DIGESTING the INEFFABLE at the WTF CAFÉ

a conversation on EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE with Sarah Curran & David J. Levin

BY ZACHARY CAHILL

On the eve of the launch of a new experimental performance initiative at the University of Chicago, curator Sarah Curran and founding director of the Gray Center, opera scholar, and dramaturg David J. Levin sat down with Zachary Cahill to talk about the initiative and the nature of experimental performance more broadly—what is and isn’t, and the importance of processing the experience with fellow audience members.
ZC — I want to return to something Sarah had mentioned recently about how we can put a frame around an experience and that through the process of framing we can start to understand a walk through the quad as an experimental performance.

Or how we can even reframe my lunch today with colleagues as a performance. What is that framing mechanism, or what is the substance of that framing? How do you think about framing in ways that allow us to say, “ah, that is an experimental performance”? As people who are curating and planning an experimental performance series, I’m curious, how do you think about this dynamic of framing in relation to curating performance?

SC — Actually, I think asking these types of questions starts to give shape to the frame. Are we talking about the lunch as experimental performance because we’re wondering about social interaction or the economics of food waste or something about how people’s bodies in space determine pedestrian movements and eating habits? There could be a lot of different ways to approach it. For instance, what would it be if we were to include your lunch at Café Logan as part of a performance festival that we held? I think the framing would be in the questions we were asking the artists or performers, and how we might relate that particular dialogue to other things that are happening on campus or in the city.

ZC — I want to follow this thread a little more. Coming from a visual art perspective, for Marcel Duchamp it was the act of putting an everyday object (say a shovel, a bottle rack, or a urinal) in the art gallery that established a frame, the gallery itself automatically changed our perception of the object. So, if we’re talking about that lunch as experimental performance, it feels different to me because it’s happening off a stage and the audience may not realize what they’re viewing is performance, or am I wrong about this? How do you manage something that is really pushing against the frame, itself? It is almost as if, with experimental performance, the frame doesn’t have a frame.

DL — Since we’re on the campus of the University of Chicago it seems worthwhile to invoke the sociologist Erving Goffman, who of course did his graduate work here at the University and who in his famous book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, resorts to the language of theater to think about how people interact and how there is a kind of citationality, and therefore, a performative quality to the nature of interaction. I guess the question is: at what point does interaction warrant reflection? There are various forms of reflection, of course, where we sort of train an analytic eye upon, let’s say, everyday interaction. But what is a performance if not the convening of critical eyes on events that have until now not been convened in order to see something that hasn’t previously been seen?

I think one of Goffman’s fundamental insights was that if performance is relegated or restricted to the extraordinary, then in some sense what does not get seen is what we see all the time. Would it, therefore, be in the spirit of experimental performance to draw our attention to something which, in some sense, we haven’t yet seen, and would it make sense for that something that we haven’t seen before to be something that is fundamentally familiar to us? Is the everyday in some sense warranted as a forum for our attention, and would the theory of experimentation properly extend to the kind of improvisatory qualities that Goffman enumerates in our daily interactions?

Now look, I guess, having said that, I would also say I’m weirdly conservative and somewhat impatient with a sense that everything is performance and, therefore, everything is experimental. I think actually curating what constitutes experimentation brings with it the responsibility to make the argument for this being more worthy of attention than that. So, launching an experimental performance initiative as we are, which is something that Sarah is working on with a group of colleagues here at the University and across the city, launching a program and a project of experimental performance brings with it a certain responsibility to say, “look, I think this is exciting and interesting,” and hopefully there is a contagious sense of “yeah.” But it surely will also generate a conversation. Like “well, is it and why?” But I don’t think anything is in and of itself excluded. But I guess I don’t think that everything, therefore, is included.
SC — Yes, I agree, and there is so much to that. I think about this in relation to various modes of attention, because we really are in an attention economy at the moment. Therefore, what do we want to be intentional about how we are drawing people’s attention through experimental performance? The other thing that really stood out for me from what you just said was—and it drew back to Zach’s original prompt about séances—David, you mentioned that Goffman helped us see things through a performative lens that we didn’t see before. And that’s sort of what I think about with séances. We’re here in the same room but we’re all seeing something that we didn’t see before. I think that’s something about performance, that sense of if we all collectively come together and hone our attention in on something, what will we see that we didn’t see before? I think that’s one of the really special opportunities and transformative capacities of performance—that it will shift the room in that way and that’s why it isn’t just having lunch. It’s us coming together to look at this thing analytically or kinesthetically or in space and time together. And yeah, what will we see that we did not see before?

DL — Or hear or touch or . . . ?

SC — Yes, exactly.

DL — Right. I mean that is what we experience differently. There is a kind of endless involution to experimentation. To the question of lunch: when does it stop being lunch and when does it become an experience? Is it a performance if it’s lunch on Top Chef or on Chopped?

There, it seems like the frame is one that constitutes it as performance. But absent the framing, it seems like there are all kinds of ways in which social and individual experiences can warrant a form of attention that they haven’t received. Then it’s just a question of how that attention is deployed and how the object of that attention is managed or how it is inflected. That, to my mind, makes it more or less compelling.

ZC — This makes me think of Victor Turner a little bit and his work on ritual and performance. David, I think what I’m hearing you describe is lunch as a kind of ritual. I want to try to unpack a little bit about the power of form. By which I mean, we could just pretend that we’re having lunch or we could pretend that we’re having a court case and that somehow once we inhabit that particular form, that ritual, even if we’re just joking around, all of a sudden there is a power to it. Does experimental performance always need to reinvent the wheel, or can it work with recognizable forms?

SC — Experimental performance doesn’t always have to reinvent form. I think experimental theater in its first iteration came up precisely working against form. In this way of thinking, form gives you something to challenge, to resist or reshape or “inhabit.” Experimental performance sees form as tool. You just mentioned multiple kinds of forms and the multiplicity of forms allows for an experimental performance that is a court case or is the well-made play. Experimental performance has the ability and elasticity to take either the form (the court case or the play) as a form of experimentation itself or uses the form to create another question.

ZC — One thing I keep hearing in our conversation is the importance language plays in performance. I’m curious about this. It makes me think back to my student days studying performance with Tania Bruguera, who stressed that performance always starts in language, different from visual arts, which she suggested starts with an image. I take it that might be a provocative statement. But it leads me to ask about the importance of the embodied and things that fall outside of language. Could you talk about the role of the body in performance?

SC — Yeah, I’d say that is a provocative statement. As David suggested, there are a number of people and opinions on that experimental performance committee and, among that small group of people, I’m sure there would be a lot of opinions on that provocation. I think there is a realm of performance in which language is important, and there is an argument for the language of the body, which is not necessarily verbal, that is essential to performance. I think there are some people who would say language, if you consider language to be words, is a distraction for performance or takes away from it depending on your point of
view or your background. So, in the dance world, language is a completely different concept, right? It could be a hindrance. It might be a sort of garnish in a performance. It might be the performance. It totally depends on your ambition or interest as a choreographer or dancer. So, yes and no.

DL — Yes. It seems like one of the risks of locating experimental performance at the University of Chicago is that it might come to be understood as geek experimental performance. Surely, part of the geek canon of experimental performance is a whole set of experiments, sort of Gertrude Stein and friends around language. But, to get back to your point, if that’s all we’re doing, I’d say great. Yeah, let’s have at it. But let’s make sure we make it linguistic but also fundamentally a linguistic, paralinguistic, even anti-linguistic.

I guess if there’s a consensus about something then experimental performance would want to interrogate that consensus. So, for instance, one of the most interesting contemporary choreographers, William Forsythe, is someone who has actually interrogated precisely the sense which Sarah articulated so cogently and so beautifully just now, that language and dance don’t really get along. I think Bill Forsythe has brought choreographic principles to language and has brought language to choreographic principles. Not by lending them linguistic form, (although he does that), but by trying to figure out what would happen if you collided language with the body. What does that collision look like? And he’s done so with an endless sense of invention. So, I guess I would say it’s important for us to come to the recognition that there are certain precepts about artistic forms, and then it’s really important for us to find the smartest, most inventive, most exciting, and interesting artists who are, in a sense, taking on those precepts and doing so in ways that aren’t just intellectually satisfying, but that are also artistically generative and enthralling.

ZC — As you’re talking, one term from your book Unsettling Opera that strikes me as relevant to our conversation here is the word “ineffable.” I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the ineffable, or how you think about the relationship of the ineffable to performance.

DL — Well, look, I think there are people who have thought about the ineffable in compelling and revelatory ways, in particular the philosopher Vladimir Jankelévitch, who has written about music and its relationship to the ineffable in ways that I really admire. And there are certainly musicologists (I’m thinking here of Carolyn Abbate and Michael Gallope), who have thought in really exciting ways about ineffability and music, in dialogue with Jankelévitch and I would say that my ideas on ineffability follow from their work. But, okay, with all of those provisos in mind, I guess there is something that I find really exciting about the experience of performance. I think we could use various terms for what that might be. The ineffable, or ineffability, might be one of them.

But another one that may be somewhat less familiar would be something like “radical invention.” That there is such a thing as a turn of the imagination where something transpires that is wholly unforeseen, and there is just extreme pleasure in that for me. I just find that hugely exhilarating and exciting. By no means does art have a lock on that. But I think it’s one of art’s opportunities and when it happens, and it happens rarely, I think there is no greater pleasure and it can happen in any genre and in any forum.

ZC — A question for each of you, then: is radical invention wholly dependent on the maker?

SC — That’s a really good question. It’s definitely not wholly dependent on the maker, it is also dependent on your audience member. As David was talking, I was sitting here thinking to myself, “what does it take to surprise David Levin at this point?” David, you have had a long career in the arts, so what is it that merits surprise for you? Obviously, it’s hard to even say. And I think that’s the point.

ZC — It also seems like the encounter is critical, here, meaning the staging of how people encounter the performance. In my experience, it might not be a great performance, per se, but if it catches me off-guard then my appreciation
of it shifts markedly. How do you think about staging the encounter with the audience?

SC — For me it’s often a sensorial quality. I think, for example, suddenly hearing a sound from behind that I was not expecting in a performance that was oriented in front of me, right? And that feeling of oh, okay, now I have to turn and move in space toward this other completely unexpected thing. Or, I once brought a bunch of students to a performance of Louis Andriessen’s *De Materie*, directed by Heiner Goebbels in the Park Avenue Armory. It involved live sheep, and I can’t tell you how many essays I got after the fact about the sense of smelling the sheep before you saw them and not knowing what it was. Because why would sheep be in this performance? It was this sudden earthy smell. Out of everything we saw in a week in New York City, that was what had the biggest impact, the complete sensorial surprise and, yeah, disrupting expectations.

DL — So, one quick thought, which may or may not be helpful. It strikes me that what we’re saying is that there’s a kind of utopian moment to this, where all of a sudden something can fundamentally be something else. Where even something that is familiar can become something radically unfamiliar or something that was settled can emerge newly unsettled. I guess the allegorical quality of it would be that the world, which in some sense is perhaps familiar, could be re-experienced as fundamentally unfamiliar. That seems really exciting to me.

ZC — Is there ever a time-lapse between the performance and when that happens?

DL — Well, I remember when I was a student and I went to see a performance directed by a famous director. I was living in Germany. I went to see a performance of a very famous play, “Before Sunrise” by the canonical German naturalist Gerhart Hauptmann, which had been directed by Einar Schleef, a German experimental theater director and designer. I remember I almost walked out. I was just so outraged by this production because it was programmatically antinaturalistic. It actually took the language of the piece, which is the language of the streets—that was a hallmark of Hauptmann’s Naturalist project, and a central feature of its provocation—and made it willfully into “poetry.” So, all of a sudden, stuff that was supposed to be functional language was rendered as beautiful, even non-referential poetry. I found it so utterly irritating. I was just outraged and annoyed as only a college student can be. Then I kept thinking about it. I actually think about it to this day because I feel like it was really a formative experience of inversion where initially . . . it was like, wait, I’m the student. If inversion is not exciting to me, then to whom? How have I become so conservative that I’m defending the inherent value of naturalism qua its programmatic and historical aspirations?

What? Oh my God. I’d become like a little Republican in my aesthetic positions. And the more I thought about it the more I thought, oh, this is such an inspired project. So, yeah, I’ve had that experience frequently since then where I’m in a performance and I’m deeply annoyed. The more I think about it, the more I’m perplexed by my annoyance.

SC — David, can I ask you something? Does the transition from annoyance to enthusiasm happen on an individual basis or in conversation with other people?

DL — Most recently it happened very much in a conversation when I went to a performance with a bunch of students. They convinced me that I was just completely wrong.

SC — Wow.
DL — Which was so great. But, honestly, if I had gone to it alone . . . A big part of my German experience when I was in college was that I attended performances alone. So, I was in conversation with myself. I don’t remember that I ever spoke to anyone about that production. I think you come to a different understanding in conversation.

SC — I think so, because one of the things I like, one of the beauties of doing this in an educational setting, is that there is a natural inclination toward discussion, right?

SC — One would hope that that will happen with this project for our colleagues in their classes.

ZC — Absolutely.

SC — But, outside of that, I think I’ve been in parts of performances that have been so almost otherworldly, right? I went to a production where everyone had to wear white to enter the space. Then you lay down on a white circle as you’re surrounded by sounds of the apocalypse basically. It was a really intense experience. But the genius of the experience was shuttling us straight into a bar afterward. So, rather than going out into the street, into the night and wondering what the heck just happened, you turned to somebody next to you and said, “What the heck just happened?” and exchanged what you thought it was for you. That was as much part of the performance as the official written score. And I think that is part of our curatorial role, creating this space for conversation to explore why something might be agitating or illuminating.

ZC — It sounds like, and I mean this in the best possible way, you might have to play the role of audience manipulator. By that I mean to suggest that you have to be intentional about creating space for unintentional things to happen around a performance.

SC — Absolutely.

DL — Right, right. And that there’s an architectural component to that, too . . . I mean, I think that’s the genius of the 1700 Theater that the Steppenwolf Theatre recently opened, which has a gorgeous café bar right next to a black box multi-use experimental space. Or if you think about Augusta Read Thomas’s Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition. They have a concert every quarter and after the concert there is a giant party in the lobby, the Gidwitz Lobby of the Logan Center where everyone is invited, having just witnessed three or four world premieres, to talk and think about what it is they’ve just experienced.

If you think about, to take another example, what is annoying and frustrating about the Court Theatre, is that their lobby space is teeny. So, you come out and as much as you want to talk, there’s very little space in which to do so. I think the folks at Court Theatre are super frustrated about this. I think as they imagine a future Court, my understanding is that one of the things they seek is a place to congregate and exchange ideas.

ZC — Kind of like a what the fuck just happened café.

DL — Yeah! Exactly: the WTF Café!

SC — I think you just named our café! But I think as David was saying at one point, there is this SNL-based stereotype of experimental performance which is high-brow, snooty, turtleneck sweater, foreign accent scenario that is alienating to a lot of people. It’s really important to me, and I believe for this project that we chip away at that stereotype and make an experimental performance initiative that is inviting not just to students and the faculty, but to the South Side [of Chicago], to the city at large. It’s a place where people see themselves as well, and they feel part of the conversation. That conversation is really important.

DL — I guess I would say that they see themselves and are confounded. Ideally, they don’t just see themselves.

SC — Agree.

DL — But that there’s a question mark in there somewhere and maybe not where they would expect it or where we would expect it.

SC — Yes.

DL — I think both of those things are important: that the audiences be as diverse as the work that we’re presenting and that there be a sense that this isn’t just for the pre-selected few who are going to get it, but rather that this is work that engages multiple
audiences, multiple forms, in multiple ways.

ZC — My last question is somewhat open-ended: what do you guys feel like doesn’t get asked when you’re talking about experimental performance? After being in the field for a while and engaging with so many different perspectives, what would be your, “Why can’t we just talk about X topic?”

SC — I guess I’d be interested in talking more about silliness and sincerity. I feel like those don’t get put on the table as much when you’re talking about experimental performance, especially within an institutional setting like the University of Chicago. I think the silly and the sincere can have a place within experimental performance and when it comes to surprise and joy, they are a big part of that.

ZC — I love that answer. When I think about the study of art history in relation to what you just said, I think about New York in the ‘70s and figures who are now considered canonical and taken very seriously in art history lecture halls. These were young people in their 20s and early 30s like Gordon Matta-Clark, Robert Morris, Tricia Brown, and Carolee Schneemann. I had the chance to talk to Carolee Schneemann about that moment and the role of fun at that time in the arts and I ventured, “It just seems like you guys are having a lot of fun.” To which she nodded, “Yes, I see, that is true . . . except Walter De Maria—he was very serious.”

DL — That’s so beautiful. We had these conversations in our committee meetings last year and Sam Pluta, one of our colleagues, an experimental composer, said there are not enough places where we can be messy on this campus, right? I think one of those places is the Gray Center Lab. As you know, it was designed to spill things and make a mess. What laboratory is pristine? You might seek to make it pristine before and after the experiment, but the experiment itself, experimentation can be—at times, has to be—messy. So, I guess one of the things I feel is fundamental to the project, would be to embrace that it’s possible to play and make a mess . . . that the University of Chicago is a place for making a mess. That it would be good if we made a mess. That just seems like a really important thing to hold onto.

Notes

1 For more about Vladimir Jankélévitch’s notion of ineffability, see David J. Levin’s excellent and fascinating book, Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 207.

2 This was from a conversation I had with the artist when she was visiting The University of Chicago in November 2008 as part of the Film Study Center’s screening series where Schneemann screened *Fuses* and *Kitch’s Last Meal*. The quote is not exact but conveys the gist of our conversation.