

A LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP WITH PERFORMANCE

REHEARSING 'WHAT IF' ONLINE



By Ariane Vanco

The *What If* cast and creative team sit patiently, waiting for a rehearsal to start. The grid view of everyone's faces on Zoom disappears as designer Moes shares his screen to play a video. It is a screen-recording of someone's phone scrolling through a WhatsApp group chat, and various voice messages are being

A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

played in turn. In one message, an exasperated Yennefer¹ says, after pouring out her frustrations with working on Zoom, “I feel like I’m in a long-distance relationship with work.” The video continues to show a recording of a Zoom call. Yennefer is online and experiencing technical difficulties trying to get her end of the call to work. Moes and Hidayat appear in different windows, dressed in floral shirts and singing along to the same song, while Yennefer continues battling static noise and poor connection. The video ends and Moes unshares his screen, bringing back the grid view of faces. The audience is silent for some time before comments start trickling in, and someone finally admits that the frustrations poured out in the video seemed so real, that they weren’t sure if it was acted out for the piece alone. This initial piece on the difficulties of working online would slowly evolve into “Frozen, Broken, Poof”, an episode about the cast celebrating Shawn’s birthday, while also reenacting some of the very real moments, routines and difficulties experienced through rehearsing online.

What does it mean to rehearse for a show online? To rehearse over live video conferencing where discussions (that were already difficult to have in person) are now disrupted further by poor connection, poor audio, endless static and ambient noise? To rehearse on a completely new platform where “liveness” doesn’t mean the same thing, and one has to struggle with cleverly incorporating technology, yet not using it as a crutch? As *What If* performer Yennefer aptly described the situation: she felt like she was in a “long distance relationship with the work”. That’s exactly it! There’s still joy to be had in the process of creating art, but it feels muted (pardon the pun)

1. Alias requested by the artist.

A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance



The marketing visuals of *0 dB* and *Fetching Sanctuary*. The designs and colours reflect the mood and the theme of each piece.

online. The problems and the negotiations are still there, but it's much more frustrating to try and tackle them without meeting physically. It's still sticky and messy to navigate, it's harder to hash things out when disagreements occur. To top it all off, each person is forced to bring these problems into their home and personal space. This piece will take a brief look at the rehearsal process for *What If* that took place in June and July. During this period, the cast was split into smaller groups where they worked intensively on individual "episodes" of the production, and were retooling and finessing ideas that had come up in the earlier months of the rehearsal process and moulding them into their final form. I'll go deeper into the questions I've raised earlier this paragraph when zooming in (it's really not on purpose!) on two of these episodes, *0 dB* and *Fetching Sanctuary*.

There are two parts to this question: one, how do you create and rehearse for a show that will be *presented* online and two, how do you approach the rehearsal process online? *What If* had a long 6-month run-up to the show, commencing rehearsals in mid-February,



A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

so having Covid-19 push rehearsals and any form of performance online happened early enough to give the team some time to adjust to this new form of working. Most of the groundwork done to have the team integrate and find their groove working with each other wasn't wasted. Instead of putting on a show as a big group, the cast was split into smaller teams, working mostly in pairs for each short episode.

In the process, the team has had to revisit conversations about access and how to accommodate and adjust audience access over Zoom, conversations that are much harder to have when mediated by an imperfect communication tool - it has its benefits, such as allowing Jing Hong to be a part of rehearsals from her home in Austria, instead of having to miss a month of rehearsals as was initially planned. However, discussions and even arguments can be quite tiring to go through with when punctuated by connectivity issues and lapses in speech. We've all heard about "Zoom fatigue" at this point, where it's uncomfortable and tiring to have to engage in a "constant gaze" during meetings and overthinking every movement and change in facial expression (Fosslie & Duffy, 2020).

Soon it was clear that it would be useful to bring in someone new to be a creative advisor on using technology to help navigate a terrain no one was really familiar with yet. Shengen Lim, a multidisciplinary artist and advocate for New Media art, was eventually introduced to the team in mid-April. While digital performances have since become de rigueur during the pandemic, there are so many logistics and possibilities to lay out and consider in its earlier months: How would

the team actually “stage” the show over Zoom? If lockdown restrictions were lifted, would it be easier for the performers to be gathered in the same physical space? If so, how would the team make preparations while still unable to meet in person? How might one orientate the audience around this new online space, and potentially provide “tech support” for them?

“Rehearsals” began to consist of finding ways to make use of the virtual space and the kinds of interactions and interventions it offers, to explore how the aesthetics of live theatre might be translated into virtual performance. The cast now had to create what they had hoped to do in a physical space beforehand, and see how much of it could be kept and how much would have to change to fit the new medium. *0 dB* (by designer Tim and performer Ka Wai) and *Fetching Sanctuary* (by sound designer Sze Min and performer Hidayat) form interesting counterpoints to each other: the former is a purely-visual piece (specifically for non-hearing audiences), while the latter is purely audio (specifically for non-sighted audiences). Both pairs of artists tried to integrate their personal interests and practices with each other to create meaningful pieces. At the same time, they had to navigate issues around the technical execution of their work in an online space to make the work as accessible as possible to their audience demographic, as well as adapt their content for this new medium.

In earlier presentations and experiments in the rehearsal process, Hidayat was interested in re-imagining his character as the protagonist of a hero’s story. In his first experiment, Hidayat made a



During a presentation as part of the devising process, Hidayat acted as a hero, working out to prepare for a battle.

highly-stylised “movie trailer” about a fantasy adventure in which he filmed himself acting out scenes in his house, editing the video over tracks made by Sze Min. For the final iteration of these experiments, which has culminated in the audio episode *Fetching Sanctuary*, he chose the story of a different kind of protagonist: that of a “front-line hero” in the fight against Covid-19 which inspired both himself and Sze Min. They set out to create a piece that took the viral blog post of an American nurse as a starting point. Sze Min was very keen on audience participation in the work, and wanted to get audiences to vote at specific times for items to be given to the nurse to advance the story. Initial meetings with the directorial team focused on the logistical nitty-gritty of the piece: how would this voting be carried out? How would non-sighted audiences know what the options were, and when to vote? What if the piece were an audio-only one, and audiences heard a sound cue that would prompt them to vote; if

that were possible, would these sounds just create chaos? Was that chaos desirable? Slowly, the conversation moved away from this checklist of technical issues to resolve, and into the creative content of the piece. Who would be reading the piece, and did the pair want one voice (female or male?) or a bunch of voices overlapping? After a few presentations, there came a sense that the piece wouldn't quite captivate the audience since it was so far removed from Singapore, so the team grappled with how to retain the concept but tweak the story to hit closer to home – to become much more personal and raw and engaging in a local context?

For *0 dB*, Tim and Ka Wai had worked together before on earlier experiments, in which they had explored a blend of live performance and film animation. In their initial presentations to the group, Ka Wai had provided Tim with photos of his arms, legs, and face, and Tim edited them together to create a video. It started out with pictures of Ka Wai's arms in roughly the position one might expect them to be, but as the video progressed, more and more pictures of different body parts taken out of context were added. Slowly, this patchwork of arms and legs and finally, Ka Wai's head, unfolded before our eyes. It felt like a psychedelic but meditative exploration of the body, and if the body might lose certain meanings while gaining new ones when taken apart and reassembled in a completely different way. *0 dB* presents a story inspired by Tim's own journey as a deaf person encountering sound and vibration, and confronting these new senses first with some fear and trepidation before learning to embrace them. Ka Wai wrote the script, which Tim then animated, an art form quite different from



A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance



A snapshot of Timothy and Ka Wai's earlier piece. Timothy drew inspiration from the Vitruvian Man when arranging his limbs.

what he's used to as a designer and visual communicator. Tim created storyboards of the animation – the protagonist is a really adorable little blob – and incorporated studies of shadow and depth, making use of dimensions to give more texture to a piece that would be only visual. The challenge was to render “sound” visually, as waves crashing into the blob from all directions, seemingly random and disorienting at times. Shengen even suggested the possibility of using sound sparingly, so that the audience might be able to *feel* the sound through the vibrations of their laptop speakers and earphones. As more rehearsals passed, the animation continued to evolve as the team made decisions on what kind of story would create more emotion and meaningful tension, such as





Screenshot from *0 dB* of sound waves crashing into the blob.

how the blob should look like and how its reactions could look more lifelike. This was always the main focus of the rehearsal sessions. The script and story were touching and captivating and, given both artists' expertise, might have been performed beautifully on stage. The issue now was finding a way to create that same live experience through animation instead, and for the 2-dimensional video to capture as much depth and complexity as Tim and Ka Wai had envisioned.

In the few rehearsals I attended, the group would start by working out the logistics and technical kinks of the piece, where they wanted to go with what they had so far, and what they would need. As the mountain of technical issues were slowly checked off the list, the cast

A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

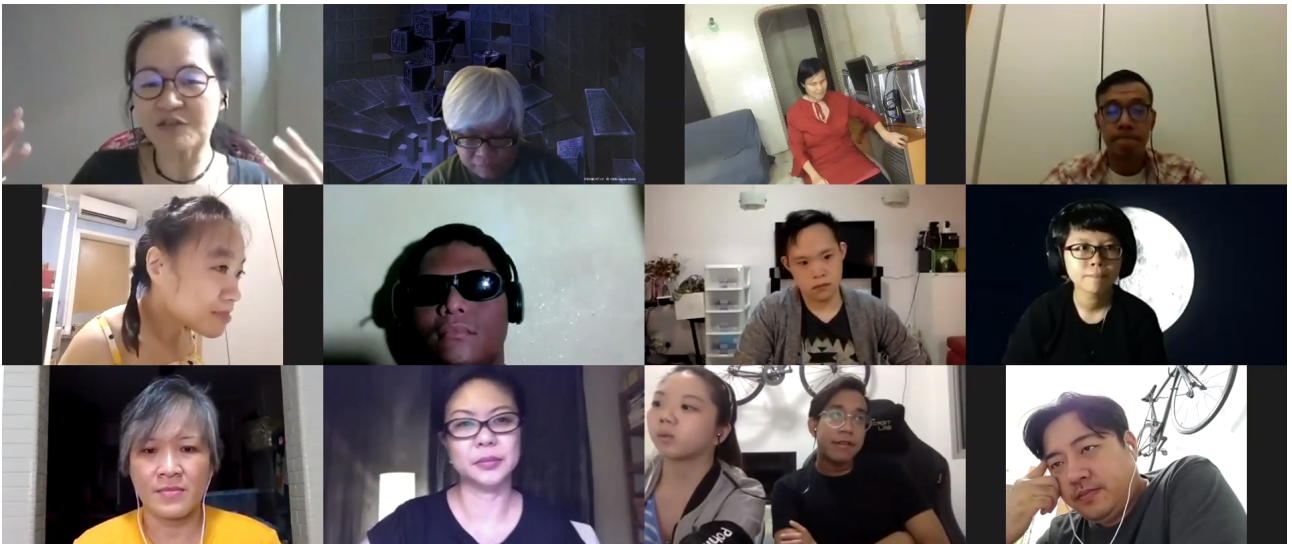
and directors could refocus on developing each piece's content and, from there, make changes to scripts and storylines.

This felt quite similar to the earlier big-group rehearsals a few months ago (which you can read about in Corrie's [earlier piece](#)), particularly the way critique and feedback was being given among the cast. Initially, everyone was very tentative about their critique. One "rule" that Jing Hong set out at the beginning of the rehearsal process in February was that she didn't want anyone to be "too nice" to each other. She wanted everyone involved to remain respectful and constructive, but to be as direct as possible in providing feedback and voicing out problems. During this period of intense work on individual episodes, Jing Hong pointed out again that the critique offered by the artists wasn't focusing on the content of the performances, but rather on the technical aspects of each piece: how they were filmed or animated, or how they blended live conversation and editing in post-production, to name a few. She was instead looking for feedback on whether the pieces were effectively communicated over Zoom, or if they did anything for you, or made you feel anything and why or why not.

Reflecting on that now, it seemed that there were a few issues at work here. The team was grappling with the new dimension of the technical demands of an online space, and it has been difficult (maybe impossible!) to separate the complexities of these technical requirements of **form** from the **content** of each work. It has been difficult for performance practitioners not accustomed to working with new media — as well as physically separate from each other — to

A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

learn an entirely new technical vocabulary that has a symbiotic relationship with the content of their work. Only after breaking away whatever did or didn't work about the *way* a piece was created, could we properly look at *what* the piece was trying to say. It feels like when we can't quite figure out why we aren't captured by this new version of "live" performance in an online space, we fall back on focusing on what worked and didn't work technically, almost as if we're trying to evaluate how well an online performance can mimic or recreate "live" performance. But is this even possible in the first place? It's hard to rehearse for and constantly improve an online performance piece when we are still learning the fundamentals of what works and what doesn't in an online performance piece. Performance-makers around the world have had to adapt to this new medium in a matter of months, and the direction "live" performance will take in the coming years still remains to be seen. It's not enough



The team of *What If* having a post-show dialogue where audiences pose questions to them.



A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

to try and categorise *0 dB* as a silent animation piece, or “Fetching Sanctuary” as a radio play, as both pieces will be played “live” for an intimate audience, and the *What If* creative team has been working on ways in which to invite their audience members to immerse themselves in each online episode as they would in a “live” theatre performance.

So, how does one rehearse for a show online? The creative team on *What If* have been on the forefront of exploring not just online performance as a new hybrid medium, but also how to incorporate accessibility into these pieces. We are so early on in adapting and adjusting to the changes in our encounter with live performance during this pandemic, that creatives and audience members still seem to be figuring out what these new vocabularies and guidelines are, and they change all the time.

One struggle has been reconstructing the feeling of intimacy and liveness for an audience engaging with these pieces behind a screen, at home. Another has been learning the foreign languages of film and new media while trying to keep online performance separate from the domain of film and television (which is particularly difficult in an era of live-streaming platforms). Third, all the conventions of access that disability performance has established – such as closed captions, touch tours of the set and audio description – need to be reimagined for the realm of the virtual. Finally, once the shows have been performed, new guidelines and frameworks to evaluate them critically as audiences and as creatives will have to be created. Online performance might not simply be a placeholder to keep making art



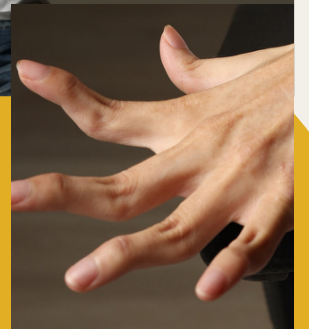
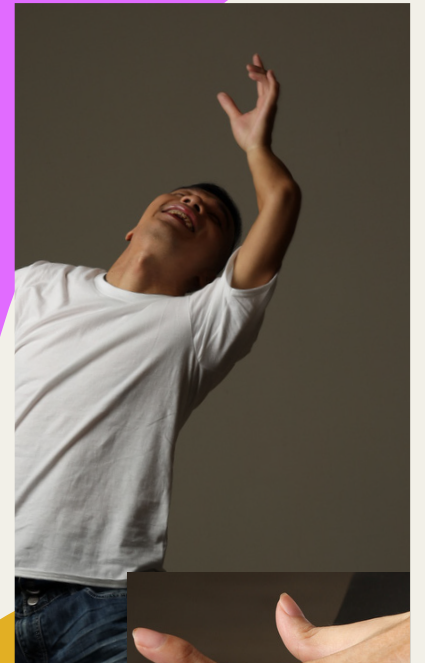
A Long-Distance Relationship with Performance

while Covid-19 persists and, if it's here to stay, we will need to find ways to keep improving the process. Come August, the *What If* team will have been living and (attempting to) create art during a pandemic for four months. It's still a completely new process that they are trying to figure out and finetune. In watching *What If* take shape, it's been exciting to witness discussions of access alongside the making of performance work. There were four "Zoom orientation" sessions planned a week before the show opened for non-hearing and non-sighted audience members, like a virtual "touch tour" of the online spaces they will be in. It's really hard to work on a theatre show online, without tried and tested strategies to fall back on. But maybe it's equally exciting for this generation of artists to be the ones deciding what works and what doesn't, and how to challenge and test these limits. What if this could set a precedent for how theatre (and accessible theatre) can be made virtually?



REFERENCES

Duffy, Mollie West & Fosslien, Lisa. "How to Combat Zoom Fatigue." *Harvard Business Review*, 29 Apr. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue>.



WHAT IF

4, 8, 11 & 15 AUGUST 2020