHER

On an Emotional Outlet for Political Anxiety and Aesthetic Conflict

Political verbatim performance allowed the students to exercise emotional release from mounting international tension; however, this release could not be realized through caricature. Instead, catharsis was found in the innate aesthetic conflicts of the performance (i.e., Chinese-International high school students performing American presidents). This aesthetic conflict is more than irony, it's political transgressiveness. Political transgressiveness provides a subversive and nuanced alternative to satire. Instead of mocking the president, one is embodying the president—from there, the aesthetic conflict provides the artist's commentary.

On Requirements and Choices in Verbatim Performance

As a discipline, verbatim performance demanded that the students consider the precise details of their characters, which created a tension between the concept of *requirements* (the "coded" transcript) and

choices (determining tactics related to a character's objective and obstacle). Navigating this tension is essential if artist-researchers want to apply the abstract concepts of acting theory (e.g. objectives and obstacles) that often trip-up high school actors.

On Political Rhetoric and Belonging in the United States

Finally, this mode of performance allowed the students to analyze and interpret political events that were directly impacting their lives. The students used political verbatim performance as a way of considering their futures on a tumultuous global stage, such as Sam coping with Donald Trump's xenophobic remarks by performing the "China virus" speech in the Political Lip-Sync, or Emily using the debate as a way of informing her decision about whether to attend college in the United States. Thus, these performances were an act of civic engagement and roleplay for the students, allowing them the opportunity to kinesthetically consider political concepts and subversively respond to political provocations through the transgressiveness of aesthetic conflict.

PART FOUR: THE VERBATIM EFFECT

In an attempt to measure the "Verbatim Effect" (if you will) on these students; here's what we have to say:

Sam: As I am now pursuing Social Science in college, verbatim encourages me to observe the world around me more carefully; I hope to explore the world with the same keen awareness and acute senses.

David: I am now more interested in performance art as a form of communication. I hope statistics and computer science might provide me with important new insights into the relationship between art and its audience.

Emily: Right after this project, I auditioned for a Chinese-adapted version of *The Vagina Monologues* in Beijing and was lucky enough to be cast as a lead actress. During my rehearsals, I kept coming back to this project: I realized that identity has power. My identity as a woman, a Chinese citizen, and an international student at a U.S. boarding

school together contribute to my life experience and my perspective. Perspectives make me experience the world more fully. Acting as Biden gives me another lens to view the world, and the curiosity and courage to keep exploring new perspectives. Thus, I eventually made the decision to leave the United States.

Alex: For Sam and David, their education in verbatim performance will inform their methodological approaches to their primary academic fields. For Emily, verbatim performance supported the recognition of power in identity. Emily used this power to decide not to pursue education in the United States. At the time of this writing, all three students are heading into their undergraduate educations; this next stage will undoubtedly provide conditioning, exploration, and further opportunities for performance and adaptability. As I look ahead to another semester of teaching, I place this experiment of time, distance, and digitality on the shelf with hopes that the conditions that dictated its circumstances were an anomaly. But, verbatim ethnotheater is permanently applied into my practice as an educator working with a global student population. It's far too highfalutin to assert that theater can change the world; but, the Verbatim Effect indicates that verbatim performance supports a student's discernment of their place in it.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Alex Ates is the director of theater at Westtown School. He has graduate degrees in interdisciplinary study from New York University and directing from The University of Alabama. Undergraduate degree from Emerson College.

David Feng is a member of the class of 2021 at Westtown School. He is a Chinese-International student who enrolled in Westtown School in 2017 and will be studying Computational and Applied Mathematics at the University of Chicago.

Sam Hu is a member of the class of 2021 at Westtown School. He is a Chinese-International student who enrolled in Westtown School in 2017 and will be studying Social Sciences at Swarthmore College.

Emily Zhang is a member of the class of 2021 at Westtown School. She is a Chinese-International student who enrolled in Westtown School in 2017 and will be studying Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh.