



## Putting a Different Spin on the World through Sound: An Interview with Silvia Mercuriali

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello and welcome to the Gallery.

I first saw Silvia Mercuriali's *etiquette* in 2012 in Prague. It took place in an ornate central European-style cafe, during the regular opening hours and in amongst a sea of unsuspecting customers. As instructed, I took my seat opposite a stranger I'd never met before, put on my headphones and entered a parallel world.

Italian-born artist Silvia Mercuriali is best known for the invention of 'autoteatro' – a form of live performance in which the headphone-wearing audience member is led through a series of instructions to interact with their surroundings. As was the case with *etiquette*, autoteatro rarely requires live performers other than the audience members themselves. Its artistry and craft are entirely contained in the interplay between the soundtrack and the real world.

In this conversation Silvia Mercuriali shares with us the story of her developmental journey as an artist, her formative influences rooted in European film and performance, the value of collaboration in her work, the need for new languages as well as her radical departures from various influential traditions. We also learn about her latest project currently in development and being designed to be performed in swimming pools.

Silvia Mercuriali is one of the four artists selected in partnership with Battersea Arts Centre to be supported by the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies Project.

This conversation took place by Skype on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2020, in the first week of Covid-19 lockdown in London.

### [00:02:06] BEGINNINGS: FROM ITALY TO THE UK

**Duška Radosavljević:** The idea of this conversation is really just to start to get to know you as an artist, and we're interested to maybe go all the way back to your early days as an artist to begin to find out how you were shaped as an artist – what your formative influences were, what your training was that shaped your practice the way that it is now, and then, hopefully to see how you've arrived at this project that you are doing now.

**Silvia Mercuriali:** So, I started getting interested in theatre in Italy. When I was in Italy and I started making theatre, I went to a school called L'Arsenale, which is pretty much Lecoq in Milan – that sort of work on physical theatre, mask, clowning, all of those. I've always been very physical in the kind of work that I've done, working with a theatre and dance company, I ice skated for more than 15 years, going around professionally and doing competitions. I then got into theatre. I decided that I would carry on with my passion for theatre through studying at this school, and I would say that even though I don't do any more mask work or physical theatre either, I thought that that was a very important step for me because of the school itself. Apart from the style that it teaches, what it really teaches is each individual to be responsible for the thing that they want to make. And so it's all about creating your own work. So sure, like in everything when you're teaching, somebody gives you some guidance – so this would be the style – but you've got to create your thing yourself. So I wasn't really trained to be good at reading texts as such, or becoming a character as such, but I have been trained at just having an idea and making it happen. There was a lot of learning of other stuff, but I think that was for me the most important thing which sometimes we kind of lose a little bit here and there.

**DR:** Was this kind of a formal degree training or was it just something you did alongside your studies?

**SM:** So this was just something I did alongside university, yeah. It was really good, even though



maybe because I had to study certain things that I really was not so interested in but then ultimately now I feel are very useful – learning a little bit about marketing, learning a little bit about economy, learning a little bit about law, there was a lot of dipping your toes into really kind of big things. This is how it works – or it worked at that point in Italy – you would have the same courses that are shared and they would be the basic ones, but then everything else you could tailor-make to what you want to study. So I ended up doing a degree on Pasolini and Roland Barthes's structure of fable. In a social sciences and communication marketing degree it wasn't easy to find a professor that would follow me. Even though it wasn't exactly a degree in theatre, the combination of going to this school for theatre that is L'Arsenale as well as learning about wanting to make your own work, as well as learning about how you communicate about your work and how to think in terms of finances, wasn't actually such a bad combination.

**DR:** What decade are we talking about?

**SM:** We're talking about '95. First two years of university I was studying theatre as well. And then before I even finished university, I sort of started working with a professional company in Italy called L'Impasto and we were touring around, so I was like tippity-tapping my big dissertation whilst going around singing and dancing. It doesn't exist anymore. It was quite young people, actually, from Bologna who got together with other people from Napoli and put out a big call. And then we had a big, big, big show at Santarcangelo Festival and we just started going around doing this kind of theatre and dance – very political kind of theatre and always to do with sociological issues whether it was the G8 or family in Italy and what it means, you know, things like that. So I was working with them – sorry I'm really giving you a very detailed story of my life pretty much. In fact before I even started working with them – that was 1998 – before I started working with them, actually, I went to do a very weird really unsatisfying workshop with this Polish director, organised by Lecoq ex-students, which is why we were there as well, because Lecoq and L'Arsenale are sort of going alongside each other. The students got together and we did these three weeks or something like that of absolutely horrible, horrible, very overly-dramatic acting which I really hated. But I also really loved the company, and amongst the people that were there, there was Anthony Hampton from England. We started sort of imagining shows and we found out that we had a very similar sort of taste – that we were maybe less driven by narrative and much more driven by what was actually really happening on stage. Maybe less interested in a lot of rehearsals or – yes rehearsal, but as long as the event... What we always talked about were events which were always going to have a degree of uniqueness that could never be repeated. That's I suppose how I start going off onto my UK tangent. Because then Anthony came to Milan and we did a show there in a big squat. And then I went to Paris and we did another show in another squat. And then we sort of really liked working with each other and we liked what we were making together, so we decided to make a company and I moved to the UK.

**DR:** How long did it take before you moved to the UK? When did you come to the UK then?

**SM:** 2000.

**DR:** 2000. And what sort of works did you make in that interim period?

**SM:** When Anthony and I started working together it was still, like I was saying, very much to do with creating things that had some sort of degree of uniqueness that couldn't really be repeated. There was a lot of thinking about – which then would be stuck in our practice for a long time – this idea of the head and the body, the idea that your brain is constantly giving yourself instruction to do things. And actually how you then cope – your actual, physical self in the actual, physical world don't often do the things that your brain has imagined quite as the brain has imagined it. So this sort of like shift or conflict between what your head tells you to do and how you actually act in normal life, that is somewhat really the basis of all of our work. We were making shows that were a lot to do with that. In Paris, that's the easiest example to talk about, it was called *Next* and it was [about] this person that was attempting to do something which to him could be meaningful, let's say, and after a minute it would keep saying 'next'. There's two figures, a man and a woman, that would come on stage and try something. If he wasn't happy with what was happening, it would call 'next' and there would be a next scene, and then a next scene. And it was all about – I suppose the two people are the two voices in



your head. It's your brain attempting to do something, and your instinct or your body, attempting to follow. And then your self is made of, you know, three elements: your brain, your body and the world, let's say. This is very simplified. So that was the kind of work that we were doing. In Milan the show was – it was a nightmare in Milan, i.e. it was the story of a dream of somebody who was trying to fall asleep. There wasn't really continuity necessarily but it was definitely the story of one person trying to sleep or being stuck in a dream. It was very visual but it already had a little kind of taste of this idea of instructions in it.

### **[00:11:25] ROTOZAZA AND THE BIRTH OF 'AUTOTEATRO'**

**DR:** And when you came to the UK in 2000 did you make Rotozaza straightaway or was there an interim period?

**SM:** Anthony had done a show already with the name Rotozaza. I just came here and joined him. Together we kind of carried on – you know, I would say that we kept shifting between being very interested in what is real – reality, real places, site-specific – and this more conceptual idea of instructions.

**DR:** When was *etiquette* made, seeing as that's quite an important point of reference?

**SM:** It was 2006 when we were writing it, and it premiered on Valentine's Day in 2007 at Shunt.

**DR:** Okay. And at what point did the term 'autoteatro' come about?

**SM:** For *etiquette*. Because to begin with, we just called it 'theatre of command and response', because that's actually the first turning point – making work with people who were unrehearsed through writing a series of instructions that they just had to follow, and by doing so we would have different performers every night on stage but following exactly the same set of instructions. As we did more and more of that, people in the audience were like: 'Oh my god, you're so lucky, you get to see all these different people doing it!' So that's why we then started doing it with two people on stage so that you could see the difference in the response of the people. But there were still complications in terms of performance, and strategy-wise it was still quite – it was an in-between stage where the instruction hadn't taken over yet and there was still some performance happening. So we would have live characters interacting with the guest performers as well as the instructions sort of leading the whole thing. Although obviously, ultimately, the instruction led the whole thing all the time because we were then giving them instruction live but it kind of was a way of creating a more visual show, also. But as well as this, we were sort of looking into 'What does it mean when the person who you're watching doesn't know what he's going to do until both of you hear it?' And that's the beginning of it. But then: What does it mean when you start lying to the audience who thinks that the instruction that the guest performer is receiving on stage is one but actually their reaction is different? So we were really interested in bringing in some sort of chaos and disruption of the rules that, although it was only seemingly a rebellion, it was in fact still exactly following all of the rules. So it was a creation of a sort of a controlled chaos in a way without it being controlled because it had been rehearsed, but it was controlled because it was wanted.

### **[00:14:53 to 00:16:06] Excerpt from *etiquette* by Rotozaza (2007)**

**DR:** So was an early version of the *etiquette* something that the audience watched – something that there was another audience watching?

**SM:** This was the shows before *etiquette* – all of the shows before *etiquette* just had this idea of guest performers.

**DR:** And can you give me some names of those shows?

**SM:** There is *Doublethink*. That was really the one that threw us out there the most, so we started touring internationally a lot with *Doublethink*.

**DR:** The reason I am asking is because I'm interested in where this idea came from because obviously this same idea then really took off through the work of Tim Crouch, [Nassim] Soleimanpour – this idea of the performer changing every night.



**SM:** When Tim Crouch was doing *An Oak Tree*, it was interesting, he ended up being a guest in ours and we were guests in his because we did the same sort of strategy. Incredibly different approaches yeah, [but] it's just the very basic idea of instructing a different performer.

**DR:** And where did it come from for you? What prompted this idea of wanting to have a different performer doing the command and response every night?

**SM:** We were thinking a lot about this idea of instructions already in a way with this sense of the head telling you and the body following. It was quite a natural development of what we were doing. And the idea was sort of wanting to show a person without a mask, wanting to put on stage somebody who is so unprepared that it can't not show its true colours in a way. Because of the real interest being: when you give an instruction, there is this shifting of the eyes from side to side to try and decide quickly what my response is going to be. And it mostly was practical. There wasn't much time to think about how you were going to do it. You just had to do it as yourself – and not allowing time, doing it as yourself is what we found interesting because it really kind of exposed humanness, you know? It exposed people – yeah, just really that – without an armour, without a mask. And so obviously not everyone can do it.

**DR:** And when you say 'the mask', 'without the mask', that's a very interesting choice of words and it makes me wonder is this because you come from the Lecoq background that you say this?

**SM:** No. I'm not talking about a neutral mask necessarily. I mean the mask of the actor, you know, whoever his character is. We all have a mask all the time. We've got several and we decide which one to wear every time. And in a way, you can't decide which mask to wear in that situation. You just have to stumble into the one that is best suited to the action but you just haven't got time to look good, in a way. And at times you look absolutely amazing because you're not trying. I suppose that's really where the autoteatro comes from – this idea of wanting to show the human in its beauty, without any kind of safety net.

#### **[00:19:45] SOUND**

**DR:** How did your interest in sound evolve through all of this? At what point did sound become quite an important aspect?

**SM:** I'd probably say straight away. There is an exercise – now I can't remember anymore – that we were doing in – I'm going to call it 'Lecoq' because it's easier to understand I'm talking about that school. In the second year – I can't remember at all where it was coming from, but I think we were asked to recreate an environment. We wanted to recreate a forest but we did that with lights off and just sounds because we weren't so interested in the rest. I suppose that's where – you know probably it was always there I'm not really sure – but that's the first time that I can remember really making and taking the decision that the only thing that will tell you the story or that will make you realise where you are, will be the sound. So we did this thing in complete darkness with things that are definitely not the right thing to use but would make the right sounds – those clicking things for the gas, you know, to make little crickets, little things like that, using like completely weird instruments to recreate the actual sound of the forest. So I would say that maybe there was something there, and then it carried on a lot because, you know, 2003, we were in Edinburgh, we did a show collaborating with Icarus, this electronic music band from London, and we made a show for Edinburgh which was in a – well, the audience was in a cemetery sitting underneath a tarpaulin from which we hung loads of tiny car speakers. All of these car speakers were connected to an amplifier connected to some computers where Sam [Britton] and Ollie [Bown] – Icarus – were hiding under an umbrella behind another tombstone and bringing in all the sounds that the audience was listening to whilst looking at a street. So they're looking at people passing by, they're hearing all of the sounds, and it's a story about Edinburgh told by this completely crazy guy, who, I can't even remember I think we actually – Lenny he was called – I think we might have met him just walking on the beach, and then we interviewed him and that became sort of the narration of the show. But then we introduced characters within the live setting of the street that were a fake policeman, a fake woman crying, lots of fake different characters although only three actors. And we would change. And this, you know, led us to quite a



few problems obviously. First with the police because that was a real police uniform we were using. And then with some very, very disgruntled passer-by that caught me having cried my eyes out, just going behind a column ready for another scene. So that wasn't ideal. I wouldn't do that again. But the sound there was very important. This idea of over-imposing a narrative, over-imposing a sound which doesn't necessarily – that sometimes matches what you're seeing and what you're travelling through, and sometimes it goes in opposition, and what does that bring? I am a very chaotic artist to follow because I had Rotozaza but then I kept collaborating with other people. I was working with Gemma, who I've met because we were doing little things in Bethnal Green, you know, when Shunt was still there and Anthony and I did one of our shows and she really liked it.

**DR:** This is Gemma Brockis, right?

**SM:** Gemma Brockis from Shunt, yes. Me and Gemma, without really knowing each other very much, decided we wanted to do a show together because we just liked each other's work. One day I went and had coffee with Gemma, who I didn't know, and we started talking and for some reason I had just re-read *Pinocchio*, I don't know why, and she was in the middle of reading it so we decided to make *Pinocchio* together. Our *Pinocchio* obviously had very little of the story other than the idea of a journey, of looking for something. But it was a show set in a car where three audience members at a time would get a ticket and the ticket would give them a phone number. They were told to go to a car park – first time we did it it was a super empty car park here in Dalston – so you'd go there and you'd call a number and you'd hear this woman on the phone, like a bit hectic, saying: 'Sorry, sorry, we're coming, just stay where you are!' And then, soon after, this car would arrive, just really, really fast, and just go in the middle of the car park and just spin around and then stop abruptly, the boot would open, a corpse would fall out. And Gemma, beautifully, would come [out] of the driver's seat with a tiny little recorder with crickets playing and would go and invite the people into the car. Basically the story was three people being kidnapped by those who, after a while, we realise are Pinocchio and the Blue Fairy, who are following the trail of a whale. Now all of this is – there was a whale in the Thames just around that time, I don't know if you remember, that stuck, that really tried to – we recorded all of the radio stuff, and what we wanted to do was have the vague story of Pinocchio or basically a road movie where the audience was actually in the movie with us. And they were playing the part, in the story of *Pinocchio*, of the rabbits of death. In the story of the women on the trail of this whale, they were just three people being kidnapped and then dumped on the side of the road at the end of the trip. And the whole thing is about the police looking for us and us looking for a whale – so there's a bit of a chase going around. But the story itself isn't all that important – what was important to us was the fact that we wanted to, as I said, create this film. We wanted the windshield and the windows to become screens for the audience, and every time they looked out everything they looked at, anyone passing by, they were all extras in our film, which had a different soundtrack to that of the outside because we had the car radio. The car radio was – we were playing a lot between what was real radio and what was pre-recorded radio. At that point, we're talking 2003, it wasn't the most straightforward thing to do in a car 'cause, you know – it was the first time that [wireless FM] transmitter had come out. So you could actually connect yourself to the radio, and it was all a bit dodgy and basically I spent most of the time on iPods DJing whilst also kind of like looking back at the audience member, trying to also carry on with the story whilst Gemma was busy driving, theoretically not allowed to act at all, and yet still, you know, trying to push the story. But then as we're driving – for example one of the bigger scenes: we're driving along, just off Chelsea Bridge to go towards Albert Bridge on Chelsea side, so you're along the river and you turn the corner and suddenly there is a storm – in the car only – and it's raining really heavily and the windshield's got all the water where Gemma is obviously. And Pinocchio gets out of the car because he thinks he's seen the whale. We are here. The radio is talking about the whale in this big storm, and out of that a sort of more emotional, say, soundtrack – big epic sound, comes up. So we've got the storm, the news about the whale, and this incredibly kind of evocative, very, very, epic music whilst Pinocchio in his yellow mac is kind of running along the river. And then s/he jumps, or it looks like s/he jumps, right into the river and then comes back completely drenched. So the idea was to create this really kind of movie-like scene, you know, like this big scene and that's why sound is massive for me. I just love how I can use the outside world but then really transform it into exciting or poetic or sad or whatever you want. You



can choose how you look at the world. You can put a different spin by having a different kind of sound. And then how much sounds confuse you, make you find connections when there aren't any.

### [00:29:36] THE INFLUENCE OF FILM

**DR:** When we had that first encounter at Battersea Arts Centre I remember you talked about the film that kind of—

**SM:** Yes. Well, you know, being a boring Italian my favourite is of course Pasolini. Hence, like writing about him in my dissertation at university. I love how, you know, at that time in Italy films were really making the most of the real world, the outside world. So sets were not – I mean of course there was like the *Cleopatra* or *Ben Hur* or whatever being made with big sets and all of that, but actually there was a moment in the '60s where in Italy filming in real location was a real thing because they had something. Because without having to add anything, it was an incredibly poetic and emotional landscape, you know, like the sort of seaside at the outskirts of Rome or Rimini or the kind of industrial ugliness that becomes something else – well, it becomes art. And I love all of these long queues of whatever you want – nuns or priests or cardinals, you know, this sort of thing, anything that cuts through a landscape, things that cut through landscape. So how do you just change how you perceive a particular place just by, say, having these nuns walking through – are they walking all to the left or what happens if they're all walking through all of it? Or, you know, what kind of movement and all of that sense? I love the fact that they were really looking at what was really there. And in a way it felt as if the film was written for that place. And if I have to say, in terms of Pasolini, I would say most of his stuff was written for that place because it was talking about that place, it was talking about those people. And he wouldn't go to a studio and rebuild it, he would use the subject that he's interested in.

**DR:** The particular example you talked about was actually not an Italian film. It was – was it an English film you talked about?

**SM:** John Smith.

**DR:** Yes.

**SM:** Well, John Smith is definitely a big massive influence for me. I don't know if you've ever seen *The Girl Chewing Gum*. Basically it can summarise the two interests that I have, which is real people, and how do you change real places, and both without actually changing them but just through sound and narration. The autoteatro which is so consumed with the idea of allowing the audience members to become their own performers in their own show is all about real people. Real people and giving them the possibilities of just becoming something else by freeing yourself from the responsibility of deciding what to do and what to say, and on the other hand the actual landscape and how you change it. In John Smith's *The Girl Chewing Gum*, it's very simple. It was shot around here in Dalston, on the edge between De Beauvoir and Dalston in fact. It's real people. The camera seems to begin with – it's a fixed camera and it's just real people walking in front of the camera. But John Smith is commenting on everything he sees as if he was calling the people to enter the scene. So he would say: 'From the right let's have the old man with the hat, looking, scratching his cheek', whatever, and you would have the old man, scratching his cheek. Obviously, the sound was added afterwards and recorded in a field on the outskirts of London, completely remote from the place where it was being filmed. So in a way he's really saying: 'The sound and the images have nothing to do with each other but I'm going to put them together, and by doing that I create another reality where all of those people are extras in the film that I am making for absolutely just you, the viewer.' And the viewer is the one who changes. So for me the whole film is about me. It's about me first of all learning that what I am watching – I have to pretend it is really done for me and that those people are all acting for me, and then I have to pretend that the stories are – because he carries on and it gets to develop a little bit the way that he talks about things and he starts telling stories, possibilities. The man with the hands in his pockets has just robbed a post office and his hand is sweating, gripping the gun that he's got in his pocket. None of it is real, but then I am asked to believe that extra layer of fiction. When I get there, then he suddenly cuts everything and is like: 'Oh yeah, no actually, I'm not really there.' But



does that world still exist? I love that. I love what he did, and I suppose that a lot of what I do is pretty much that. I like real people, I like real places and what it gave me was really the opportunity to look at those people and get excited. Obviously even now that's going to be quite something, isn't it, the more we get locked in. You go outside, you go to the supermarket, and you've got all of these people around and everybody is an obstacle. You stop looking at people, and I mean it doesn't have to be in a crisis as it is now, but now it's heightened – they are walking too slowly, I'm trying to get to something and they're in the way. People are just an obstacle that you need to kind of get out of the way most of the time, or that is annoying you because you've got other things in your head and you have no time for the guy who is texting, which we all do whilst walking. If you are not doing it in that moment, it means that everybody is an inconsiderate, horrible person. If you do it, people should be considerate of you. It's an interesting thing when now the only thing that exists is us and the people in the close vicinity. Everybody else is just a nuisance. So that's why also in *Wondermart* that was – *Wondermart* is exactly like *etiquette* but it takes you through the aisles of a supermarket and the idea is exactly that: rediscover people. Forget about buying. What do you care about buying? What about the people around you? They are super exciting! They all have stories. They all have something behind and they're all also the main characters in their own film. I can't discount you as a hero, so you shouldn't be seen by me just as an obstacle.

#### **[00:37:19] INVENTING NEW LANGUAGES**

**DR:** Now that you have mentioned *Wandermart*, maybe we can cover quickly that period between *Wondermart* and now, because was that breaking point between Rotozaza and the next phase?

**SM:** So *Wondermart* in the end I made on my own, not as Rotozaza – and from that moment, I suppose my collaboration with Gemma Brockis as Berlin-Nevada, as a new collaboration became more important. I started working with Simon Wilkinson, who is a filmmaker from Brighton. We sort of joined together the autoteatro idea and his idea of interactive film and we came across these video goggles. We saw actually someone doing a short piece using video goggles and at that point we had spoken with the Brighton and Hove White Night. So we basically had a script that we wanted to make and it was very complicated with lots of projectors. It was going to be again in a car, because I'm a little bit obsessed because of various kinds of hitchhiking moments I've had and it's always interesting the humanity that you meet. But this time we really wanted, instead of having reality on the other side of the car window, we wanted something that was extremely not real but that felt really real. So when we came across these video goggles we were like: 'Oh this is perfect!' We made a film that was shot in the first person and that was a sort of crazy joy ride in this car with people speaking a language that was totally not understandable because it was literally a language we invented, although it was a real language. So if the characters were talking to each other, [they] were actually saying things, they weren't just making up funny words.

#### **[00:39:24 to 00:41:09] Excerpt from *And the Birds Fell from the Sky* (2011)**

So you, as an audience member, you are wearing video goggles, everything is shot from your point of view. If you are told to look at your hands, you look and there are some hands. They are not really yours, but there are some hands which move in time with what you are doing. You are told to turn your head to the left and to the right, the whole world turns to the left and to the right to follow your gaze. So in a way it was pre-empting what we now have, because again that was 2010 and, still, great VR stuff and 360° cameras and all of that – there was none of it. So we sort of made up this possibility through instruction to create the illusion of you being in charge of what you are looking at. The first show we did was called *And the Birds Fell from the Sky*, and it was a commission with Brighton and Hove White Night, and the show really worked in a way. I mean, having the possibility of having video goggles it took the autoteatro to an extreme, an extreme where I would never go if it wasn't with video goggles. In real life, I would never put people in a dangerous situation – whilst with video goggles I could put them in a very, very dangerous situation without them actually being in any real danger – but feeling the danger because they are watching the danger. They are sitting in a car seat for real, there is like a massive subwoofer behind the car



seat which is like pumping kind of car sounds. So the car, you don't hear it but you can feel it, because the seat is kind of like rattling and moving, having those vibrations that you have in a car. Everything that you saw, which you were supposed to smell or touch, was really there. So that smell would be people drinking – alcohol smell, yes plenty of alcohol, things being burned, yes there is real fire. So in your real senses everything is real and it's really happening. Your eyes are seeing something, your senses are feeling that is also true, and then on top of that you've got your ears, which are the last straw to kind of convince you that everything is actually really happening.

**DR:** Did you use the word 'immersive theatre' at the time or at any other time later?

**SM:** I might have called it an 'immersive experience', but to be perfectly honest I never liked the concept. Not because I don't like the concept, I think that it's great, that's exactly what we are doing, but it's sort of like 'immersive' popped out and it became the commercial word before it was even the interesting word. I still cringe if I am writing an application and I have to say: 'The audience is immersed in a soundscape', because it is exactly the right word to use but it kind of has been taken away from my vocabulary in a way.

**DR:** So then, between 2010 *And the Birds Fell from the Sky* and now?

**SM:** So basically, from 2010, for quite a few years I did video work – video goggles and autoteatro joined together in a more filmic way. But then at the same time I carried on working with Gemma. So we did quite a bit of touring of *Pinocchio*, which actually happened before. But then we wrote a new show where the interest again is the outside, but this time we wanted to bring it inside. And so we made a show inspired by *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, which now tours around to different places, and wherever it goes, it re-adapts itself. So the story: it's a lecture given in a made-up language completely like a mash of lots of different languages from all over the world. This lecturer comes to your town and gives you a lecture on your town. Truth is, first of all you don't understand very much because it is all in a made-up language, but the whole thing is about the pictures and the videos that are made about that town and how the lecturer slowly, slowly falls into describing the cities as these cities of *Invisible Cities*. So it's London, but it's like Chloe, it's London, but it's like Sophronia, and all of that. The concept – it is quite similar, it's this sense of depending on – and this was Marco Polo or, rather, Italo Calvino doing that – depending on the eyes that you have on, you will read your city in a different way. So the melancholic look will make you look at your city in a way, and the in-love look will probably make you see it completely differently. Even here, I suppose, you will be drawn to certain things rather than others. The show was an opportunity not only because me and Gemma just absolutely really love walking around like two idiots without knowing where we are and talking to people and making connections and discovering, and all of that. So we made the show that would allow that as the process to happen. Wherever we go, we would spend a week in advance and we talk to people, we take lots of pictures, re-edit all of the films, and then – a bit like in the autoteatro – even though the script is always the same, what's inside always changes because it's the quality or the personality of the place that changes the piece. You know, especially when there's small places, it's really beautiful because you see people never consider their city as important. They never consider their city as anything. And so most of the time the reaction is: it's quite exciting to look at your city, somebody is taking the time to look at your city and bring it back to you, but rediscovered.

**DR:** How does the audience experience this piece? Is it still through the goggles?

**SM:** No, this is an actual show.

**DR:** Oh, okay, okay.

**SM:** Crazy as it is, this is an actual show. So we don't do it in theatre-theatres, although we have done it at BAC for example, but we do it mostly in either conference rooms, on top of hotels – so you've got the last floor and at the end you've got this beautiful reveal of the view. We always look for a place that has a view.

**DR:** I see.

**SM:** So whether it's the, I don't know, meeting room in a council place or whatever. It could be anywhere.



**DR:** The lecturer speaks in an invented language, and what's the other bit of the content in this, a film?

**SM:** Imagine it's – I am giving the lecture in this made-up language and then I have videos of what I am talking about. So I'm talking about the city being a city made of two sides, which is pretty much always true for any city, and I say, for example: 'It's like Despina. Do you know Despina? No? Okay well then–' Obviously this all in a made-up language, and I say: 'Okay it's like Despina. I'll show you Despina. Here is Despina.' And then you've got a video with the words in the actual words, in a language that the audience can understand. We film the two sides of the city, the two different approaches of the city, by using then the words of Italo Calvino to describe Despina and adapting the words to the actual – well actually adapting the editing of the film to the words so that your city does really look like: 'Oh, yes, if you think about it there are really two sides.' But then it is true that at some point the audience does wear headphones. It does halfway through, when they basically slowly discover that we're going deeper into the book rather than into the city. So we've gone right into the book, but now who are we? And then you discover the lecturer is actually Marco Polo. The technician, who seems like it was a technician, is not really, it's Marco Polo's horse – and the audience who is listening to me is in fact Kublai Khan. So they know more about the city than I do, like Kublai Khan did know more about his empire than Marco Polo did. Especially in this book, given that in this book it turns out that Marco Polo is always just describing Venice.

**DR:** Great! And why an invented language?

**SM:** 'Cause we wanted it. For one thing, touring is something quite important to us, touring in different countries, different cultures. We want to be able to take it anywhere without any problem. So the best thing ever is to just speak a language which nobody can feel like they can't understand. So after all that, finally, the last thing – and then we are onto *Swimming* – the last thing I did was *Macondo* which is an autoteatro piece for 100 people that takes place in a theatre. You know, sometimes I am radical like that! And that was really a celebration of community and the idea of an audience of people who have to collaborate with each other in order for the show to actually happen at all. It's an autoteatro. Like *etiquette*, it's very simple: you press play, everything starts, but this time there were like 12 different tracks. So people could decide whether they wanted to be beginners, intermediate, advanced or heroes, and depending on what they chose they had more or less focus. So obviously the hero has got a solo focus, whilst if you are the beginner you are a part of a Greek chorus, you're hidden amongst the mass. And the story of the piece is really simple – people come to see the show where all they know is that it is inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It turns out that the actors haven't turned up, and we hear that because we are wearing headphones and there's a glitch in the sound and it sounds like we are hearing one of the technicians doing all of the calls before the show. So we learn that there are no actors, and at that point the first audience member in pitch dark stands up, puts a torch on and walks on stage. From that moment onwards, lights, everything gets done by the audience. So that first audience member will then become the technician who is behind the desk which is on stage, doing all of the lights for all of the show – there isn't somebody else doing the lights. And there is a director sitting in the audience, who is giving sort of instructions, there is an understudy, there is the hero, there is the costume person, all of them, they all get together – in the end the whole audience is on stage. And the whole audience, in the process of trying to do the show that is *[One] Hundred Years of Solitude*, which is the craziest story to try and tell, all people remember is that they kind of die and they're all sort of called the same. So all they are trying to do is to shoot one. That's all they are trying to do throughout the whole show. And they get better and better and better until they sort of give up and the whole village becomes alive, and everybody in the audience steps onstage. So it's really about collaboration and being together.

**[00:52:21 to 00:55:04] Excerpt from *Macondo* (2015)**

**[00:55:04] *SWIMMING HOME* (2020)**

**DR:** I know that you've been working on the *Swimming* project already. So the idea is developing, but I don't know exactly where you are now with how far the concept has developed and what you



envisage it becoming.

**SM:** Yes, so I suppose the biggest leap I did was this realisation of this new level, this bringing in a new community – this possibility of working with the local community of swimmers to create an event that can be experienced from two points of view, and where both communities are sort of looking at each other and reconsidering the way that they look at each other as well as the environment. That's what I want to do, work with the community of swimmers and interview them. So this is actually something that I am already doing. I am already interviewing a lot of swimmers. First, it was nicer because I was meeting them, and in person everything is much nicer. And now I am doing them via Skype. It's not ideal but let's see how it goes.

**DR:** So it will be a show where the audience goes into the swimming pool and sits in the swimming pool and watches the swimmers – and basically the swimmers are performing the actions that you are scoring?

**SM:** Yes. Most of the swimmers will be just doing exactly what they do. One of the swimmers will be following my track. As far as the swimming community is concerned, I am carrying on. As far as the solo swimmer, it will have to wait for a minute. The way that I want to work now is collect as many interviews as possible, but then I am going to start looking into collecting as many kind of ambient sounds as possible. I am interested in collages, I am interested in films, and so I'll be probably putting together all of that material. I will find myself in the situation where I will have longer, more complex and layered tracks to test. And then the work with the swimmer can start, because the work with the swimmer will be the work with a performer. Actually, it will be a lot of different people making it so that it works regardless of what your level of swimming is. This is the optimistic plan. Then there is the apocalyptic plan. The apocalyptic plan is that god knows when we are going to get out of this. I just started thinking that I might start writing little exercises, which might be towards the making of this piece, for people to do in their own self-isolated environment, just looking at water in a cup or water in a bath, whatever you've got.

**DR:** Thank you so much! Thanks!

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

### Clips Summary

[00:14:53 to 00:16:06] *etiquette* by Rotozaza (2007)

[00:39:24 to 00:41:09] *And the Birds Fell from the Sky* (2011)

[00:52:21 to 00:55:04] *Macondo* (2015)

Audio available at [www.auralia.space/gallery1-silviamercuriali/](http://www.auralia.space/gallery1-silviamercuriali/).

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Mercuriali, Silvia (2020) LMYE Gallery #1: Putting a Different Spin on the World - An Interview with Silvia Mercuriali, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.12764300.v6>.

