CAN I BE FRANK? BY MORGAN BASSICHIS

An Essay by Lauren Mackler

Before they arrive, it's empty, save for a single standing microphone and a large yellow backdrop on which is painted a black and white striped buoy.

Frank Maya saunters on stage. He is slender, handsome, dressed in simple black pants and a button-up. He takes a sip from a red cup and rests it on a speaker stage right. Then, he begins his 1987 show "Frank Maya Talks" at La MaMa theater in New York City. As advertised, the show is primarily speech, though with occasional musical interludes that will, by the end, climax into a full-blown pop performance with three backup singers in tow. But the bulk of the show is talking as Maya makes his way energetically through a series of scenes, or vignettes, he calls "rants." These charged monologues range from observations on life to meditations on death to the meandering description of a dream. They are a seance, the internal monologue of a murder victim, a horror movie pitch. He reflects on children, aging, dating, fucking, and dying. The occasional songs feel like mantras; their lyrics repeat pulsingly. His humor is not typically funny but searing because it's loaded with political stakes—he talks about AIDS, the

hypocrisy of public figures at this time, what one leaves behind. And in 1987, he's doing this to an audience of peers who are likely actively grieving, or dying, or fighting, or all the above. Seven years later, in 1995, Maya will die too. But before then, he will reach the edges of mainstream success: In the 1990s, he will be featured on MTV's Comedy Hour and broadcast a special on Comedy Central. He will be one of the first openly gay comedians on American television. In 1991 he'll land on the Dick Cavett Show, where a curiously unprepared Cavett interviews Maya with a glow of misguided superiority. Maya, asked repeatedly to answer for the gay community at large, responds with humor, distance, grace, and self-possession; ready to modulate the bold strokes of Cavett's blunt image of gay men with cutting detail. A native New Yorker, when asked about his large family (he's one of six), Maya responds, unwaveringly: we were all "tremendously in love with fame."

Can I be Frank? is an homage, but also an impersonation. It's billed as a 'reprise,' but at times, it's a dramatization. Morgan Bassichis (they/them), who identifies as "kind of a comedian, kind of a performance artist, kind of a musician," creates a show "about someone who has an eerily, cosmically similar relationship to all of these genres." During the show, Bassichis doubles as

Frank and is Morgan, in turn—slowly closing the distance between the two. In preparation, they interviewed friends, family members, and colleagues to understand Maya's relationship to his time and their intergenerational kinships, including the perennial concerns of desire, ambition, and survival. Bassichis gains access to Maya's work through the care and diligence of the choreographer Neil Greenberg, a former lover of Maya's, who has digitized and archived Maya's performances online. Bassichis pours over the material and homes in on Maya's performance at La MaMa. It is the bedrock of their show.

The questions at hand: Where do you end, and I begin? What does it mean to stand on stage, take on another's character, voice, and affect—tell their jokes? "How do we honor the people who made us possible?" Bassichis asks a loaded audience, which are both coming for them and Maya. What happens when we lose the distinction between the two? Maya was rising to fame when he died. He was, as Bassichis highlights, on "the precipice of success," and this, too, is something to mourn—the "almost there" of someone who died too young to see their hard work come to fruition. Where does the tautness of grief reach the threshold required to become a joke? Like its title, the show itself is full of double entendre; it's a medley of messages at once, and in that

sense, it mirrors this time, too, with the self-conscious and multiple voices of this era, Bassichis's.

Can I be Frank?, with its seance-y themes, also raises questions of authorship—whose material is this, anyway? (Does it matter?)—and evokes the idea of genius as spirit, channeling through artists as vehicles, possessing artistic processes. Maya is, as Bassichis describes him, an "artistic ancestor." In their performance, Bassichis summons Maya both in content and form. "That's a human thing." Bassichis says in a radio interview, "We make sense of ourselves based on those around us and those who came before us. Particularly for those of us who are marginalized […] we can become very attached to seeing our own reflection…" In this way, the show contends with the larger concerns of legacy, one's own alongside how we remember those we lost, and what it means to focus on one individual in a mass grieving event. What it means to stand on stage and offer to stand in for the other, or others…

Raised, proverbially, in the activist circles of San Francisco in the early aughts, Bassichis learned to listen, speak collectively, move as a whole, and to do so with purpose. Their performances often reflect the vocabulary of gestures that generations of

activists have created to weather external forces *and* disentangle the many subjectivities that make a collective, or a public. In activist circles and protest, Bassichis is an eloquent amplifier of the collective sentiment. On cultural stages, they have actively metabolized their politics into their art, with a gift for tethering the large and many crises of our time together and to their audience's minutia. Here, everyone is included, and so everyone is complicit. At a *Jewish Voices for Peace* gathering in mid-2024, they began their speech with: "I am honored to be here tonight as one of hundreds of thousands of antizionist-jews…" and indeed, "one of many" defines Bassichis's approach to their work across fields. Even as they shine incandescently under the spotlight in center stage, they are conscious of being simultaneously plural and singular, infused with a simultaneous responsibility to the collective and the self, because the worth of one single person also explains the exponential worth of the masses—all of those individualities. Bassichis is a galvanizing force; their gift is to perform a collective interiority, to clarify our collective meaning with their nuanced dissection of our internal monologues and all their complexity. They hone in on large and small details of everyday life, improvising against them in concert with their audience.

Bassichis also has the exquisite, wide-ranging voice of a skilled singer, but is choosing to do with it something more complicated, less classifiable. Often described as “incantations,” their songs use pop-music hooks, in loops, and repeat words and phrases until they lose meaning, or accrue new meaning, or create a new psychic space for feeling their meaning. Their humor is grounding; it situates the audience, for better or worse, in their time, space, and self, with all of the small humiliations and awkwardnesses that implies. To be frank is also literal: to be forthright, direct, courageous, and outspoken. The artist Gregg Bordowitz has compared Bassichis’s works to Bertol Bretch’s affect-full learning plays of the 1920s and 30s, and to the ACT-UP meetings of the 90s. Bassichis connects with their audience not simply to make them laugh (to seduce, to please) but also to feel a large, contradictory register of emotions together—anger, shame, guilt, hurt—to reflect, to embody, and to act.

“If you can get people to laugh, you can get them to listen. I think a lot about disarming people, and demilitarizing, and the connections between the two.”

Because to speak *to* and *from* the collective, one must know how to speak for a self, Morgan Bassichis is a skilled and nimble

writer. They write alone and collectively across registers: for songs, performances, speeches, and academic journals. *Can I be Frank?* weaves at least two texts together; at least two narrators too. It recontextualizes Maya's performances (mainly *Frank Maya Talks*, but also others) and offers contemporary commentary and context. They audit their process. The work is content and form, a multitude on stage—a variety of "I"s—that can then better stand in and implicate the great many individualities seated in the audience, their particularities, and their common ground. If writing is said to clarify the writer's thoughts—through the painstaking process of excavating intention—lucid writing also, in effect, clarifies the reader's intent.

In his 1989 speech and essay "Mourning and Militancy," Douglas Crimp begins by evoking Lee Eldeman's critique of the slogan "Silence = Death." Eldeman stakes that the metaphorical quality of the slogan makes it too abstract, vulnerable to interpretation, and distracting from the urgency of the crisis. The "Silence" could be misread—is it the lack of frankness regarding the disease or sexuality, or both?—and muddles the call to action. It lumped being gay with AIDS, in the same way the disease was being tagged as the "gay plague" to distance and condemn a whole demographic. However useful as an image for a

movement, the emblem simplified the problem into a binary equation. The same kind of binaries that divide rather than unify. Eldeman wrote: “Silence=Death thus contributes to the ideologically motivated confusion of the literal and the figural, the proper and the improper, the inside and the outside, and in the process that recalls the biology of the human immunodeficiency virus as it attacks the mechanisms whereby the body can distinguish between “Self and Not-Self.” That was the point, ultimately, that there can be a distinction between the interior and the exterior, the individual and the other—the one on stage, in the audience, or elsewhere—and simultaneously none at all.

Fran Lebowitz once articulated that what was lost during the AIDS epidemic was not just a great generation of artists, though that too, but also the audience that inspired and held them accountable to their craft. And in their audience, the institutional memory of what they made. I say *institution* here in the most human, humane sense. The rich and varied people within the organizations of our lives. *Can I be Frank?* plumbs the complicated feelings of grief and longing, desire and impatience, fear and rage that persist almost forty years after Maya’s original performance. “Mourning feels too much like capitulation,” Crimp says as he evokes Sigmund Freud’s incompatible description of

mourning as an all-encompassing pause in living. Crimp asks instead for a grief that does not distract and deflect, that does not excise parts of the dead's lives but remembers them wholly. Anything less would impede one's ability to fight for the living; those who will die if we don't continue to fight for them because medication is unavailable, because the political interests of the powerful are at odds with their survival, or simply because the audience doesn't know them. Is there a more dangerous fate than being forgotten? Bassichis and Maya's entanglement across time complicates the already multifaceted debates and discussions around any activism, remembrance, and continuation. In his text, Crimp depicts the quietude of the mourning rituals versus the loudness of the militant political action and promises them as non-distinct, instead as one. What Bassichis offers is in this lineage: a new kind of mourning, riotous and complicated, with the genuine desire, within the depths of loss, to alchemize grief into power, to look ahead, to act, and to rant.