

VERBATIM THEATRE

Objectives

- Students will lead one another through non-verbal movement sequences.
- Students will observe and replicate a person’s movement and speech.
- Students will reflect on the skills that actors need to create verbatim theatre.

Activity

Playwright and actor Anna Deavere Smith blends journalism and art to examine critical social issues. Thirty years ago, The Mark Taper Forum commissioned her to create a show about the 1992 Los Angeles uprising following the assault on Rodney King. Smith recorded interviews with over 300 people about what occurred before, during, and after the event. Then, she edited and arranged those interview transcripts into a series of monologues. The final result of her process — *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*—debuted as a solo performance in which Anna Deavere Smith played over 40 different characters of various genders, races, ethnicities, and ages. She performed not only their actual words, but also their physical mannerisms, patterns of speech, and dialects as accurately as she could. This style of documentary theater-making is known as verbatim theater.

Part 1: Mirroring Movement

- This exercise helps actors practice focus, observation, and making physical choices to create character.
- Students stand in partners facing each other and decide who is A and who is B.
- A students will start by making a facial expression. B students will mirror the expression accurately as they can. A students can move their body as well as their face. B students will be their mirror, trying to copy the movements of their partner exactly. Partners will explore this activity, and then switch roles.
- Remind student leaders that moving slowly and clearly will allow their partners to achieve more accuracy. Teams should work together to accomplish this task.
- Next, A students should take a walk around the room. B students will switch from being a mirror to being a shadow, copying their walk exactly.
- Give further prompts to the A students to imagine different kind of walks, such as walking on a very hot or cold day, or when they are late to class. Partners will switch roles so that both have the opportunity to observe and to be observed.

Reflection Questions:

- How did it feel to see yourself mirrored?
- Did you learn anything about yourself?
- What made it easy to follow someone? What made it more difficult?

Part 2: Adding Speech

- A students should try saying hello to themselves in the mirror. B students should do their best to copy the As vocal tone, volume, rhythm and speed, as well as their body actions. Partners switch roles and repeat.
- A students should now introduce themselves. B will mirror, then switch. Remember that ums, errs, and sounds are an important part of speech and should be copied too!
- Next, A students are going to have one minute to describe their all-time favorite food to their partner. Partners will listen and observe as closely as possible, and then see if they can repeat the entire description back. Partners switch roles and repeat.

Reflection Questions

- How did it feel to observe and listen that intently?
- Did knowing someone was watching you cause you to alter your behavior or speech in any way?
- Was it easier to remember someone's body actions or someone's words?

As you watch *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, remember that every actor on that stage is speaking the exact words of real people, keeping as close to their original speech patterns and words as possible. See if you can track what choices the actors make with their voices and bodies to become all of the different people. And as you reflect on the show, ask yourself why Anna Deavere Smith might choose to use real people's words, rather than writing one from her imagination.

Lesson Extensions

Find a recording of a speech by a public figure. See if you can present a few lines of that speech as that person. Can you capture their mannerisms and patterns of speech?

Complete a short interview with a classmate on a subject of your choice. Record the interview and/or take notes. Then, see if you can turn your partner's answers into a short speech that you can perform for the class. Remember that verbatim theater uses all the sounds a person makes as well, so "um"s, "uh"s, laughter, and repeated words should be included in the script.