

## CONTEXTUALIZING *IF YOU WANNA SWITCH SEATS, WE COULD*

LUCY MEDEIROS, LILLY STANNARD, JOE SALVATORE *New York University*

**ABSTRACT.** The Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL) at New York University's Steinhardt School conducted a Research-based Theatre investigation entitled *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*. The project involved secondary school students from across the US performing a section of the September 2020 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The aim was to explore how perceptions change when the debate is performed by young people. The project used the ethnodramatic form of verbatim performance, where actors portray someone word for word and gesture for gesture and often of a different identity. The project culminated in a virtual public sharing of the filmed investigations, and offered students an opportunity to gain a better understanding of their place in the political landscape.

### METTRE *IF YOU WANNA SWITCH SEATS, WE COULD* EN CONTEXTE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Le Verbatim Performance Lab de l'École Steinhardt de l'Université de New York a mené une enquête théâtrale fondée sur la recherche intitulée *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*. Ici, des élèves de secondaire américain ont interprété une section du débat présidentiel de septembre 2020 entre Trump et Biden. L'objectif était d'explorer comment les perceptions changent lorsque le débat est présenté par des jeunes. Le projet utilisait la forme ethnodramatique de la performance verbatim, dans laquelle les acteurs incarnent une personne mot pour mot, souvent en assumant une identité différente de la leur. Le projet s'est conclu par une présentation publique virtuelle des enquêtes filmées, offrant aux élèves l'opportunité de mieux comprendre leur place dans le paysage politique.

This piece accompanies a video submission called *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could* (<https://bit.ly/VPLSwitchSeatsExample>). The video features excerpts from a verbatim performance investigation of the presidential debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, moderated by Chris Wallace, that took place on September 29, 2020. This particular version of the investigation was performed by high school students from Appoquinimink High School and Middletown High School, both located in Middletown, Delaware.<sup>1</sup>

During the first 100 days of Joe Biden's presidency, New York University's Verbatim Performance Lab (VPL) embarked on a Research-based Theatre investigation (Belliveau & Lea, 2016) entitled *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could*, in collaboration with several middle and high schools across the United States. The title of the performed investigation came from a statement made by Wallace during the September 29, 2020 debate in response to the candidates' behavior. Using the ethnodramatic form of verbatim performance (Salvatore, 2023; Vachon & Salvatore, 2023), 60 teenagers and 12 teachers from schools around the US explored what happened to their perceptions and audiences' perceptions when a section of that Biden-Trump debate was performed verbatim by young people.

Verbatim performance is "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'" (Verbatim Performance Lab, 2024). It often includes "portraying across identity," meaning that an actor portrays someone of a race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, age, ability, or orientation different from their own (Salvatore, 2023, p. 6). VPL has created many projects using verbatim performance to investigate current events. For example, *The Kavanaugh Files* used gender-reversed casting to recreate moments from the testimonies of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh during confirmation hearings for Kavanaugh's appointment to the US Supreme Court. and game penalties she received. The project included three versions of the interactions, each featuring a change to the gender and/or race of the actor portraying Williams' words and gestures verbatim. In both examples outlined above, VPL asked audiences to consider if their responses shifted when the gender and/or race of the original individual changed in the investigations.

As VPL's mission is to disrupt assumptions, biases, and intolerances across a spectrum of political, cultural, and social narratives, we hypothesized that a verbatim performance of a debate excerpt between Trump and Biden

could assist performers and audiences in identifying the effects of the communication styles of the debaters and the moderator. The project embraced theatrical performance as an embodied form of investigation, exceeding the boundaries of ethnodrama and ethnotheatre (Saldaña, 2011; Salvatore, 2018, 2020) and placing it within a Research-based Theatre paradigm (Belliveau & Lea, 2016, p. 6).

After the first contentious debate between then-President Donald Trump and Democratic Presidential nominee Joe Biden, there was much discussion about the childlike behavior of the two men. As reported by *Politico* on September 30, 2020, Alex Castellanos of ABC News described his perception of the debate: “Apparently, I tuned into the wrong debate. I saw children debating, interrupting, calling each other names, never listening to dad” (para. 14). This recurring theme in the media coverage sparked a question for VPL’s leadership: What would happen to an audience’s perception of the interactions between the adults during the debate if younger and differently-bodied actors took on these roles through verbatim performance? VPL recruited teachers from twelve middle and high schools across the U.S. to investigate this question and began meetings and rehearsals in early February 2021. As an entry point for the teachers and students, VPL posed a second question: What might young actors discover about these candidates and the moderator when they take on their speech and gestural patterns through verbatim performance?

To support the students and teachers in their investigations of these questions, VPL’s Education and Outreach Coordinator Lilly Stannard and Education Intern Lucy Medeiros (2021) developed a [curriculum](#) that framed verbatim performance as a form of the scientific method, a process that many students learn in their elementary or middle school science classes. The method starts with a researcher posing a question and then forming a hypothesis. Next, the researcher tests the idea through an experiment, collects and analyzes results, and then presents their conclusions. In this case, the student researchers presented their findings through a recorded verbatim performance for an audience. Stannard and Medeiros developed and distributed the curriculum, encouraging teachers to implement it as written or adjust it in ways that worked best for them and their students.

The first phase of the curriculum introduced VPL, its mission, and examples of past projects to illustrate the performance style. It then defined key terms and concepts related to VPL’s verbatim performance practice. The second phase used mixed-bias media reports about the debate to provide context, assess the students’ existing knowledge and

understanding of the debate, and gauge their levels of political engagement. The teachers then introduced the video selection from the debate that the students would investigate through rehearsal and performance. Following a guided discussion about their objective and subjective observations of this debate moment and its participants, students formulated hypotheses about what they might uncover through their investigation and performance of Biden, Trump, and Wallace. Several groups also developed additional research questions specific to their communities and their interests.

In the third phase, the students chose – or the teacher assigned – a role for each student to investigate. Most students wanted to act in the investigation, but a few also served as assistant directors and designers for their school's project. Before rehearsals began, all participating teachers and students completed a pre-investigation survey that prompted them to share their initial observations about the debate excerpt, their initial hypotheses about what they might discover through their investigation, and any questions they had as they began the rehearsal process. This surveying process is part of VPL's standard procedure when working on any verbatim performance project. Students then learned how to read the scored transcript of the debate excerpt that VPL had prepared (Salvatore, 2020; Leavy, 2020; Stamatiou, Kildow, Spearing, Nodding, & Price, 2022) and how to code that transcript for speech and gestural patterns. A scored transcript uses a transcription style that reflects an individual's speaking cadence by taking a hard return each time the individual pauses. The transcription appears more like poetry on the page than prose (Salvatore, 2020, 2023).

In the fourth phase, the students rehearsed their roles using the original debate video and their coded transcripts. Through the rehearsal process, teachers and students adjusted the gender pronouns within the scored transcript to match the gender identity of the student investigating and performing a particular role, when necessary. VPL provided fictional names for each candidate and other individuals referenced in the original debate exchange. These names matched the number of syllables in the original names: "King" replaced "Trump" and "Thompson" replaced "Biden."

Given that the project occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and that each participating school had its own COVID safety protocols, some schools rehearsed virtually, while others rehearsed in person, with varying masking and social distancing practices. At the pandemic's start, VPL shifted quickly to a virtual environment with projects like [Portraits U.S.](#) and

[\*You Can't Unring Bell\*](#). The learning from those previous projects helped guide the schools working with virtual and asynchronous investigations. When requested and possible, VPL team members attended virtual rehearsals with the students and their teachers and assisted with coaching the verbatim performance investigations. The VPL team also provided basic guidelines for costumes, encouraging students to wear clothing that matched their gender identity. For example, if a female-identified student investigated and performed Joe Biden, she was encouraged to dress as a female-identified presidential candidate would dress for a debate.

Following the rehearsal period, each school created a video recording of their verbatim performances. Some schools created one version, while others created multiple versions to accommodate student interest and participation in the project. When developing the curriculum to guide the investigation, Stannard and Medeiros made the lessons accessible and malleable enough to serve different communities at each school. This flexible curriculum, the logistics of working virtually across time zones, and the varying resources available to each school, contributed to many variations across the final video submissions. The emphasis on student discovery took priority over uniformity, which impacted the performed investigations and the data collected. However, it provided opportunities for students to exercise their creativity and explore their unique curiosities. Further, these different approaches provided insight into how each community interacted with the original artifact and how different geographical and socio-economic contexts might influence perspective.

Schools had varying production resources available, so the final filmed investigations embraced a variety of approaches and aesthetics. Some schools filmed their investigations remotely through live Zoom recordings; some filmed in person and unmasked but standing far away from each other. Others filmed with transparent masks, standing at a similar distance as the speakers stood in the original debate. Each school's investigation also reflected the demographics of its student population, and their availability and interest in participating. For example, The Westtown School in West Chester, Pennsylvania, featured three international high school seniors working remotely from China; Appoquinimink and Middletown High Schools in Middletown, Delaware, and Lady Bird Johnson Middle School in Irving, Texas, each featured six students with varied racial and ethnic identities; Deerfield High School in Deerfield, Illinois, highlighted 19 students from an advanced acting class performing a mash-up of the debate excerpt; and The Chapin School in New York, New York, worked with students from their debate team. The varied approaches adopted by each school allowed audiences to experience the

verbatim performance of the debate through different bodies and contexts, thus emphasizing how identity and space inform our perceptions.

*If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could* culminated in a virtual public sharing of the filmed investigations on April 17, 2021, about two weeks ahead of President Biden's first 100 days in office. The event featured four curated 90-minute sessions. Each session included a viewing of two or three schools' recorded verbatim performance investigations followed by a discussion with the participating teachers and their students, co-led by a VPL affiliate and a faculty respondent. The session concluded with a facilitated question and answer session with the audience, which included participants' families, school community members, the general public, and other NYU colleagues. Over 250 attendees participated in the virtual event, 58 of whom completed an optional anonymous audience survey presented at the end. A [virtual event program](#) lists each school, its participants, and a statement from each teacher about their approach to the investigation. The program also includes information about the moderators and respondents and lists all participating VPL team members and their roles in the project.

The project's final phase asked students and teachers to complete a post-investigation survey to evaluate if they had experienced any changes in their perceptions of the debate and its participants after completing the verbatim performance investigation. In general, students reported that their perceptions of Biden, Trump, and Wallace did not change much; however, they shared that they gained a more nuanced understanding of the candidates and greater empathy for Wallace as he tried to keep the debate under control.<sup>2</sup> One actor who investigated Trump noted the following in her pre-investigation survey:

I think I may find some deeper sense of empathy for Trump... I disagreed with just about every one of his policies, and so I rarely really took the time to hear him out while he was president. I believe stepping into his shoes and really getting to know his words, mannerisms, and other behavior will help me understand him better even if I don't agree with the words I am saying.

Following her investigation and performance, the actor concluded:

I think this project has taught me that Trump is actually somewhat smarter than I previously gave him credit for. He think[s] a lot about the manner in which he needs to say things or the words he needs to use in order to get the most amount of people on his side. Since he doesn't really stand for much of anything himself, it is evident that gaining support is his top priority.

She also “discovered that, as a female, I have a tendency to shut down when I am interrupted in a way that Trump certainly does not.”

An actor investigating Biden initially wrote in his pre-investigation survey that:

My hypothesis is that I will discover a frustrated politician, upset by the way things are being run at the time, at the center of Biden’s mannerisms. I think these details will be subtle parts of his character and I think part of his struggle will be an inability to articulate everything he wants to say in a debate that is as wild as the artifact is.

After his investigation and performance, the actor noted:

I’m more forgiving of Biden’s actions after this, now that I’ve seen and understand a bit of his side. Before I was holding him to a higher regard, and I believed this debate wasn’t representative of what I wanted in any of my leaders. But I think that kind of limited my ability to appreciate Biden when he was being honest, and whether I like it or not, I think he’s pretty honest (for a politician) in this debate, which I can respect.

An actor investigating Chris Wallace hypothesized in her pre-investigation survey that “audiences will be able to empathize with [Wallace’s] situation when I, as a young person, am placed in his position.” When noting discoveries from her investigation and performance, the actor stated:

I always saw Chris Wallace as a level-headed person trying his best to control a situation that was completely out of his control. I guess I now see just how lost and worried he actually feels in this conversation, and I have more empathy for him.

Participants also offered insights beyond what they learned about Biden, Trump, or Wallace. The student assistant director for Lady Bird Johnson Middle School’s project expressed a discovery that was echoed by other students, saying “it’s really important to see different perspectives, listen and allow everyone the opportunity to take space. I feel like this experience has me more aware of my surroundings and understanding conflict” (Irving Weekly Staff, 2021, para. 9). Another student noted that “Verbatim performance is extremely effective at helping us understand why people act the way they do.” Similarly, Alex Ates, theatre teacher and director of the project at Westtown School, co-authored a piece with his students about their experience and concluded that:

This mode of performance allowed the students to analyze and interpret political events that were directly impacting their lives... allowing them the opportunity to kinesthetically consider political concepts and subversively respond to political provocations through the

transgressiveness of aesthetic conflict. (Ates, Feng, Hu, & Zhang, 2021, p. 43)

VPL wanted to engage pre- and emerging voters as citizens of this country and, by extension, the world with this project. Through the discoveries outlined above it became clear that the project succeeded in that respect.

As a Research-based Theatre project using verbatim performance, *If You Wanna Switch Seats, We Could* offered students an opportunity to identify disconnects between themselves and the men in the highest leadership positions in the U.S., while also gaining a better understanding of how they fit into the current political landscape. They were able to interrogate the intersections of their identities and those of Biden, Trump, and Wallace, and engage in a mode of political participation and discourse available to them as young people without the right to vote.

#### NOTES:

- 1) All students completed a photo/video release form to allow for the screening of the videos created for this project. A parent or guardian also signed the photo/video release form for students under the age of 18.
- 2) Most of the following cited student responses come from assignments completed as part of the curriculum created for this project. One student response comes from a local newspaper article which is cited. All student responses have been anonymized for this article.

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LUCY MEDEIROS teaches theatre full-time to New York City students in grades 6-12. She has a BS and MA in Educational Theatre from the Steinhardt School at New York University. [lkm349@nyu.edu](mailto:lkm349@nyu.edu)

LILLY STANNARD is co-founder of Impact Arts, a prison-based arts nonprofit, and is an interdisciplinary artist, educator, and artist-researcher interested in the transformative nature of the arts in various settings. [lilystannard@gmail.com](mailto:lilystannard@gmail.com)

JOE SALVATORE is the founder and director of the Verbatim Performance Lab and a Clinical Professor of Educational Theatre at the Steinhardt School at New York University. [joe.salvatore@nyu.edu](mailto:joe.salvatore@nyu.edu)

LUCY MEDEIROS enseigne le théâtre à temps plein aux élèves de la 6e à la 12e année à New York. Elle est titulaire d'un BS et d'une MA en théâtre éducatif de l'École Steinhardt de l'Université de New York. [lkm349@nyu.edu](mailto:lkm349@nyu.edu)

LILLY STANNARD est cofondatrice d'Impact Arts, une organisation artistique à but non lucratif établie en milieu carcéral. Elle est artiste interdisciplinaire, pédagogue et artiste-chercheuse, intéressée par le pouvoir transformateur des arts dans divers contextes. [lilystannard@gmail.com](mailto:lilystannard@gmail.com)

JOE SALVATORE est le fondateur et directeur du Verbatim Performance Lab ainsi que professeur clinicien en théâtre éducatif à l'École Steinhardt de l'Université de New York. [joe.salvatore@nyu.edu](mailto:joe.salvatore@nyu.edu)