It is indeed my enormous privilege to introduce our commencement speaker for today, Julia Jarcho, even it is also a challenge to find words that are adequate to the task of introducing someone of such inventive creativity and unorthodox erudition. There are many amongst us at Berkeley and in all creative fields who claim to walk the line between so-called theory and so-called practice, but I’d suspect all would be hard-pressed to find someone who has so successfully walked the walk on both sides of that polarizing fence.

Julia Jarcho is not only familiar with theory; she is indeed a theorist. From an award-winning undergraduate thesis on Wittgenstein – entitled “‘Going On’: Wittgenstein’s Liveness and the Grammar of the Theater”-- through to a dissertation and published book that unsettled and revised a couple of centuries of aesthetic theory – and a few more centuries of anti-theatrical theory—she has proved herself a theorist of enormous vision and precision.

Julia Jarcho is not only familiar with practice; she is an award-winning practitioner, a playwright given to perpetual experimentation. Her playwrighting started early too, even in high school, when her plays were receiving productions on the professional stage. On top of early awards, the New York Times celebrated her as “a playwright too young to drink.” The creativity continued, long past the age of legal drinking, in plays such as Dreamless Land or American Treasure. These and other works prompted critics to push for new vocabularies in order to describe the “weird taut surfaces of her stories that hypnotize...the plays burrow into unanswerable questions that never come fully into focus...What is the impulse to violence? Could we hold a memory that precedes our experience?”

© 2023 Shannon Jackson
Julia Jarcho has continued to reinvent that dialectic between theory and practice throughout the course of her life. She won New York’s Obie Award for Theatrical excellence in 2013 with a play called *Grimly Handsome*, continuing a practice that Mac Wellman and others say, does not simply make theater, but philosophizes on the condition of theater itself. Around the same year, Jarcho also finished her PhD dissertation in Rhetoric, theorizing what she called negative theatricality in modern and contemporary performance. And so it goes, as her practice reframes theory, her theory reframes practice. Known for being a playwright who once said, “theater is fundamentally embarrassing,” Jarcho knows whereof she speaks. Many classical and contemporary rhetoricians have found public speech embarrassing—and when it becomes too embarrassing, they often call it theatrical. For Jarcho, that place of embarrassment is a place to be mined; the presence of affects like embarrassment along with other strong emotions—shame, dread, anxiety, anticipation, horror, thrill, doubt—are sure signs that something interesting must be “going on.”

Jarcho’s ability to inhabit such places fuels her work as a theorist-practitioner. When her book was accepted by Cambridge University Press, they recommended she change to a more accessible title, publishing it as *Writing and the Modern Stage*. That’s fine, I guess, but I remember the titles that she wanted in the first place—negative theatrics, for instance, or the original title of her dissertation which was: “This Will Kill.” This Will Kill. Working at the edge of the literal and the metaphoric with a casual ominousness, Jarcho has racked up more awards and recognitions as she figures out how to kill it in the theater, including the Mark
O’Donnell Prize, the Berrilla Kerr Award for Excellence in Playwriting, residencies at the Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference, and even a Doris Duke Foundation Impact Award; she now also happens to be a tenured professor of theater and playwrighting at Brown University. As her philosophically-informed practice continues, critics still work to compose sentences adequate to her creativity and erudition. New Yorker critic, Hilton Als, now UC Berkeley’s own newly-minted professor, is one of many critics who feted her as part of a new guard of women in experimental theater, saying “they construct worlds that are might be feminist and story-driven. But their narratives aren’t linear; that would be untrue to their view of how experience plays out. If anything, artists like Jarcho are attuned to the mad leaps in logic that make everyday communication a spectacle, if you listen.”

Listen we do. And listen we will. I’m thrilled to welcome Julia Jarcho back to Berkeley and to this ritual stage, this stage of ritual that it is an ending for many of you but also a beginning, a commencement. She might be embarrassed to take the podium right now, but I am sure that, in her own unorthodox way, she will kill.