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O SILÊNCIO QUE ANTECEDE A PALAVRA

THE SILENCE THAT PRECEDES THE WORD

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The silence that precedes the word

Abstract: what's the difference between comical and non-comical performance? What moment defines that a comic performance will be a success? With these concerns, it was proposed to the actors of the Celeiro de Antas Theater Group a research project that consisted of investigating the instant, the moment that precedes the scenic action, which we started to call "The Silence That Precedes the Word." The starting point was to investigate whether there is a specific conduct that, once adopted, favors the emergence of laughter at the moment an action. And the group spent five months speculating and discussing these subtleties. This article aims to record the paths and results of this investigation.
Keywords: acting; comicity; training; creative process; pause and reaction.

O silêncio que antecede a palavra

Resumo: qual a diferença de uma atuação cômica e não cômica? Qual o momento que define que a performance cômica vai ser um sucesso? Com essas inquietudes, foi proposta aos atores do Grupo de Teatro Celeiro das Antas um projeto de pesquisa que consistiu em investigar o instante, o momento que antecede a ação cênica, que passamos a chamar de "O Silêncio Que Antecede a Palavra". O ponto de partida foi investigar se existe uma conduta que, uma vez adotada, favoreça o surgimento do riso no momento da execução de uma ação. E o grupo ficou cinco meses especulando e discutindo essas sutilezas. Este artigo tem o propósito de registrar os caminhos e o resultado dessa investigação.
Palavras-chave: atuação; comicidade; treinamento; processo criativo; pausa e reação.

1 Introduction

"…I ask only that you remain silent, so you may better understand what lies *beneath* the words".
(Jacques Lecoq)

Certain questions repeatedly resurface whenever I reflect on comicity: what distinguishes comic performance from non-comic performance? At what precise moment is the potential success of a comic performance determined? If I did exactly the same thing every day, why was it not as effective yesterday? ... *Oops*! An important clarification is necessary: Here, I am not looking for an 'one size fits all' formula to apply to every case or any idea and that, once applied, would result on Laughter taking place under any condition. I do not mean to achieve the philosopher's stone of comicity, the one that will deliver a final answer. No… I may be a Clown, but I am not insane. I want only a path, a trail through which effective triggers for Laughter can be analyzed and understood. I am chasing an idea that, when applied, supports the examination of a comic performance, allowing for the understanding of everything that would operate as a Laughter provoking element, and all that would not. I am not satisfied with analyses that attribute the merit of a successful comic performance solely to the performer's talent, that is, those reduced to praise. I must be able to understand it when I am successful—if I am ever successful—in a comic performance, and the other way around, when failure is inevitable.

In response to these concerns, I proposed to the actors of my theatre group, Celeiro das Antas, a research project aimed at investigating the instant, the moment that precedes scenic action, which we came to call "The Silence That Precedes the Word."[1] To investigate whether there is a specific conduct that, once adopted, favors the emergence of Laughter at the moment an action is performed and, if so, what that conduct might be. The group agreed to take on the challenge, then we spent five months speculating on such subtleties.

Now, here I am, writing in an effort to record the paths taken and the results which emerged from this investigation.

2 Defining a Path

As its foundation, I proposed that the group adopt the theory of the pleasure principle as formulated by Freud in his book "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1996). The same book served as the theoretical basis for my master's dissertation, "O Desempenho do Ator na Construção do Riso – A dramaturgia de uma encenação cômica" (The Actor's Performance in the Construction of Laughter – The Dramaturgy of a Comic Staging), defended at the Universidade de Brasília in 2008.

1This text was made public in different versions in 2018 on the Celeiro das Antas *Facebook* profile and, in 2025, on the author's blog.

Freud defines the pursuit of pleasure as a characteristic of the human mind, operating as a defensive mechanism that seeks to avoid discomfort and pain. Human beings expend energy to protect themselves from situations in which they feel threatened, avoiding any possibility of being affected by pain and seeking refuge from discomfort. He refers to this expenditure of energy as *Ausgabe*, which may be understood as the psychic energy produced by the individual and directed toward a specific end. Pleasure resides in the recompense of these expenditures and is manifested as pleasant physical sensations.

When this psychic energy is expended and yet an economy remains—that is, a surplus of energy that finds no outlet for expenditure—it is converted into comic pleasure and discharged in the form of Laughter. "[…] the source of comic pleasure lies in the comparison of a difference between two expenditures. Comic pleasure, and the effect by which it is recognized—laughter—only emerges when this difference is not capable of being put to use and is therefore able to find discharge" (Freud, 1996, p. 203). Thus, Laughter would be the effect produced by comic pleasure generated through the economy of psychic energy, which Freud termed expenditure (*Ausgabe*).

We were aware that everything we investigated would be tested in terms of its effectiveness within specific contexts, unlike scientific research, which requires proof subjected to rigorous criteria in order to demonstrate validity. In such cases, the object of research must be submitted to a certain number of tests and achieve the same result in most cases. By way of example, ELASTIC exercise resistance bands were subjected 1,200 times to a tensile load equivalent to 100 kg and did not rupture, which allows one to state that these bands are suitable for physical exercise. In the arts, however, it is sufficient to test the effectiveness of a form of conduct within a specific context in order to formulate claims about it.

3 In the Beginning Was the Word?…

From the outset, we realized that the word referred to in the title of our research was not restricted to spoken language, but also included the thought-word—that is, the word as action, as an idea to be communicated, whether verbally or through gesture. By way of clarification, gesture is understood as any movement charged with intention, ranging from the most subtle to the most explicit.

Incidentally, 'Subtlety' became a key term for understanding this investigation.

Stanislavski (2003) had already asserted that everything that passes through an individual's mind alters their body. In the practical work of our research, we experienced the validity of this statement. We applied meditation as a tool that enabled us to perceive how thoughts arise in the mind, how they settle, and how they develop. This process of self-observation makes it easier for the actor to achieve greater control over thoughts—not by preventing them from arising, but by

noticing their emergence and preventing them from settling and developing, occupying the mind and affecting the body.

In the first phase of the research, we investigated the principles that make the Expressive Body. To this end, we sought to achieve bodily neutrality, understanding the Neutral Body as a body capable of expressing nothing. What is the logic behind this? We believed that, in order to reach a non-expressive body, it would be necessary to expand our awareness of what renders the body expressive, so that these elements could then be consciously neutralized, even if only temporarily. Several weeks of work followed.

In the pursuit of this Neutral Body, we inevitably arrived at the concept of an energy center that maintains and sustains the body in action. This center is mentioned by many theorists of movement and the body, some of whom describe it as the body's center of gravity. We began working with the Imaginary Center of the body, as per the concepts defined by Michael Chekhov in his book "To the Actor: On the technique of acting":

> "Imagine that inside your chest there is a center from which impulses flow to all your movements. Think of this imaginary center as a source of inner activity and power of your body. Send this power to the head, arms, hands, torso, legs, and feet. Let the feeling of vigor, harmony, and well-being penetrate your entire body. Take care that your shoulders, elbows, wrists, hips, and knees do not obstruct the flow of this energy coming from the imaginary center, but allow it to circulate freely" (Chekhov, 2003, p. 8).

The use of the energy center creates the possibility of working with everyday movements in a more conscious manner, expanding the potential for exploring new forms of movement. The energy center produces a sense that the body operates as an integrated whole, that nothing moves by chance, and that any change produced in the energy center instantaneously alters the qualities of movement. Working with the focus of attention directed toward the Energy Center produces a sensation of heightened concentration, with an increased capacity to direct attention toward a specific idea, subject, or task.

During the first two months, we worked on the pursuit of neutrality through the manipulation of the Energy Center. We observed that exposing bodies in a neutral state for a brief period places the audience in a state of suspension, temporarily interrupting the line of reasoning they had been developing and creating an expectation that favors their receptivity to what is about to be presented. The greatest difficulty we encountered was the anxiety experienced by those who place themselves before an audience. In most cases, this anxiety leads the performer to carry out some small action, thereby breaking this expectation. Such an action may be as minimal as a tension arising in some part of the body.

4 Defining the Minimum Required for Engaging the Audience

Given that the experiments would be taken onto the field and conducted before an audience, we defined the minimal structure of a "scene" or "scenic action" as the establishment of contact, the development of that contact, and the rupture of contact. In our rehearsal-room experiments, we observed that it is in the establishment of contact that the silence preceding the word emerges (in which "word" is understood as action).

Through the establishment of contact, we are able to induce a state of readiness, a disposition in the audience to accept the performer's proposal. The first action requires the actor's awareness, so that they perceive the direction in which they intend to lead the performance. The minimum required is for the actor to allow themselves to be seen, to place themselves before the audience, and let the audience observe them without revealing even the slightest trace of intention. It is simply a matter of allowing the audience to see the performer and imagine whatever they wish. This action is so simple and yet so powerful that, in most cases, when the actor sustains it for the necessary length of time, the audience already begins to produce its first laughter.

As the research progressed, we realized that this establishment of contact is repeated throughout the performance as a way of restarting a line of thought, introducing a new subject, or establishing a new focus of interest. It is important to emphasize that each renewal of the establishment of contact requires this minimal structure of development and rupture every time it takes place. If this structure is neglected, it may spark disinterest in the audience, producing a rupture of contact initiated by them, sometimes unconsciously, leading to the spectator's abandonment of the performer in the midst of the performance. This is the moment when the audience thinks or intuitively feels: this is not going anywhere. They mentally withdraw from the performance, allowing their thinking mind to wander to places more pleasant than the one in which they find themselves.

5 Defining Criteria for the Research

For this research, it was necessary to establish criteria for data collection and the subsequent analysis of the performative action. We chose to adopt the criteria developed by the actress, clown, and researcher Ana Flávia Garcia, used in her research on Open Dramaturgy and refined by her over recent years.

One of such criteria was the "perception of personal impact," which Ana Flávia defines as the actor's awareness of how their image is received by the spectator. This criterion proved to be highly significant for the research, as the absence of such awareness can lead to misunderstandings and divert the actor from the overall objective of their action, making successful execution of

the performance more difficult. Conversely, the actor's awareness of the impact they have on the audience places them in an extremely favorable position for guiding their performance.

Another criterion to be considered is the manner in which the actor approaches the audience, that is, how initial contact is established: is the approach initiated through insinuation, through invitation, through summons, through exposure, or through welcoming?

Another important factor to be observed is the Level of Contraction that the actor exerts on the audience, provoking attention, interest, involvement, participation, and/or commitment. The opposite must also be taken into account: the Level of Relaxation, which produces dispersion and/or disinterest.

To what level does the actor affect the audience, generating laughter, enchantment, emotional responses, or irreverence?

These criteria provided a framework for the collection of data and for a more reliable evaluation of the outcomes of the actions carried out with the audience and in the rehearsal room in relation to the research.

6 Training — A Necessary Routine

According to Eugênio Barba:

> "Our social use of the body is necessarily a product of our culture: the body has been acculturated and colonized. It knows only the uses and perspectives for which it has been educated. To find new ones, the body must distance itself from its programs. It must inevitably be directed toward a new form of 'culture' and undergo a new 'colonization.' It is this path that enables actors to discover their own life, their own independence, and their own physical eloquence. Training exercises are the embodiment this 'second colonization' […]" (Barba, 1995, p. 245).

In light of the research, and in continuity with the practices the group already carried out in its productions, we reformulated our training routine, seeking to move beyond the limits imposed by the everyday use of our bodies and challenge elements to which we were already accustomed.

Our training routine included the practice of meditation. For at least approximately 10 minutes, we sat in lotus position and focused our attention on our breath. This practice is known as *Anapana*. It is meant to calm the mind, allowing one to perceive how thoughts arise and to prevent them from settling and developing. To achieve this, we directed attention to the breath, observing the air entering and leaving in the most natural way possible, while listening to all surrounding sounds without judging or classifying them. Everything that occurs around us and within the body serves solely to expand awareness of the here and now. With practice, we were able to increase the intervals of time between involuntary thoughts that arise in the mind. This empty space is gradually strengthened and weakens thoughts that emerge randomly.

We then moved on to physical practice, alternating between stretching exercises, aerobic activities, floor acrobatics, and spontaneous dance. Altogether, this amounted to an average of 1 hour and 30 minutes of physical practice. The work was always oriented toward expanding bodily awareness and refining the physical body, leaving it prepared to act and react to all internal and external stimuli.

The second part of the physical exercises was directed toward expressive work. With awareness of the Energy Center, we connected the extremities of the body and all the joints, so that even the slightest change in the Energy Center altered the quality of movement. Once the Center was established, we began to perform everyday actions—dragging, pushing, carrying, throwing imaginary objects of varied sizes and weights, sitting, standing—while varying time, rhythm, speed, and weight. Because this routine was consistently carried out in connection with the Imaginary Energy Center, we were able to perceive that movement altered the qualities of the Energy Center in the same way that changes in size, color, and temperature altered movement. The displacement of the Center within the had a direct impact on it, generating further psychophysical sensations. Within the group, we had already used the Imaginary Center as a means of creating bodies for characters in our performances, but we now began to use the Energy Center to work with the everyday body and, from it, to alter and sustain the qualities of movement. These exercises were intended to expand our capacity to express intentions and feelings and establish physical neutrality.

At a later stage of the research, we revised our concept of neutrality and began working with the energy vectors generated by the Energy Center in our bodies, activating an energy opposed to these vectors of force. Neutrality thus became living, dynamic, and active rather than passive—a controlled state within our bodies. Soon, we would discover that this concept and this practice would be paramount to our research. They would serve as a reference for all the material to be investigated.

The third part of our routine consisted of creating scenic actions for practical experimentation on how to deal with "The Silence That Precedes the Word." Among the various possibilities explored, and drawing on the experience already acquired by the members of the group in other works and in Clown Outings, we chose to focus on the construction of Performative Programs, a concept developed by Dr. Eleonora Fabião[2].

> "I call performative actions programs because, at this moment, this seems to me the most appropriate word to describe a type of action that is methodically calculated, conceptually refined, and that generally demands extreme tenacity to be carried out, and that approaches the improvisational exclusively insofar as it will not be previously rehearsed. Performing programs is fundamentally different from launching oneself into improvisational games. The performer does not improvise an idea: they create a program and program themselves to carry it out

2 Eleonora Fabião is an actress, *performer*, and performance theorist. She is an Adjunct Professor in the Theatre Directing Program at the School of Communication at UFRJ, holds a master's degree in Social History of Culture (PUC-RJ), and a PhD in Performance Studies from New York University (NY), funded by CAPES.

> (even if their program is to pay someone to perform actions conceived by them or to invite spectators to activate their propositions). In acting out their program, they reset their bodies and environment" (Fabião, 2009, p. 237).

Among all the proposals presented to the Group, this one seemed to us the most effective, as it supported our evaluation criteria and allowed us to place ourselves before an audience in a manner closest to what we had experienced in the training room. The Program differs fundamentally from the theatrical scene in that it defines only three elements necessary for its execution: What shall take place? Where shall it happen? Who will be performing it? By contrast, the theatrical scene involves two additional questions: When is it taking place? Why is it happening? And, in the study of the scene, all of these questions are formulated in the past tense, since the story has already occurred, and it is through the execution of the performance that it is brought into the present. The Program, by contrast, is a proposition to be executed; it has not yet happened, which does not mean that every program is unprecedented, but once it has been carried out, it becomes memory and part of a record, no longer a performance. At this point, theatre and performance resemble one another, insofar as both exist only in the here and now, at the moment of their execution.

To clarify this distinction, I present a program devised by the actress Kelly Costty[3] entitled "Blank Letter": the actress, carrying an envelope, approaches a person on the street, removes a blank sheet of paper from the envelope, and asks the person to read the letter to her. This program was carried out during one of the Group's experimental outings, and the reactions of those involved were highly diverse. What we observed was that most people read the letters they wished they had received or written.

Training with Impulse then began to be employed as a means of channeling and objectifying our actions. Impulses were understood within the framework defined by Stanislavski:

> "These creative impulses are naturally followed by others that lead to action. But an impulse is not yet action. An impulse is an inner urge, a desire not yet satisfied, whereas action proper is an, either inner or outer, answer to that desire. The impulse calls for inner action, and inner action eventually demands outer action" (Stanislavski, 2003, p. 66).

Impulse would thus be a phenomenon that occurs in the actor/*performer*, preceding the action itself, leading them to act out of a necessity or reason that, instead of necessarily rational, is perceived and triggered by the forces gathered by the impulse to act. One impulse generates an action, which in turn generates a new impulse, leading to another action; in this way, a sequence of events unfolds that gradually reveals the *performer*'s intention, produced through action and manifested in the execution of the program, in constant relation to the need to adapt to each new situation—needs that are transformed as a consequence of action. Impulse thus becomes the catalyst for all the elements that enable the actor/*performer* to develop their program. It is, in itself,

3 An actress from the Celeiro das Antas Theatre Group took part in the research and recorded this experience in her logbook.

the point of departure: "[…] the main point lies not in the action itself, but in the natural evocation of impulses to action" (Stanislavski, 2003, p. 268), and, consequently, also the point of arrival. Through the renewal of impulse, actions appear to arise unexpectedly. Working in this manner, we observed that the outcomes of executed actions acquired a degree of authenticity—one might even call it spontaneity—leading the actor/*performer* to "act with sincerity, wholeness, and integrity of purpose" (Stanislavski, 2003, p. 268).

We also observed that, by acting from impulses, the actor had a greater likelihood of achieving comic success, avoiding an excessive focus on the procedural mechanisms that trigger Laughter. Precisely because they are not seeking to be funny, they are more likely to become so. Laughter is an effect produced by comic pleasure, triggered by a convincing, spontaneous performance carried out in an inadvertent manner.

7 A Watershed Exercise

Faced with all these situations, something still remained unclear to us halfway through our research. What was the fundamental difference between comic and non-comic performance? We even carried out outings split into two distinct moments. In the first, we went out to perform our programs wearing our Clown costumes. We then returned without the costumes, dressed in everyday clothes, to perform the programs. Some programs, whether performed with or without clown costumes, elicited Laughter from those watching; others did not. Where, then, was this dividing line?

One day in the rehearsal room, I proposed that the group carry out an exercise I had experienced in a workshop with Lume. I asked the actors to choose two real stories from their own lives: one with a comic character and another with a sad character. I asked each actor to step forward and tell these stories, beginning with the sad one. When they were deeply immersed in the emotions generated by the stories, they were instructed to shift to the comic story. This situation was repeated several times with each actor. Afterward, each participant wrote in their logbook what was occurring internally while telling each of the distinct stories. At that moment, we used the established evaluation elements to guide the logbook entries. I asked them to be clear and direct in their notes, avoiding subjective, imprecise, or generic terms. This was the exercise I had learned from Lume, though not necessarily accompanied by the practice of keeping a logbook.

The following day, I asked each actor to revisit their notes, and we discussed what the entries had in common; to our surprise, there were many shared aspects—far more than we had anticipated. We refined the terms used to define the internal actions generated during comic and sad performances. I then asked each participant to step forward and tell the stories again, but this time using the internal procedures that had occurred during the telling of the comic story to narrate the sad story, and vice versa. It was important that the stories remain as close as possible to how they

had been told the previous day. The result was surprising: we began to laugh at what had previously made us cry and to be moved by what had previously made us laugh.

Through this exercise, we were able to perceive in practice what many masters of clowning had already told us—that humor lies not in what is done, but in how it is done. This became unmistakably evident. Comic Presence thus came to be understood in a different way by the actor-researchers. But… what were these elements perceived in the actors' bodies?

We observed that, when telling a joyful story, the actors' bodies entered a state of readiness; tensions dissolved, revealing a body that was more relaxed and active; the body resonated evenly, without strain. Breathing became light and followed its own rhythm, bringing relaxation to both the body and the surrounding environment. The Energy Center became solar and expansive, reverberating throughout the body and generating a desire to share, to take advantage of every situation, revealing to the audience a euphoric, playful individual, fully surrendered to the circumstances of the moment, living in the here and now, with quick thoughts—an active presence whose gaze constantly sought the audience and was filled with light. A solar presence.

Sad stories, by contrast, affected the actor's body by rendering it withdrawn, tense, and inhibited, with slumped shoulders. Breathing was dense and heavy; at times it seemed suspended and, even when they took deep breaths, failed to help the body relax. The Energy Center became dark, reverberating throughout the body and provoking a desire for self-protection and withdrawal, revealing to the audience an introspective individual with a lower-pitched voice and a funereal tone, with measured thoughts—someone who thinks carefully before speaking, who appears to be constantly avoiding pain; a passive person, living in the past, with a gaze that avoids the audience, a lost gaze directed toward the floor. A somber presence.

Perceiving these elements clearly was highly revealing for all of us. For a long time, the actors resembled children delighting in a new toy. They manipulated their bodies with ease. They calmed their emotions and awakened internal hurricanes; throughout the rehearsal room emerged Pucks, Oberons, and Fairies, rebellious Riobaldos, vengeful Hamlets, and passionately in-love Marias Bonitas. The actors went beyond their habitual states, creating bodies charged with emotion, capable of moving rapidly from one emotional state to another.

Yes! *Oops*… but that is precisely the function of a well-trained actor. There is nothing new about that. Even more so in the case of the actors of Celeiro, who possess academic training and continue their studies and practice. So what, then, was the watershed? What trick made it? What was the turning point?

These elements do not necessarily need to be employed as a set. We realized that the conscious use of a single element was enough to trigger the entire process. For instance, the actor may access all the elements by using breathing as a trigger that activates and sets the body in motion, bringing the Energy Center into operation, shaping the body, and giving form to what will be transformed into a character. Alternatively, the actor may access the Imaginary Energy Center and allow it to

carry out all the work.

In practice, through the training of neutrality, the body becomes consciously available to the actor. Aware of all the elements that render the body expressive, the actor can neutralize themselves. From this initial state, multiple paths emerge for activating a scenic body. And it is precisely in this instant—in the seconds that precede the word, with the body still silent—that what is to come is revealed, or rather, that the actor decides where they wish their body to go.

Jacques Lecoq draws attention to silence in human relationships:

> "In all human relationships, two great silent zones appear: one before and, the other, after the word. Before, we have not yet spoken and find ourselves in a state of reserve that allows the word to be born from silence, to be stronger, thus avoiding discourse, the explanatory. In those silent situations, work on human nature allows for the identification of the moments in which the word does not yet exist. The other silence is that of afterward, when there is nothing more to say. This one interests us less!" (Lecoq, 2010, p. 60).

This silence that precedes the word, which we perceived in practice throughout our research, reveals itself in its full power as something that exists only to be broken, that is born to then cease to exist, to be ruptured and filled by the spoken word or the thought-word embodied in gesture. And it allows us to go beyond the word, endowing it with intention. To allow the word or gesture to be contaminated at its origin, breaking the silence and awakening laughter or tears in the audience. To understand that, however antagonistic they may seem, both joy and sadness share the same origin: emptiness, silence, nothingness.

To be able to decide, in the present moment, in the instant in which the performance takes shape, which direction it will take. Aware of the forms of conduct and procedures involved in the realization of the scene, allowing the body to appear fully contaminated by color, texture, and temperature, deforming itself or being reorganized by an Imaginary Energy Center connected to the whole body. Requiring only that the actor breathes consciously, allowing life to emerge first within their own body and then to contaminate the environment, composing the atmospheres they choose and reaching those who are willing to watch them in that instant.

All of this may not be new for many, but for us it was profoundly revealing. To realize that it is not when one sets out to do, neither when one surrenders to action, but when one opens oneself to the emptiness of the instant, to the zero moment, to nothingness, that the generative power of what may emerge clearly and convincingly truly resides. Paraphrasing Stanislavski (2003), just as a musician who practices to play the violin learns all the notes and experiments with different melodies so that, when standing before an audience, they may decide which piece to perform and how to perform it, or whether they wish simply to improvise. To allow a unique piece of music to flow—one that shall never be played again. That was the freedom we experienced as this research unfolded, when we stood face to face with the silence that precedes the word.

Regarding comic procedures, we came to understand them as a consequence of the development of contact, as a means of sustaining the relationship that has been established. We recognized the effectiveness of very simple procedures, such as working with a dilated body, generated from an Imaginary Energy Center that appears to overflow, to extend slightly beyond its expected limits, producing the image of a body that is misaligned, displaced from its original place. This generates the impression that everything that emerges from this body will be inadequate to resolve that imbalance. What degree of dilation is required for this to trigger laughter? The degree of subtlety. The degree that allows the audience to perceive and feel it as something that only they notice, something that occurs inadvertently, without reflection, unpremeditated.

I like to understand the things I do. For me, making a living from art has never meant plunging into subjectivity. It has always meant emerging from it into practice: how to give form and life to what provokes and unsettles me; how to give voice to the creatures that inhabit both my everyday life and my imagination.

Brasília, May 18th2018

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