

WARMING UP TO WHAT IF

PHYSICALITY AND VOCABULARIES OF MOVEMENT



By Ariane Vanco

“Water through the fingers; inhale for nothing;
exhale, arms come up.”

SETTING UP SPACES

The cast and Jing Hong sit cross-legged on the floor in a loose circle. Elsewhere in the room, non-cast members have retreated to their corners to prepare for the day's rehearsal. Some sit around on the floor, ready to join in. Jing Hong is about to begin leading the cast warm-up. She first reminds them about the focus of the warm-up, posing questions such as "how can I use the least amount of effort to perform this action?". They take a few breaths to settle in, then begin with the stretches and exercises that they have become accustomed to over the past month.

Right from the first rehearsal for *What If*, Jing Hong had made her plan clear: to take a psychophysical approach to actor's training while they explore and devise themes and modes of performance to build into the final show. Her intention was to explore what it means to carry out this training with this particular cast, with "physical" being the challenge here. For a small cast, there is a wide variance in terms of individual physical capabilities and needs; each body is quite different from the others. Hidayat and Wai Yee are non-sighted athletes and performers - Hidayat is a goalball player, and Wai Yee is a trained long-distance runner. Yennefer¹ is a practitioner with cerebral palsy and is a wheelchair user with experience in physical training. Ka Wai is a performer and a drama instructor in schools, while Shawn has both a dance and theatre background. Yet how they have been navigating these differences and, sometimes, difficulties to come up with a combined warm-up, a shared vocabulary of

1. Alias chosen by the artist



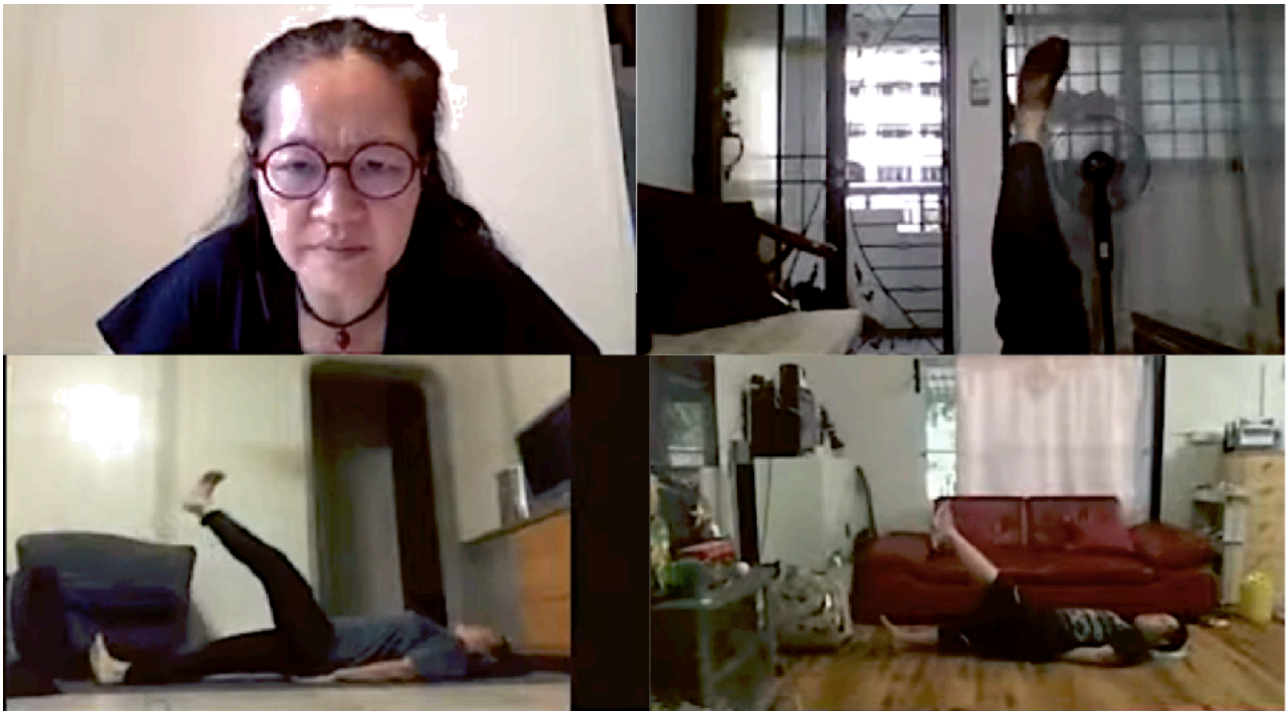
Different ways that the cast explore the use of their bodies in the devising process. (The cast: Hidayat, Ka Wai, Yennefer, Shawn and Wai Yee. From left to right, top to bottom)

movements that each member is familiar with, has been fascinating to observe. Jing Hong is no stranger to working with a wide range of bodies. With a performance and directing background in theatre and dance, conducting this kind of actor training is not new. In the last couple of years, working with elderly communities has become the focus of her movement-based work. Most recently on the Singapore stage, she directed the non-verbal piece "**The Ordinary And The Unspectacular**" as part of The Theatre Practice's M1 Patch! A Theatre Festival of Artful Play in 2018. The work looked at the everyday



fundamentals of human life and what it means to be human. Having produced the work with students before, she recreated it this time with older bodies, bodies that have gone through many more years of repeating these daily mundanities. Actors over 50 move very differently from younger performers, and Jing Hong was interested in the stories that can be told from these differences in movements. The same could possibly be said of this production: someone who is blind walks quite differently from someone who is not. What stories can be told from the everyday movements and gestures of a blind actor? For “The Ordinary And The Unspectacular”, Jing Hong had hoped that “the audience gets the time to take in the things that might seem assumed or mundane” (Nanda, 2018), a philosophy which appears to be guiding *What If* and its creation. There is an interest in slowing things down to appreciate why the body moves the way it does, for both actor and audience alike. The challenge in this stage of the rehearsal process is then adapting the physical training for disabled actors just as she did for older actors.

Jing Hong’s cues are interesting to me. With each new movement she introduces, the focus remains on maintaining the lightness of one’s body, in noticing how one’s body moves rather than actively moving each body part. Especially for a cast with varying physical needs and abilities, this process takes the emphasis away from one’s physical ability to move a certain way. Rather, the body moves the way it does and can, and all you have to do is acknowledge it. To see if you can go deeper with each breath, to keep your movements light and weightless, to get a sense of how your body is able to move today.



The cast lifting their leg during their warm-up, guided by Jing Hong through Zoom.

“You are not lifting your leg; your leg is being lifted.”

Jing Hong goes around the room, making slight adjustments to the cast to get them to feel what she wants them to feel: the stretch in the hips, the lengthening of the spine, the tightening of the core. The warm-ups appear to place an emphasis on bodily awareness, on building that mind-body connection to know which part of the body is responsible for this particular stretch, which part is being targeted, and building that muscle memory into one’s physical vocabulary. I see this to be especially important for the non-sighted cast: to know how your body is moving or how it is positioned without being able to see yourself. A large part of physicality involves locating your

body in space and time, feeling where your body is relative to the space it is in. There are some things that perhaps don't make as much sense when you can't see it relative to something else, like your feet being parallel to each other, or how straight your legs are when they're lifted over your head. As I've watched the non-sighted members of the cast navigate the warm-ups, I've learnt how quickly the body learns and adapts. Once adjustments are made, the body eventually knows where to go, how far into the movement it needs to reach. Here, the importance of lightness/weightlessness comes in again: when the body feels light and not much effort is needed to hold a position, that must be its most natural and most "beneficial" position, where water and energy can flow freely through the body.

At this point I think it might be useful to take a closer look at what is understood as the "natural" or "neutral" body. Many kinds of physical training teach a correct form that is based on what a "normal" body is supposed to be like and is universally applied to all bodies. There is often not much consideration for what this "normal" body means, and the extent of its applicability. More specific to the theatre, disability performance scholar Carrie Sandahl questions the idea of the "neutral" body that is taken as "humanity's baseline" (Johnston 46). Conceptually, the neutral body is one that can be stripped of all the individuality of the actor's body, such that a role might be built upon this "clean slate". It should not be necessary for a disabled performer to forcibly adjust their bodies and access requirements to be "cured" or to achieve some kind of idealised neutral state. Sandahl continues:

Disabled bodies, though, cannot be cured. They may tremor, wobble, or be asymmetrical. Implicit in the various manifestations of the neutral metaphor is the assumption that a character cannot be built from a position of physical difference. The appropriate actor's body for any character, even a character that is literally disabled or symbolically struggling, is not only the able body, but also the extraordinarily able body (Sandahl cited in Johnston (2016, p. 47)).



Jing Hong observes the cast, as they practice their "drop-in" from home at the beginning and ending of each online rehearsal session. (From left to right, top to bottom: Hidayat, Ka Wai, Shawn, Wai Yee, Jing Hong and Yennefer)

Adapting actor's training for different kinds of bodies requires the recognition that the idea of the neutral body is merely an idealised unattainable state, and that it might be unattainable for a good reason. Jing Hong's approach to the sequences she's created for the cast of *What If* seems to be taking this direction, in acknowledging



the differences and unique qualities of each body and adapting the warm-up form to each individual. One instance comes to mind here: during the second official *What If* rehearsal, the cast was eased into the warm-up by learning how to “drop-in”, a short sequence to bring awareness to one’s body, one’s breathing, and to ground oneself in the space and time of the rehearsal. The standard form taught to us at the beginning was to stand with your feet parallel to each other, shoulder-width apart. After going through one round of this, standing still, breathing, sensing the walls and the people around you, we each took a deep breath, and relaxed with a sigh. The cast was asked how they felt about the drop-in, and Shawn commented that his feet “felt red”, an apt description of the soreness that most of us felt in this unfamiliar position. Over the next few rounds that we practised this, the cast was encouraged to take the adjustments that they needed, to keep their feet as wide apart or as close together as was needed to feel comfortable and not in pain. Each individual’s unique “neutral” position was being created, what made sense and felt most natural to them and only them. For example, Jing Hong spent some time during the first rehearsal working separately with Ka Wai and Yennefer. The soles of their feet do not ordinarily lie flat on the ground, hence the cue to root their feet firmly into the ground isn’t particularly useful. Instead, they were told to imagine and focus on certain pressure points in their feet, and Jing Hong would press these points for a more tactile description of where they are. They were guided to imagine water flowing out of these points, to direct energy and attention through these points, grounding them onto the rehearsal floor in a way that works for them. The drop-in is a practice separate from the warm-up, one that marks the start and end of each



rehearsal, but is an important foundation before the warm-up can even begin. It sets the pace for each individual, serving as preparation for more movements and training to be built upon.

Getting used to this takes time. The warm-up started out as a short sequence, a rudimentary set of stretches to get the body warm and moving. As the weeks passed, Jing Hong continued to add exercises and stretches, each one slightly more challenging than the last, each one requiring more coordination, more bodily awareness, and more time to get “right”. What’s struck me most about this rehearsal space is the lack of hurried anxiety: there is always time to take things slowly. That’s not to say that there is no urgency in the process; rather, Jing Hong is willing to spend more time on the fundamentals, on the core rituals that start and end each rehearsal. There is always time to settle in, time to breathe in and out, time to slowly get used to each new position and new stretch. It’s okay if you don’t get it today, you might get it tomorrow, or on Sunday, or next week. And the cast responds to this: with each warm-up, there are fewer protests, fewer distractions as everyone struggles less with a new and difficult movement. Each week introduces more silence, more peace into the warm-up, more enjoyment with comments like “oh, this is my favorite part”, and exclamations like “whee!”. It’s this same time and patience given to the cast to orientate themselves, both physically in the rehearsal venue and virtually on Zoom calls (as elaborated on in Corrie’s piece) that seems to have allowed them to become more comfortable in the space. To be in the right physical and spiritual environment to collaborate and make theatre.



VIRTUAL ACCESSIBILITY



First day on Zoom, learning how to acclimatise to online rehearsals as a team.

With the recent measures to stop the spread of Covid-19, rehearsals have been shifted online since the end of March. Physicality looks a lot different now on Zoom rehearsals, and so does access. By now, everyone in the cast knows the motions in their bones, but Jing Hong still has someone in the cast lead the warm-up each time. Warm-ups seem to have less of a physical purpose now: it's hard to perform live on Zoom, so presentations are largely filmed and edited beforehand and played on the call for everyone to watch and discuss. There's no practical need to warm the body up, neither is there the opportunity to ground oneself in the space together when you can't hear or feel the people around you, the communal breathing in the room. Over the Internet, the warm-up remains and serves to ground us in time, in

each member's makeshift rehearsal space, to retain some sense of normalcy in these odd times.

This does however beg the question of how effective the warm-up is for each individual cast member. Without the support of access workers, or someone to physically adjust one in person, does everyone still have the same kind of access to the sequence? To both the physical and mental preparation that it serves? The care taken to set up the space and get ready for each rehearsal has definitely aided a much smoother transition into a respectful and fruitful virtual discussion over Zoom, however, to what extent can access be translated from the physical into the virtual world? This is being made more obvious now with the shift away from physical rehearsals, which leads me to wonder if certain issues were being overlooked right from the start.

Going back to Jing Hong's practice of psychophysical training: it is not merely the physical training of the body's capabilities that is important, but rather the linking of the physical to the psychological, the mind-body preparation for rehearsal. The warm-up sequence serves to prepare and train the body as well as the mind to be together and present in this space and time, to prepare to think and create as a group. When one is suddenly unable to participate in the physicality of these movements, then we must also consider if one is still able to access the spiritual connection and preparation of the sequence.

With a show like *What If*, featuring a cast with a wide range of access



and mobility requirements, and approaching the work from different backgrounds and methods, I foresee there being a deep interest in the process of performance creation. As the various circumstances have forced us to work and rehearse from home, these questions become even more pertinent as we examine how well the process holds up when we are unable to convene and work in person. Even now as I try to describe how the process has been in the past two months for myself, I look back to the warm-up as a guide. To the very basis of the physical training taking place each week, and how that has translated into the virtual sphere. What might seem to outsiders as a simple theatrical practice has in fact evolved over many weeks of practice, forming the foundation for which the values and structure of this process have collectively developed. I'm not sure if the warm-up sequence is perfect in meeting the needs of persons with various disabilities and diverging histories of physical training. One might argue that a sequence tailored to each individual's needs would work better than a blanket structure. As mentioned before, the idea that all bodies are able to achieve a "normal", neutral state is outdated and impractical, and fails to take into account bodies that are not "extraordinarily able" (Johnston 47). *What If* has definitely made the effort to introduce the bodily awareness needed to adjust and find one's own normative state upon which the training can take place, especially with the introduction of the drop-in, however there has been limits to how much individual attention can be given during the rest of the warm-up sequence. I do think there are meaningful discussions to be had to explore the diversifying of traditional training methods. There are possibilities from this warm-up set and



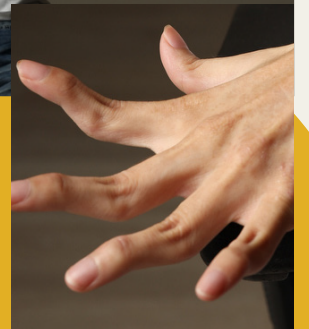
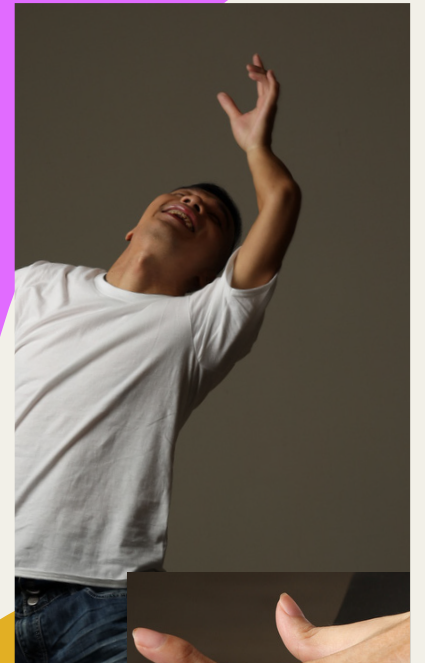
the mindfulness it induces that can be used to create more safe and sustainable practices in setting up rehearsal spaces, and I do hope that fewer productions take the rhythms and invitations of warm-ups for granted.



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