



## The Sound That You Feel An Interview with Sammy Metcalfe (Sleepwalk Collective)

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello! Welcome to the Gallery.

Our guest in the Gallery today is Sammy Metcalfe, the British representative of the Spanish-based, international company of dreamers, Sleepwalk Collective. Born out of London's DIY scene, Sleepwalk Collective is renowned for the kind of work which, according to *The Scotsman*, 'commands attention' with its 'intensity and shapeliness'. In 2011, their show *As the Flames Rose We Danced to the Sirens*, *the Sirens* was nominated for the Total Theatre Awards at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the same performance went on to win top awards at festivals in Kosovo, Birmingham and Bilbao. From then on, they have created a series of acclaimed and technically accomplished works whose form is characterised by a distinctive use of speech and sound.

In this interview, we hear about how the company's specific way of working has evolved with regard to their interest in form, music, sound, atmosphere, technology and collaboration with others. We find out about their working process and how they as a company began to adapt to the unforeseen circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic while keeping a connection to the UK in the run up to Brexit.

Sleepwalk Collective are the Associate Artist Company of the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies project.

This interview was conducted between London and Madrid on Skype on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

### [00:01:51] FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

**Duška Radosavljević:** So, how did Sleepwalk Collective come about first of all? I understand you went to Rose Bruford, so how did you start working together? And what personal journeys brought you together and personal points of interest?

**Sammy Metcalfe:** So the three of us who make up the company, which is me, iara and Malla – although for the last few years it's predominantly just me and iara – we met studying European Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford, which is a course which is a mix of theory and practice. It's sort of theory through practice, and it's also a course where you're studying performance and directing and design. We didn't come out of the training as performers or as directors, it was 'theatre-makers'. We all had exactly the same training, so the roles that we've fallen into since then, which is where I'm predominantly outside – I don't perform very often, I don't know if I'd call myself a 'director' because I think the direction is fairly collaborative – but I do a lot of the writing, I do the music and I'm the outside eye in terms of the process. And we formed the company just at the very end of the course, just because I think – it was partly that thing of: 'Well, we're finishing, now we got to do something!' I think the three of us felt we'd been responding to the same ideas and were interested in the same kinds of things, so it was one night – it was a very quick decision – we just figured: 'Okay, the three of us like working together and we're interested in the same things so it makes sense to form a company.' There wasn't really a deeper thought process than that. It then took us quite a long time to figure out what we were doing – so we formed the company in 2006 and the show, which I think was the first one that really felt like it was our work, wasn't until 2010. So we had a kind of four-year period where we were doing a few projects, but really just trying to figure out what we wanted to do and what our work was. So by 2010 – that's when it really felt like we kind of existed as a company, and everything then was much faster and more focused. In terms of our initial practice, one thing that's really key is we came out of the kind of DIY scene – which I guess was most active between 2005 and 2015, even though we were working in – because we formed the company in London and we were in London for a year, but in 2007 we moved to Spain. We tend to make the shows in Spain now, but do a lot of touring in the UK and some of our main supporters, like Battersea Arts Centre, are in the UK. So we're still kind of dividing the time between the two countries but we were very connected to and influenced by a lot of artists in the UK around 2005 and 2010 – companies like Action Hero, Search Party, that whole ethos of 'you work with



what you've got', the idea that we should be learning how to do everything that we can. So we're not just going to be working as performers or as makers, we're also going to be doing the design work, we're going to be doing the music work. We do have collaborators who we bring in occasionally but we're still working with relatively limited resources. We have a lighting designer [Alex Fernandes] who we bring in for bigger and more ambitious projects, and we use him as a consultant on quite a lot of the work we do, but we've kind of taught ourselves as much as we can how to take responsibility for kind of every aspect of the works – and video design as well is something else. And some of our abilities are fairly basic in those areas, but we've learnt to get what we want and, I guess, work within our limitations as well. So in terms of in relation, specifically to sound and music, I'm not really a musician – I had a good musical education when I was very young, music was always very important to my parents, so my mum was teaching me music from about the age of three or four. And I kind of did play a few instruments when I was young, but I was never technically very good as a musician – and I still don't really think of myself as a musician – but I'm grateful for having been exposed to a lot of musical ideas from when I was very young, and I think I've got quite a good ear, maybe. I kind of developed instincts that I now use quite a lot and they help me to manage the fact that, from a technical angle, I'm not particularly good as a musician. But I know how to find things because I can hear them.

**DR:** I was going to ask you what formative influences might have informed your way of working. You mentioned some of these DIY companies, which I presume might have been the companies that you were becoming aware of when you were a student?

**SM:** It was actually kind of straight after we graduated. Because the course we did was great in terms of things like creative and conceptual thinking, but it's very much focused – or it was when we were studying – on early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, up until the kind of '80s I guess. And it's a lot of European work, a lot of Polish work, focused on the classical avant-garde as well. So a lot of the companies who we were maybe directly influenced by in the beginning were essentially our contemporaries, and it was people whose work we became aware of really straight after graduating and coming out of that quite academic bubble and running to catch up and see what work was actually being made. Especially artists of our generation or artists who started working just a couple of years before we were, and people who were making stuff that felt 'of its time' in a positive sense. I mean obviously Forced Entertainment is a big influence, because they're a big influence on everyone in the UK. Melanie Wilson was a really big influence for me – I saw a couple of her really early shows, I saw a show I think it was just before I graduated, so it would have been late 2005 – I saw a show called *Simple Girl*, which was one of Melanie Wilson's early solos and was really blown away by it. An aspect of it that was really key, which maybe I only realised later, was that sound was really integral to the work – the way she was working with text and with her voice was really important for me. And then I saw some – I haven't seen anything she's done for years actually! But that's one of the disadvantages of being in Spain, it's pure luck when we actually get to see any work in the UK. But I think that that was really major.

## **[00:08:34] THE ROLE OF SOUND AND MUSIC**

**DR:** Very often it comes across as though your area is more to do with writing and sound design and iara's area is spatial design, if I understand correctly, and then you have these other collaborators who complete the puzzle in some ways as well. And you mentioned that both of you are interested in sound as the primary means of making – when did you become aware of that as a shared interest?

**SM:** It kind of happened really gradually, I think. So the first time we actually did any sound design ourselves was in the show we did in 2010, or 2009/2010, which is *The Sirens* [*As the Flames Rose We Danced to the Sirens, the Sirens*]. Before then we'd just been using music that we liked, and just playing music that we liked in our shows, and then kind of started to feel like maybe that was a bit lazy, and also that we weren't tailoring stuff for exactly what we wanted. When we did *The Sirens* I still didn't feel confident – or actually it hadn't even really crossed my mind that sound design was something that we could really be doing ourselves. So we got one of my oldest friends [Adam Ireland], who we were living with at that point, to make a couple of pieces of music for the show, and that was kind of us saying: 'Well, can you make something that sounds a bit like this?', because we had other bit of music we'd been rehearsing with. And he made some stuff and then I made a couple of things just to fill some of



the space in between that, and kind of realised that I might be able to do it. And then when we did the show after that – which was *Amusements* – that's the first time I made the whole soundtrack. I don't know if we necessarily thought that was that significant at that point, but it opened up this whole way of working which is now essentially what we do, which is where we're always doing everything. Every part of the process is parallel, so we're always working simultaneously on text and on music and all the other aspects of the project as well, but I'd say especially music and text are really parallel. Whenever there's a new bit of writing we try to get music for it as soon as possible. Sometimes it goes the other way round – often it's the case where if I get stuck on something, if I get stuck on the writing I'll just switch to making some music and see if the music will tell me what the writing should be doing. Because I feel like they're always – music especially, tells you what kind of mood you're writing for, what kind of space you're writing for, and so often it really helps me to resolve stuff or it makes text work that wasn't working beforehand. For me, the relationship between the two – between text and music especially – is really intimate and often indivisible: even if you have silence with a piece of text that for me is a musical choice. So the interest – it actually happened quite quickly over the course of a few projects between 2010 and 2014 probably was when we went: 'This is how we're working now.' And it wasn't necessarily something we were expecting to happen but it immediately expanded the way we were working and just clarified it – we suddenly went: 'This is what we wanna do, this is the kind of work that we wanna make.' And I think we go through periods of trying to rethink that or trying to figure out different approaches, and occasionally we go: 'Well, shall we make a show without any music in it?', which we haven't done yet. In sort of parallel to developing the whole of that practice, iara was also developing her own practice outside of the company, and just because sound was so integral to the work of the company, she was taking aspects of that over into her work; she doesn't do the actual practical work of designing sound – that's what I do – but she does a lot of the kind of conceptual thinking. She's very good now at explaining what she wants from things, so I can make it.

**[00:12:24 to 00:13:43] Excerpt from *As the Flames Rose We Danced to the Sirens, the Sirens* (2010)**

**SM:** The role that music and sound design has within our work is – often it's the music that has the responsibility of building the dynamics into the work, creating a sense of a journey through the show. And sometimes we've done that to a really extreme extent: I remember in *Domestica*, relatively early in the process we had 45 minutes of music, with all of the dynamic up and down, really before we had any of the show made or written. And that became something we could ride on top of. And we did then change a lot of the music afterwards, and add things and expand stuff, but I feel often the music does the heavy lifting in terms of creating a sense of a journey. It means that things like text can actually be static. It's one of the things I think are funny when you read texts – especially the early shows – on the page, there's no real development or movement in terms of the text, the music and the sound creates the illusion that there is.

**DR:** Do you improvise, like when you are together in a room rehearsing, is there live music going on? And is that an improvisation or is that something you prepared earlier that comes into the rehearsal room?

**SM:** What I tend to do in terms of making music is I make a whole load of tracks, each one is almost like just a loop with minimal development – it will be more or less the same thing for quite a long time. They tend to be about ten minutes long, with minimal variations, it will just be sort of one thing. But I'll make everything basically in the same key, and it will be a mixture of some tracks which are quite dense, and some stuff which will just be a drone or a texture. And that means I can live mix different stuff, and that will be something during rehearsals that I'll do a lot and have two or sometimes even three tracks that I can play simultaneously on top of each other, and that way you can build dynamics into a track which doesn't have them by going: 'You have a first layer that's playing, then you gradually bring in another layer that's playing.' So that kind of live DJing is really integral to the process, and also that's how I do the shows live – I always run everything off DJ software. All of the shows probably have between 15 and 25 different tracks and I'm mixing one into another live, and it means I can follow what the performers are doing, and follow what a particular mood is on a particular night sometimes as well – in terms of when the transition comes and how slow the transition is. There is a liveness to the way we're working in performance and in rehearsals as well, but it's always working with pre-prepared



tracks. The other thing also that's worth talking about, which we mentioned in terms of sound design is microphone mixing.

**DR:** God, yes!

**SM:** A really, really key thing that happened for us, maybe ten years ago, is we suddenly found this way of mixing microphones which just works for us. And we still have to persuade theatre technicians sometimes that it is actually what we want. First you take out almost all of the bass, most of the low mids as well, so there're no low frequencies at all, put the high frequencies up really high, way higher than you would do normally, and then put it as loud as you possibly can go. Unless you're in a theatre with really, really good acoustics that you can work with, it's almost always on the verge of feeding back – so actually I have to have my hand on the volume control pretty much the whole way through. As soon as you've got multiple microphones it's a total nightmare! And often I'm having to just really quickly switch them on and off, because if you have more than one microphone on at the same time with that mix it will feed back. If you hear it without any music, it can sound really weird because it's got a weird, crackly – it doesn't have any bass in it at all. Firstly, that does a weird thing where it kind of goes into your head, in a weird way that's different from a regularly-mixed microphone, but also the key thing it does is it means that the voice is entirely occupying high frequencies and the music is occupying all of the other frequencies, so you can put the voice and the music pretty loud simultaneously and you can hear the voice clearly.

**DR:** And how did you discover this methodology?

**SM:** Again, it was kind of by mistake! I think a lot of the stuff we discovered doing *Amusements* – because it was headphones, because it was so sound-based we kind of had to do that work. And also it was the first time we were doing something entirely by ourselves – in terms of it was the first time I did the [sound] design entirely myself. And also some of it I just went: 'Well, this obviously sounds better!' I didn't even realise it was not the normal way of mixing stuff. There was also another thing which was that we were working with silent disco headphones, which have quite a limited range of frequencies they'll actually do, so we had to kind of do anything we could. It was very easy to overload it and make it distort, so you had to really work to make it so the voice was occupying one space and the music was occupying another space. So I think we were forced to learn a load of things we didn't realise we were learning at the time, and then realised we could apply it out loud. I think part of it – I mean Iara gives me shit for this – but it partly is that I'm almost entirely deaf in one ear, so I kind of instinctively try to make stuff really loud anyway. I've always been interested in sound that you can kind of feel almost as much as you can hear, and getting a really full bass as well. I was really influenced by one of the futurist manifestos, which is the futurist synthetic theatre, that basically you can sum up as being 'every bit of the show should be the best bit'. Like, what is the point of making a three-hour drama where really the good bit is the last 15 minutes and everything else is a build-up? Just cut out all the other stuff! And it was maybe just thinking about art that I liked previously, or stuff that I was enjoying in rehearsals – I really was just interested in the kind of peaks, where everything's really loud, where you get the impact. And so I think I've always on one level been trying to make it so you're kind of cutting out the build-up in stuff, unless you really need it. It's kind of funny, we're in a point now where actually our work is generally better received than it ever has been – and I think it's partly because we've built a bit of an audience who know the work that we make. So it's been really nice that actually stuff like *Domestica* was generally positively received, and it was kind of a shock for us! I think we still go into everything with this attitude that the work will potentially be hated by someone, or just won't make sense to some people. And I think that's encouraged us sometimes to really commit to certain things and take those things as far as we possibly can because we just go: 'Well, if we're going to do something which is a particular kind of thing, we might as well make it the most extreme version of that.' Chris Brett Bailey says that if something isn't working, try just making the most extreme version of that – rather than doing the thing you would instinctually do. You know, if something feels too long, you go: 'Well, can we make it a bit shorter?' Just make it longer. Maybe the longer version is the better version, or the louder version is the better version. Sometimes you need to just push something to its extreme and that's when it becomes interesting. I think we've kind of committed to that.





## [00:21:29] THE SLEEPWALK COLLECTIVE PROCESS

**DR:** Can you summarise what the Sleepwalk Collective process is?

**SM:** Form always comes in before content, that's maybe something important. I think we don't tend to really know what shows are going to be about until the very end of the process often. At the moment I think we're actively trying to do something new, or something which at least feels like a development from what went before. Often we will begin with a very clear and preferably limiting formal structure, formal idea for a show: the idea that that form will present a whole series of limitations that we have to work within is usually really important for us.

**DR:** Can you give an example by reference to some of the shows we've seen maybe?

**SM:** Yeah, for sure. So *Karaoke* was the one which had the most clear format from the beginning. The full idea for the show came in about 30 seconds – that it would be a karaoke and we would read all the text from screen, and that would also tell us all the instructions for action, and that also that would be projected so the audience could also see what we're seeing. That was 30 seconds of work – we then worked for about a year or longer on figuring out what that structure could accommodate. Often it's kind of that way round: you have the structure and then the work is figuring out what does that allow you to do, within those limitations, and what does that structure want to talk about. It's not that objective or scientific, but it feels like it will propose certain things that thematically it wants to talk about, and also will leave out a whole load of other things.

**DR:** When you were saying earlier about how you are writing text and music at the same time, presumably because you live together as well, that process is not you in a turret kind of writing on your own. How does the process of writing and making sound bleed into the rehearsal process?

**SM:** At the beginning – in the same sense that I'm not a musician, I'm not a writer either – and at the beginning all of the writing was coming out of text improvisation, particularly when we could have multiple performers. And it's something that we still use, especially when we're working with students, or on collaborative projects: as much as possible, text is coming out of a few really basic exercises we've got for generating text, and it's doing long improvisations and people just talking, I'm noting down stuff from outside... My writing work is often really editing, it's really just taking stuff that other people have said and editing it and finding ways of filling in the spaces and seeing what ideas come to me through listening to other people talking. That is still a part of the process – it varies a bit depending on the project, but in the last few years I've gotten more confident at actually writing myself, and so now it's a kind of a mixture. And also we tend to collaborate with people we've had long working relationships with and we also write very much for performance – we don't write the texts we want to write and then make the performers adapt to them. It's the other way round: we'll sketch bits of text and we'll see how it sounds with a particular performer, and if it doesn't work we change the text rather than change what we want the performer to do. And often in terms of the writing we're thinking about the sound of that person's voice and also a whole load of other kind of superficial things – in terms of what that performer looks like and what their presence is, for want of a better word.

**DR:** Can you illustrate this in terms of decision making, by reference to examples. You know, how would you qualify iara's voice and what does that mean in terms of how you make decisions?

**SM:** It's less a thought process than it is something just kind of like: 'You know it when you hear it', I think. I would say our process at the moment is: I'll be writing stuff which either has come partly out of text improvisation or now I'm also writing an increasing amount by myself and that's actually partly out of a desire to shift how we're using rehearsal time away from being really text-focused, which we have been for a really long time, into doing more visual exploration. I think we're working with a choreographer at the moment on a project, which is the first time we've ever done that. We're really trying to expand I guess the visual language of our work so that means we're shifting a bit away from using a lot of rehearsal time for working on text and a bit more towards using that time for other things. And that means I'm doing more writing outside of rehearsals, if that makes sense? I often find that if I've got a bit of text which would usually be incomplete the first time we hear it, I can hear iara reading something, and usually on the first way through I can hear which lines don't work and I just cross them out straight away. It's not necessarily a rational process and it's often not even about the content of the text or what it's communicating, it's just sometimes I just go: 'Well, that line feels wrong with you saying



it.' It's thinking almost musically about it, sometimes, sometimes a word just doesn't sound right for someone's voice. And obviously I think there would be ways we could put more time into going: 'We'll make this work, we'll work on your delivery and figure it out', but actually I usually find it more interesting, and more productive, just to move past that, otherwise you can get stuck on just trying to make a single line work for ages, and often it's more interesting, it takes you somewhere new if you just cut stuff and move forward as quickly as possible. It's fundamentally instinctual and musical in terms of thinking and listening and it's very much about just hearing what stuff sounds like. The idea for the show we're working with at the moment is that the scenes will be in a mix of English and Spanish and Czech, and that there'll be subtitling stuff depending on where we're performing it. Another thing that's maybe significant in terms of our practice is we spent the whole of the last decade making every show in both English and Spanish. And the way the text gets translated between one language and another language often shapes it, but we've premiered most of the shows in Spanish before we have in English. So the process of translation which iara does, often is really integral to how the text itself is developing. A lot of the approach to text is just moving stuff around from one language to another language or from one voice to another voice and just seeing what sounds right – and thinking about the feeling of the text, and particularly the feeling of the text in relation to music or in relation to an image or in relation to the lighting as well, and running with that particular mood or that particular feeling rather than thinking too much about what it means, I guess.

#### **[00:28:32] LIVENESS, PRESENCE, TEXT**

**DR:** Why is it important for your work to be in the form of live theatre as opposed to radio drama?

**SM:** Our whole approach to making stuff – definitely for me, and I think for iara as well – is always about putting different things in relationship to each other. No element is complete in itself – so the text doesn't really exist without the music, they're both leaving space for each other but they're both also taking from each other to become something more than what they are. And that goes for kind of every aspect of the production, so the relationship between a text and a particular image is more important than either element by itself. A lot of the work that we do in rehearsals – again this is something which started off at the beginning of our process as being – we were very I guess, 'pure' in terms of really engaging with particular exercises in rehearsal, and now the work's become a little bit more cerebral maybe. I think we spent a long time doing a lot of improvisatory exercises and now we can kind of do that work mentally maybe a bit more than we could at the beginning. But we still work with exercises that are just about finding chance relationships between an image and a text and a piece of music – kind of long-form improvisation within very specific structures. That's definitely why I'm interested in performance as opposed to something like radio drama because you just have more things that you can put in relationship to each other. We have done versions of some of our shows that are just audio – we did a short version of *Amusements* for the National Radio in Spain, maybe five-six years ago, and we've done some other kind of pieces. I think iara has a really strong interest in that. I find it a little bit frustrating, or maybe I just get self-conscious about the fact that you're really hearing the music and within theatre you can always kind of put something else there. I think also I get bored quite quickly! And even in rehearsals once I've heard text a few times I'm like: 'Okay, I should put something else on stage to kind of make this interesting for me again.' I mean there's another thing which is that we work in performance because it's what we know best. And we do have conversations which go: 'Well maybe we could make film?', or 'Maybe we could make a band?' It always comes down to the fact that this is the form which I understand to the deepest level. It's like you can skip past all of the preliminary formal questions about 'How do I actually even engage with this form?' and get to the interesting and complicated parts of it. There's an answer which is just about 'what are the tools that the artform gives?' but there's also an aspect which is just 'this is what I know how to do'.

**DR:** There were several things I was thinking about, some ideas sparking off. One is the way in which some of the works we've seen are aware of the presence of the audience – how does that inform your thinking, the presence of the audience?

**SM:** One thing which was really important for me was there was a period, kind of when we were starting out where suddenly there was this huge emphasis – and it felt like it was coming from artists and also



from critics – on the idea of theatre as a communal experience and that being something which was really important. And I found that really annoying! I mean, I enjoy that kind of work but I don't want everything to be like that! And I'm really interested in the experience of being part of a group but feeling alone within that, or feeling like you're having an individual experience, but you're aware of other people around you who are having experiences that are different from you. And from an audience point of view for example – I love it when I'm watching something and I'm finding it really funny and nobody else is. Or the other way round. The most sort of extreme we took that to was when we did *Amusements*, it's in a theatre, so the audience is sat in conventional seating, but everyone's wearing headphones. And that was partly because you get a whole new control over exactly what the audience are hearing, but also it was at that point a very active decision to isolate the audience from each other as much as possible – to make it so there is no contagion at all. It's a very weird show to do because the only person who is not wearing headphones is iara on stage. So she's essentially in a silent room and can hear absolutely everything that the audience are doing, and some people start singing along, and some people start laughing, while someone else crying. That was really exciting to us – this idea that you really isolate people but within a crowd, and you're kind of aware of that kind of experience. So that's been a kind of an ongoing interest.

**DR:** What would the audience members actually hear through the headphones?

**SM:** The whole show is – it's just a solo show, it's just iara in the centre of the stage, she doesn't move at all, and her shoes are actually stuck to the floor. She's speaking into a microphone the whole way through so you're getting her voice right there in your head, and then there's a soundtrack which is mixed underneath that. There is a couple of small tricks where, for example, we'll switch without anyone realising to pre-recorded text: so iara will be speaking and then she takes the microphone away and her voice carries on. So we did some stuff like that, but it was a very distinct difference between watching with the headphones and watching without. It's hugely important to me that the work is in a room in front of an audience, and I have a real issue with watching our own videos, for example. And we don't – we never film rehearsals, or if we do we never watch them afterwards!

**DR:** Another thing is that when the work comments on itself, as it sometimes does in the text, there is this awareness that the work is not narrative-led – that it's not 'drama' in the conventional sense. And then *Domestica* gets published as a playtext, how did that come about?

**SM:** It was a combination of things, because we invited Oberon to come and see the show through a kind of mutual contact we had, so we were able to ask someone to come and see it. And it was partly because it took a really long time to make that show, and also it's because we were all getting more confident in terms of things like writing, it was the first show we made where I kind of was happy with how the text works on the page. It's different from the version in the show – I feel like it probably makes more sense if you have seen the show – but it was the first time definitely I really felt like I would be happy for someone to read this. Because we had the option of presenting it as a script, so saying who's speaking each line, but it was important to me that it was just presented as a piece of writing and didn't try too much to kind of replicate how it works on stage – because I think you can never do that! You have to treat it as a slightly different form. I remember Oberon came to see it and really liked it, and then they wanted us to have tour dates set up – just because it makes more sense to publish when there's shows happening. And then that didn't happen, and then we got a handful of shows and Oberon were kind of interested enough in it as a piece of writing. Part of it is just vanity! And the fact that as we're getting older and you become conscious of how ephemeral the work that you make is and how, you know, we've got shows – I think *Karaoke* we're probably never going to do again, that show's kind of vanished, and I like that about the work. I like the fact that the stuff just exists for the moment that it does, and then it's gone. It felt like a way for the work to survive a little bit longer, I suppose. *Domestica* was the first one where that felt like a good idea – some of the early shows, especially stuff like *Karaoke* and *Amusements*, the text only works on stage, it only works in relationship with everything else, with the way the music and the imagery are making a space for you to listen to it and to hear it. And on the page it just kind of doesn't work. And I definitely had a thing that's happened where sometimes we've written something that we really liked on the page, and then you do it out loud and it's kind of lifeless – and you have to actually make the text worse as a piece of writing, in a sense, in order to make it work performatively, because text to be spoken and heard out loud is very different from text on the page a



lot of the time. And I think we're starting to find a bit more of a balance in between, and I think we're pushing ourselves – definitely with some of the new work we're doing at the moment, we're trying to be maybe more ambitious in terms of the writing, in terms of the kind of density of the writing, and to figure out how the show can accommodate text which is maybe more complex or maybe less performative. But it will still be the case, as with everything, that we'll have a couple of lines that we love as writing and we're really happy with, but they just won't work.

**[00:38:07 to 00:40:04] Excerpt from *Domestica* (2016)**

**[00:40:05] ONGOING PROJECTS**

**DR:** How did the collaboration with Chris Brett Bailey come about?

**SM:** I think we must have met six-seven years ago. We have mutual friends and we kind of met and then saw each other's work and really liked it. We had that slightly awkward thing where you really like someone's work and you don't know if you're going to get along with them – I think we were really nervous the first few times we met each other properly! And that just kind of developed, and I played guitar at the end of *This is How We Die* a few times, when it was in Edinburgh the first time. I'd been one of the kind of stand-in guitarists for when not everyone was available, and I've also done subtitling for that, doing live subtitles, because we've hosted it in Spain a couple of times. Through that we got a sense of how each other work. We also had a thing when we premiered *Domestica*, Chris was literally just down the road – we were at BAC and he was at Oval House – he was doing *Kissing the Shotgun Goodnight* so we were really hyper aware of each other's processes at that time. And it was probably around then that we started joking that we should make a show at some point, and we weren't serious at all – and that was 2016, and I think kind of last year, maybe the year before, we actually got serious about it and thought maybe we should! And so we did a kind of secret residency in Spain, it was exactly a year ago right now. And that was one that we kept totally under wraps and it was just to see if we could work together without it totally ruining our friendship. And it went well, and still we were taking it slowly, but we did a few days in London last July and then in December we did a full week here, and it's kind of coming along, I think! It feels kind of good!

**DR:** And how is *Swimming Pools* different from the one you are doing with Chris?

**SM:** The way I have been thinking about the last few years is that we have two types of show that we make: we have the shows which we kind of know how to make, and the shows which we don't know how to make. And the shows that we don't know how to make – and that's almost a deliberate choice to not know or understand what we're doing to do – are usually the ones where we make significant progress in terms of how we're evolving our practices and ideas. Those are the ones where can go wrong, obviously. Ever since we did *Domestica* – which was the last leap forward I think in terms of our work – in that case a lot of it was to do with being more ambitious with the writing, being more ambitious in really every sense within that project. And the last things we've done since then, it felt easier in a lot of ways – I mean, it never feels easy, but at least we could take the approach we developed through *Domestica* and reapply it to new forms and new stuff that we wanted to talk about. Definitely *Kourtney Kardashian*, the last show we toured, felt like we were taking this whole practice we developed and we were making another show. It was obviously a new show but the practice was only slightly different from the stuff we'd done before. So with *Swimming Pools* we're really trying to do something which feels new to us, even if the show itself will feel like our work. We're again trying to be much more ambitious in terms of scale, in terms of the writing, we're kind of playing with narrative to some degree for the first time ever, we're working with a choreographer for the first time ever – that feels really key to us. That's partly just because so much of the work that we see and are influenced by at the moment is dance – and that's partly just because dance in Spain is really good! There's much less distinction between theatre and dance here, they're not really treated as separate artforms, there's a real kind of fluidity – most of the people we know working in theatre are influenced by dance and are working with choreographers and vice versa. So this was something we were really excited by, the possibility of working with a choreographer and also just expanding our visual language which is something that we feel we really need to develop. So *Swimming Pools* is all of those things. It feels like it's the riskiest show we've made in a while, it's the most ambitious show we've ever made in terms of





the amount of collaborators and the scale and the budget and all of those kinds of things. And it's one where we hope to find something new for ourselves. Whereas the one we're making with Chris is going to be a smaller show, it feels a show where we're giving ourselves more permission to kind of enjoy it, we don't have to make a big creative leap forward because that's already happening because it's a collaboration, because Chris is bringing a whole load of things that we wouldn't be able to do.

**DR:** Such as?

**SM:** We like to kind of frame the fact that our work is non-narrative as you know, a really clear artistic choice – and it is mostly, but also we haven't really known how to do it, we can't really write narrative work! We're experimenting with that at the moment, but it's a combination of an actual definite creative choice but also about dealing with a limitation that I have in terms of working with narrative. Whereas Chris is phenomenally good at working with narrative, and making narrative do new things, and being really kind of inventive and imaginative and experimental in terms of narrative and how that works on stage. So I feel like I'm already learning a lot from the process with him. It also means that he is bringing a whole new thing into the work that wouldn't be there if it was just us. It's really exciting getting to work with his writing and getting to work with him as a performer as well. In terms of that project, Chris and iara are going to be performing, I'm outside – but again, not as a director exactly, definitely not as a writer, all the writing we are doing collaboratively between the three of us. And the music as well which – again, that's something new for me in that it's been a decade since I've had a collaborator within a project who's also making music. So, so far we've been making some stuff separately and mixing some things together and that feels really interesting. So I think that one is a more – maybe it's a more pleasurable project! It definitely feels so far – maybe it's just that we haven't got into the really difficult bit – it's felt really pleasurable and interesting, and stuff has just happened within the creative process just because we have someone who we've never worked with before and who we like a lot. Whereas I think with *Swimming Pools* we're deliberately trying to make things difficult.

## **[00:47:09] THE SPANISH-BRITISH CONNECTION**

**DR:** What made you choose to move to Spain?

**SM:** It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. We spent a year living in London after we graduated and found it really difficult – I mean I think for everyone it is, but there's a few things we just didn't plan very well. I think if we'd stuck it out longer we could have figured out a way of making it work, but we weren't really working creatively very much, we didn't know even really how to begin. And then after a year, because iara is from Vitoria in the Basque Country, she was able to apply for funding for a really exciting new art project there which only lasted a few years, but we managed to get funding to make a show. So we moved to Vitoria for six months to work on that show and we just stayed on. It was a really good place to begin working – we were there for years! And it did feel like an accident, but when we got there it was exactly the right change, it was exactly what we needed after being in London, and also it's still very easy to keep working in the UK.

**DR:** How will it work out with Brexit?

**SM:** God knows! We're not even thinking about it. The level of disruption is kind of unimaginable at this point, and we don't know. Our producer in Birmingham is great and she's been working with international companies for years and years and she started trying to figure out how to work around Brexit about three years ago. So we will have options, we still don't know what's going to happen obviously, but until now it's worked. And there has been the odd point where I've thought: 'Well maybe if we'd really committed to one country we could have progressed professionally faster.' The big thing about being between the two countries is that you can see and be influenced by different kinds of work, and it's radically different between the UK and Spain – there are superficial similarities but the whole ethos is so different. I mean, in the UK it's much easier to be an artist and there's much more artists. Like, a young artist in the UK is 21, and a young artist in Spain is 35, because it takes that much longer to get into the profession. And there's far fewer artists over here and you don't have the same kind of DIY ethos of anyone can make work, and you make the work that you can. But the difference over here is that artists of our generation are much more ambitious – they will make shows with casts of 80 people because that's what the work needs and there's no one telling you that you shouldn't do that! They're



also generally more literate and are influenced by a much wider range of artwork. I think in the UK it's still the case that there's a lot of artists you can see and they're only influenced by theatre and they're only interested in theatre, and you can tell by the work that they're making. That almost doesn't happen, that doesn't exist in Spain. Everyone is influenced by cinema hugely, and dance, and literature. I think in terms of theatre in Spain, some of the bigger influences in the last few years have been Roberto Bolaño – so literature – and Fassbinder as well was a massive influence for a while, Tarkovsky's a massive influence over here. You can see it in the work – it is just often conceptually more ambitious. Like I said before, the exchange of ideas between theatre and dance is constant. So you see work here which is of a very different style from work in the UK. And I wouldn't want to see only that – we've been hugely privileged, hugely lucky to be influenced by both the UK and Spain.

**[00:51:14 to 00:52:57] Excerpt from *El Entretenimiento* (2014), RTE Version**

**DR:** How do you describe your work in this context? In terms of how you actually hold this way of working, which is very particular – and I'm hearing you insist on this idea 'I'm not a director, I'm not a writer, I'm just an outside eye' – what do you call yourself in the Spanish context? Are you bothered about your mode of authorship not really fitting in with that?

**SM:** I think actually in a funny way it's easier over here. I think because we're definitely amongst companies who we would consider our contemporaries – and the types of companies here that we get bracketed in with, in this weird space in between theatre and dance particularly and between theatre and other artforms, theatre and performance art as well. And there isn't the same playwriting tradition that there is in the UK, and that very defined way of working, which has been shifted around a little bit more recently. I actually think in Spain it's less restricted, and I think it is possibly to do with the bleed-over with dance – you know, where within dance the role of the choreographer is sometimes understood to be more fluid, and often the choreographer will also be a dancer in the show. You won't necessarily list the director, you might list a dramaturg and that would be a slightly undefined role often within the process as well. I think dance maybe accommodates that idea of a fluidity of roles better than theatre sometimes does – and I feel like we're in that same zone in Spain and that gives us a bit more freedom to feel less like we have to define and be concrete about what our actual roles are. In terms of how we actually credit stuff, we've taken to never listing a director, it just doesn't make sense.

**DR:** Fantastic! Now this is great – thank you so much!

**SM:** Thank you and I am really interested in seeing what you do! Thank you!

**DR:** Bye!

Transcription by Jonathan Rogerson

**Clips Summary**

[00:12:24 to 00:13:43] *As the Flames Rose We Danced to the Sirens, the Sirens* (2010)

[00:38:07 to 00:40:04] *Domestica* (2016)

[00:51:14 to 00:52:57] *El Entretenimiento* (2014), RTE Version

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery5-sammymetcalf/>.

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