



Slippages in Perception: An Interview with ZU-UK

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to the Gallery!

ZU-UK are theatre artists, activists and pedagogues. Ever since their ground-breaking all night version of *Medea* performed in multiple locations between 2009 and 2011 including the Hayward Gallery, LIFT Festival and Edinburgh Fringe, they have been renowned for their distinctive approach to interactive performance and audience participation. The multi-award-winning *Hotel Medea* was followed by a number of projects using telephony and sound technology, including most famously the *Binaural Dinner Date* which has been performed over 250 times internationally since its first outing in 2016.

Founded by Artistic Director Persis Jadé Maravala and Executive Director Jorge Lopes Ramos, ZU-UK is recognised as a world-leading theatre company in immersive theatre, although this is a label they have challenged and sought to redefine by placing an emphasis on empathy at the centre of their work with the audience. In 2020, Ramos and Maravala published 'The Post-Immersive Manifesto', co-authored with Joseph Dunne-Howrie and Bart Simon for *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*. ZU-UK also run their own Masters Programme in Contemporary Performance at the University of Greenwich.

In this conversation we explore various routes and influences leading towards ZU-UK's multi-faceted way of working, which places equal value on physical training and binaural technology, politics and poetics, working in Britain and working in Brazil.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 1st June 2020.

[00:02:17] BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

Duška Radosavljević: I'm really keen to re-instate the artist in the process of knowledge production when we think about how theatre is made, how performance is made – this conversation in my view has to absolutely put the artist at the centre of it. And my approach has emerged through some of the previous work that I've done where I've talked about such things as the artist's idiom and how particular artists, or a particular company, develops a particular vocabulary over a period of time that they have worked together. Often there is an inter-relation between the various works that have developed over time. So it's very hard to look at the piece in isolation and then pull it apart and analyse it unless you actually understand where it comes from longer term. That's the reason why I want to go back to the early beginnings and retrace your steps as artists before you got to the point where you are now making the work as you do, with speech and sound at the centre of it. Particularly interesting in this respect is something that actually is relevant to both of you as artists, and that's this idea that, when we all think back to the 1990s and so on, we might remember how everybody was doing physical theatre and that tradition being at the centre of thinking about how we resist the text-based legacy of theatre-making. But now it seems that a lot of people are moving towards speech and sound and technology, and I'm just interested in that paradigm shift and what it means. To start with I'll take you back, I'll ask you to revisit your early years as artists and tell us the story of how you discovered theatre and performance and its potential, as young people.

Persis Jadé Maravala: First of all I just want to say thank you, Duška. It's really nice to have this talk with you because as I mentioned before I hardly ever get the chance to talk about this kind of stuff that we do, which is so embedded in sound, so it's nice to have that time. Often when we get interviewed our work rarely focuses on the aspect of sound because there's so many things that front-end the work and the sound is a huge driver but is also invisible. But I do actually work with sound as the main driver of communication for me as opposed to physicality and visual, you know 'visualness', so it's really nice to be able to have this chance. I came actually – funnily enough – I came into theatre via sound. My interest in the beginning was experimental music. So I came really quite late, I was already around 24,



when I started to work within the legacy of Jerzy Grotowski. And so my background is entirely physical and that's important in terms of sound: the body is really, really important to us even though, as you've correctly mentioned, there's been this shift from where we used to work – I think this is true for Jorge as well – we used to work so much on the performer's body and now we work very much on the participant's body. However, even within the work of Grotowski it was very, very much focused on the voice as an equal tool and it was a tool of elucidating meaning: as much as the literary meaning, any textual meaning or dramaturgical meaning, the voice carried meaning. And so my early work was in dealing with the voice as the main vehicle for an intercommunication to audiences but through very ritual and shamanic practices. And this goes back, actually, a bit more, to the fact that I was brought up in the Zoroastrian faith and as a child I was quite deeply lessoned in reciting the litany. I mean we call it 'the litany' but these are just sequences of sound – I know that now. They are in a language: they are in Avestan, a kind of early Pahlavi dialect, but their meaning was located in the sound of them. So it was rooted in how they were said. Of course we're just talking about reverberations and the power of repetition and the strength of the resonance and your tone and things like that. So since a child I was trained to recite these very long mantras, essentially mantras are just sounds but the closest translation of the Sanskrit word, which is 'mantra', is 'spell' in English, it's the noun 'spell'. And the term originally comes from a Persian word, it has Persian roots, and it means, and it signifies a formula that the repetition of will dispel diseases or illnesses or negativity and bring forth positivity and blessings. My grandparents were immigrants to Yemen. Although we come from Yemen my grandparents actually don't, originally we're Iranian and my father's parents are from India but Zoroastrian Indians are called Parsis. So my ancestry is Zoroastrian, which is from Iran, from Persia, and it's a very, very, very old religion. It's a kind of the beginning of the Judeo-Christian tradition of religion, i.e. monotheistic, but it's very, very close, still very close to paganism and animism and the very, very rooty, earthy origins. The reason why I even mentioned my childhood is because I think it's important in terms of – the way that we think about sound in the West is really connected to meaning of the words, you know, a very, sort of, literary: 'What do we understand by the words that are said to us?' And what I think I learnt as a child was that the sounds of the utterances, were believed to have this magical effect when they were uttered with the right intent. So you know, the ancients were really sure of this magical effect of the mantras and so am I, and the key is in the vibration. And even now, even when I'm working with things that are so far removed from shamanic ritual practices, to this day I still listen out for this vibration in everything that we do and if I don't hear it, then it's out. It doesn't make it into the work. Because even though it might be like meaningless gibberish what's interesting about the meaningless gibberishness of it is that the priests who taught me and my grandmother and everyone, for example, didn't really know what they were saying, really. It was unintelligible to them. And it's been handed down for centuries, orally and unintelligibly, and that's how it can create this transcendental mood because you have to go beyond meaning in a way that working with modern languages can never escape, you can never escape from that. So even now when I'm using my voice on the voice overs or when I'm training the actors, I'm always, always searching for this quality, for this reverberation. Working with my voice in that way as maybe not a healing force, but certainly a sort of calming force or one that engages, you know.

DR: How did you enter those circles of working with Grotowski and [those] ways of training?

PJM: I met Jonathan Grieve. He had been trained by Jola Cynkutis and she was the wife of Zbigniew Cynkutis from the Theatre Lab in Poland. She became our main reference. Jonathan was already into experimental music and he was with Contrastate and so I was around those kinds of post-punk, industrial movement, experimental noise scenes, but really through him. He was absolutely the gateway to that world. I wasn't at all privy to any of that. I didn't have contact with any of that before I met him.

DR: When abouts was this?

PJM: That was, like, '94.

DR: Okay. So obviously when you discovered the legacy of Grotowski's work you found ways of understanding or re-incorporating that personal experience.

PJM: Yeah. We were an ensemble group called Para Active and Jonathan was at that point the director but very quickly I also became the leader of training and we worked collaboratively in running the



company, running the ensemble.

DR: Yes, and I remember you saying on one occasion how this was a very rigorous training, and there was a discipline underscoring this particular way of working that then translated into how you work when you don't work with that particular heritage.

PJM: It was extremely hardcore. We were working in really difficult spaces because we didn't have money, so it was all on concrete floors and things like that and we were throwing our bodies around in this kind of search for some sort of authenticity. And we worked very long hours and we were very strict and very disciplined. We accepted anyone who wanted to come and work with us because mostly people couldn't, didn't stay; the ensemble that stayed were people who were very tough, and it was the sort of situation where if you weren't bleeding in the warm up you weren't working hard enough. So our entry levels were really, really high and it was very tough physically. And so we worked a lot with the body, and how we carried that aspect through – I mean when I then started working with Jorge I think he adopted that. I mean I think that he can talk about that but that was something that I definitely brought to our collaboration, which wasn't very easy, especially at that point then, working in a Brazilian context where people are a little bit chilled.

DR: So is there a direct significance of the post-punk context to this particular work of Para Active as a company? What was the sort of synergy between the post-punk experimental music scene and the Grotowskian system of training?

PJM: Well, I think that there was always this tension between discipline and spontaneity, between the rigour of the form and the kind of responsiveness to the moment. So we worked a lot with these tensions and, with the Grotowski work, what we were seeing is that it can be quite – I've seen so much work that has been inspired by Grotowski, which is mannered and, sort of, sedate, and it is repetitive but it's also a bit careful somehow, and we were absolutely not that. I think what we had taken from a post-punk context was: 'what is freedom?' So there's a lot of entanglement with a kind of a strange healing but we were really healing ourselves through noise, through explosive and overstated – whatever the opposite of understated is – this kind of exaggerated sound fields where things could get very clashy and very dissonant. And we were looking specifically for those contradictions and we were working in those tensions and we weren't afraid to go to those places where it could be very – you know – ugly, in the sense that there is this idea that violence can't be healing and I think we wanted to provoke that, like: 'Is that true?' Because both Jonathan and I were very influenced by rave culture and gig culture, and especially Jonathan was involved with experimental sound and music and bands that were pushing the edges of what even could be considered music, if things can still be considered music after a certain BPM or after a certain intensity! So we were pushing those edges I think, but that stuff came much more from Jonathan's background than it did from mine.

DR: Is there anything to say about any formal training or education that might have fed into this? Was there any other kind of educational context that might have facilitated those connections you were making with people that you were working with?

PJM: I didn't go to drama school. I didn't go to anything like that. It was very off the street, just cobbled together, a group of people. Some people had drama school training I think, but a lot of us just randomly crashed into Para Active. One thing that was really formal is that we did train quite rigorously in methodologies: so for the voice and stuff we were very following the line of Zygmunt Molik and taking this voice training which was super located in the body. Across all of this time I've been working with different people who represent different phases of the Grotowski timeline because you know, he had a lot of different movements. So I also worked with the early Teatro Laboratorium, with Rena [Mirecka] and then of course Jola's connection to it was in that phase as well, and Zygmunt Molik. And then I also worked with Teatro Sol, the Haitian Maud Robart, who was a trainer in the Grotowski centre for a long time, but she was very much at the Theatre of Sources stage. I did a lot work with her and that was really important in terms of vibration, in terms of that kind of style of working through the spine and the ritual, Haitian ritual aspects. And then later I worked with quite a lot with people like [Ang] Gey Ping and also another guy called Jorge – Jorge Parente, who was the main student of Zygmunt Molik. So throughout that whole phase I had a lot of connections with different phases of Grotowski and all of them were very voice-based, it was always very voice-based. Even when I went to the Workcenter [of



Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards] I always worked with them on this text that I had learnt as a child, I always was developing it.

DR: Great. Thank you so much. Shall we move to this Jorge now and hear about your journey, Jorge, from Brazil to London? What were your early exposures to performance and what was it that determined your interest in this particular form of creative expression?

Jorge Lopez Ramos: I was in Rio until I was 18, 19, and then I came to the UK. And I think one of the strongest references early on for me would have been my father because not only was he in TV, soaps, film, cinema as an actor, as a director, as a writer. He grew up in the '60s and '70s, and in Brazil all the TV was made by a very small number of people. It was all live, so they all had to rotate, they all had to write, they had to direct, they had to perform. And he was very politically engaged with the set up the Workers Party in the late '70s, early '80s. So his work was inseparable from the dictatorship in Brazil. And I was born at a time where he couldn't register me straightaway otherwise they might find where he was hiding through my registration of birth. So inevitably one way or another, his activities, his stances were very influential, whether or not I was conscious at the time. Then later on I never really fitted in culturally – because of my appearance, because of my connection or not with the culture. I never had many friends, we moved a lot in Rio from school to school. So I guess my first engagement with performing was as a kind of way to become this joker person, to distract attention from the awkwardness – and I was very overweight as well and I used to be bullied for that. My performance persona started to develop as a way to distract attention from myself and into this entertainer. Then I got involved in youth theatre, but I think one of my first strong references was [Augusto] Boal. When I went to work for a short course with Boal and his company in Rio I realised how externally – out of Brazil – there was an enormous respect for his work and the work of the Theatre of the Oppressed, and yet in Brazil there was a huge disdain from the arts scene and theatre scene, dismissing it as 'not theatre'. It wasn't artful enough, it wasn't aesthetic enough, it was about social impact and that means that: 'Oh, very nice but it's not really theatre.' And I remember that really surprising me: that whatever they were doing and the value of what they were doing could somehow be dismissed because of this higher understanding of something that they weren't part of. And I guess with Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, with capoeira martial arts, an artform that I got involved with as a teenager in Brazil and trained, and later on with Japanese butoh dance in my 20s – I think these are kind of artforms from outsiders. They're things that look a bit weird, don't quite fit into the culture that they were created, and they are a sort of form of resistance, as well. So I think I was attracted to those forms because they weren't the established norm of what art was or what everyone else was doing. I was very interested in those artforms and ended up spending a very long time working with capoeira and butoh just before I met Jadé and one of our links was the interest in physical training and various cultural contexts for training. That was how we first met, at a kind of a training course for capoeira Angola with a common master we had. But I guess I came to the UK to study, and I came to a specific course at a specific college, which was European Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford College and the course had just been created – there was no legacy. It was created by someone called Emilio Romero, who's long left the university and the team. And it was in that course that I was exposed to not just the work of Grotowski – in bite-size form, nothing at all like what Jadé has just mentioned – but also Tadeusz Kantor, Laban and so on, it was a very expansive course in terms of dipping your toes into a number of very interesting methodologies. So I guess it was a kind of parallel journey of these things that I was very attracted to and then the course itself. And because I couldn't really find common ground with my colleagues in the year that I was in in my course, I didn't feel satisfied that the work was going deep enough. And also if you come from another country you are really trying to make the most of that moment and that course, and I guess my colleagues were very young, and they weren't quite sure why they were there. So I started my company from my first year in order to be able to explore all the things I couldn't within the course. So there were these two parallel journeys of the course going alongside the development of the company.

DR: And was that Zecora Ura?

JLR: That was Zecora Ura, yeah. The company that I started was based at Rose Bruford, and when we started a new project, we'd do a call out and we'd have people from the lighting design course, from the acting course, from the actor musicianship, from the European performance arts from another year,



from costume design. So it was like an experimental company that for every new project we would set up a kind of line of enquiry or start from a text or a space or whatever, and then devise the production from there.

DR: What does Zecora Ura mean?

JLR: 'Zecora' is the Latin for 'zebra', and 'ura' is the Basque for 'running water', but also the Japanese for 'the hidden side'. Not that that was our intention, we just found out that later after we made up the name randomly, but strangely enough it reflected those two interests, which were the Japanese butoh training and the Brazilian capoeira Angola training at the time, which ended up being the meeting point between Zecora Ura and Para Active, that ended up merging, and was also the meeting point for the training that we started to establish for *Hotel Medea* and that Jadé started to write based not just on those trainings but also on research that we did in the north east of Brazil.

[00:24:35] A CONFLUENCE OF INFLUENCES

DR: Okay. So let's spend a little more time on that meeting: how did the two of you meet and decide to then pursue this path together?

JLR: So Zecora Ura had come out of a very successful UK tour of a production called *The Tempest*, or *La Tempestade*, which was a mixture of pidgin language, English, Spanish, Shakespeare English, French, Portuguese, restaging of *The Tempest* with three performers. And we were collaborating with Gabriel Gawin at that moment, who is also involved in some of the crossover legacies that we've mentioned today. Gabriel directed that after we'd done a year of research in Brazil. And then we toured several venues and it was a very successful format, it was a very successful piece, but I guess a big moment for me was the understanding that if you wanted to grow your company or develop professionally, you'd do something like that – like *The Tempest*, like we did – and then when all those festivals and venues who hosted it asked you to do something again they'd ask you to do something very similar: 'A bit more of the same, please.'

DR: So you decided the next piece wasn't going to be the same as *The Tempest* because you wanted to defy those expectations?

JLR: Not necessarily defy those expectations but just work on something else, investigate something else. Jadé and I had met by that point and even though *The Tempest* tour was running its course we were already talking about this idea of an overnight thing – we weren't sure exactly what it was. We started with overnight training ideas, overnight workshops, overnight – poetically, what that period was between sunset and sunrise... So we were already really interested in that. And also Jadé was working a lot at the time, or had been working at the time, but we were talking about: 'What's expected of a woman from another country? How violent are women allowed to be?' – a number of questions around womanhood. Around those two moments is when we started sketching [it] out, and then when we realised we wanted to make something that was going to be very ambitious and neither company could do it alone – which was *Hotel Medea* – we decided that we had to work together. We had to combine those forces otherwise it was going to be impossible to make. When I went back to those venues and those festivals saying: 'Oh, I know that you liked *The Tempest*, but now the next thing is an overnight theatre show from midnight to dawn', they all pulled out with the exception of one who gave us a little bit of R&D money and was very worried but supportive.

DR: Which one was that?

JLR: That was Salisbury International Festival at the time.

DR: What was the year of your meeting? Just so we get a foothold in where we are in the narrative.

JLR: 2005/2006. We met before, 2004, but 2005/2006 was kind of a more intense experience.

DR: Jadé, is that your story as well or do you have a slightly different take on those events and the meeting?

PJM: Yeah. I mean, I guess we were just coming from really, really opposite places. It's funny hearing Jorge talk about it because actually I think we were coming from the fact that we were just working so hard and so non-stop for zero support and we weren't well versed at all in how to get support. We were



not connected, we just didn't have a producer brain in the ensemble. And the last thing that I did with Para Active I think would have been [*The Zoo-oid Fight Night Experience*], is that right Jorge? That would have been the last thing, right?

JLR: Yeah.

PJM: So that was just the most incredible show, a show that I am so proud of that – I don't know how many people saw – I mean, very few. We took it to Edinburgh and that was an absolute disaster. It was really misunderstood and slated as this show of racism and stuff. It was really wild! That was a very, very disastrous experience. Especially what we're talking about in terms of that post-punk aesthetic and just being very aggressive and violent, but also not wanting to be theatre that was so – a bit like what Jorge was talking about with *The Tempest*, where there was this hyper-acceptability about the work, and we were really fighting for being provocative and wanting to reframe certain issues, especially diversity, like racial diversity. But you know, everyone was not getting any recompense whatsoever, we all had other kinds of jobs, a lot of us were on the dole, I was on the dole, we were getting housing benefit and stuff. Those were the days where you could still just about do that, I think it was probably the last phase of the welfare system that would support artists, I was in the last phase of that. The work was insanely good, but it destroyed us. At that point in Para Active we were still continuing with the Grotowski training but we had met Guillermo Gómez-Peña – and we found in him the right way to speak to the world in terms of all the clashes that we were experiencing in our lives. So we wanted to be really bold and I think in Guillermo's work we were able to take that performance art aspect of just being very in the here and now. We had all the training from the world of Grotowski, all the physical training and the rigour, but we were putting it in this very, very performance art format with a show called *Zoo-oid Fight Night Experience*. But it was impossible to speak about, it was really difficult to have a vocabulary. We just weren't very good at getting out there and schmoozing and we didn't have the right tools really, and the company just fell apart after that. It was very, very implosive, it failed dramatically in Edinburgh. And so when I picked myself up off the floor and dusted myself off a bit and started to work with Jorge I just wanted to go back to – you know, something smaller. Which then ended up being *Hotel Medea*, which is crazy!

[00:31:27 to 00:34:16] 'I Put a Spell on You' from *Hotel Medea*, Chapter 3: *Feast of Dawn* (2008-2012)

JPM: Meeting Jorge – in a way, we kind of met in the middle, I think. We'd come from slightly opposite directions where I'd come from incredible verticality in terms of the training and the knowledge building – it was very, very on the vertical axis – and Jorge was very, very lateral. He was really like 'anything goes' in the sense that: 'Yes, I can bring something from here and mix it with this and create this', and he was working on a lateral plain. And so we met in this crossing of the two plains: my verticality and his horizontality.

DR: Great, that's a lovely way of putting it! So you decided to make *Medea*. How long did it take to create this show and to make it a kind of participatory piece of theatre that became a definitive piece of what has been problematically referred to as immersive theatre?

JLR: There are two things I wanted to mention that go into that question. One is that Jadé had said [that] in a similar way to her experience in Para Active there was no producer, there was no network of influence or privilege or connections that could take that work that was in itself deep and excellent into an opportunity, to a platform, to growth, to funding. I arrived to the UK with no relatives or friends and there was no one to ask for favours. So by the time we met this sensation that it doesn't matter if you keep working like a maniac and saying yes to everything, that it isn't enough. There's something that we haven't managed to access for different reasons, from our different experiences, but certainly privileges that we lacked compared to a number of other individuals and organisations that we could see were managing to do all sorts of things or get all sorts of gigs. And I think it was at that moment that I realised that I wanted to do something different where however long it took – and *Hotel Medea* took six years to make – but however long it took that we made sure that we were making the right efforts. It doesn't mean that we succeeded – we succeeded in many ways and failed in many others – but that we were very much aware of that resistance, of that lack of access, and to get *Hotel Medea* from nothing to what then it became it took six years of not doing anything else or talking about anything



else: 'This is what we're doing, this is what we're doing, this is what we're doing', and rejection after rejection. One of the first things that we heard from one of the venues was: 'There is no audience for this kind of work.' And it was persistence and just 'well...' and then you see. But the other thing was about why do an overnight event? And Jadé and I were, in different experiences, running a lot of workshops. There was this late '90s/early 2000s workshop culture, workshop festivals and masters coming from abroad and running workshops. And I remember Jadé saying how problematic she felt it was that this relationship between a training legacy and a workshop that people put in their CV: 'Oh, I've done this training', because they had done a two-day workshop with someone who was really weakening, emptying and thinning what was potentially very meaningful work. So at that moment not only were we re-thinking our relationship with audiences, we were re-thinking our relationships with peers, with students. And we created that at the same time as we wanted to develop *Hotel Medea*, something called the DRIFT Residency. And the DRIFT Residency was a shift from open workshops where you pay, you attend, and you get what you'd paid for, to an engagement where you had to come with a project, you could not come empty-handed. So any participant from any artistic discipline could come but they had to be responsible for this project of theirs, so we had a more adult relationship with everyone that was there. At the end of the day they had to be responsible for their work, they had to present their work, they had to develop their work, they had to defend their work. And with *Hotel Medea* it was a similar thing but with audiences. If someone says: 'Yes, I'll stay awake from midnight until dawn with this company that I've never heard of, with this work that I don't know what it's about', that means they've already made a massive leap. We meet at midnight not with a passer-by, we meet with someone who's gone: 'I'm here, what are we doing?' So the level of commitment was completely different. And I think at that moment – it's completely different to what we are doing now, but at that moment we were interested in that level of meeting, of people who were coming with responsibility, with commitment, with presence. They were there. They're ready, they're here. Whatever their ability, they were present.

[00:38:48] A JOURNEY OF DETERMINATION: *HOTEL MEDEA* (2008-2012)

DR: And what was the first overnight performance that you did? When was it?

JLR: In 2008 we did our first test run at Salisbury International Festival. It's almost impossible to compare what then *Hotel Medea* became, but it was the first time that we were actually a group of people and we went until the morning. 2006 in Australia was the first overnight workshop. We were doing various overnight invitations to people to stay awake for the night.

PJM: At Oval House, I remember something at Oval House. Do you remember that?

JLR: Overnight. Yeah. But I think 2008 was the first time where we named it *Hotel Medea* and people who came had a ticket and we said: 'Let's see what this feels like.' It wasn't ready at all.

DR: It wasn't? And how did you emerge with that realisation that it wasn't ready?

PJM: Oh, we didn't realise that it wasn't ready, we knew it wasn't ready.

DR: No, I'm just thinking about this journey of determination of how you knew that you had to overcome all the producers saying: 'No, it will never work', and you nonetheless kept going until it became the huge success that it was, a sell-out success, as I was reminded reading your article on post-immersive theatre, people were actually touting tickets at the door.

PJM: Outside, yeah.

DR: What was this journey of determination actually like? How did you incorporate any learning experiences along the way around making performance in this way, was there already a beginning of an interest in sound there?

PJM: Yeah. I mean with the *Hotel Medea* the sound that I was going back to came from the northeast of Brazil. So when I went there with Jorge to do some research and just to hang out really, to see, we were going to overnight rituals and it was in the north east of Brazil that we were looking at cavalo marinho, maracatu and bumba meu boi. So these are three different worlds, universes, of different rituals with different stories with different Afro-Brazilian heritages and different religions attached,



different instruments attached, and different patterns of beats. And all of them we were influenced by, all of those we took lots of things from: the patternings, the way of dealing with audiences where, obviously, where there was no stage or auditorium, where it was an event, a meeting, an encounter. So I think that that backdrop gave us confidence because I had seen it, I'd grown up with it, Jorge had grown up with it, I knew it could work, we just needed to get it right, that was all. We just needed to lock it in and it all became about the invite. It was all located in the invite: how do we do this and invite people in the right way? And in the beginning we invited people in the wrong way, and that's where the mistakes were made and that's where the learning occurred and that's when we had to also translate cultural norms between, in a very crude way I can say 'hot cultures' – like mine and Jorge's, because I'm Arab and he's Brazilian – and 'not hot cultures', not as hot. So the body is different and the way of interacting, human to human interaction is different, stranger upon stranger, negotiations, spatial negotiations. Just all of that had to be – things we knew inherently in our bodies had to be translated into a training to actors, to how to treat people. Things we knew, things we had grown up with, had to now be related, and I think in terms of immersivity our work was only really immersive on this layer and that's where I feel a lot of things get it super, super wrong because they do not have the depth of body experience that we were coming from.

[00:43:13 too 00:46:56] Excerpt from *Hotel Medea, Chapter I: Zero Hour Market (2008-2012)*

JLR: And also because we had previous experiences with how work can be exoticised to a Western audience the last thing we wanted was to transpose some folkloric-sounding work from Brazil and plonk it on a London stage. That was the last thing we wanted. We worked with the masters and we committed to having a half-Brazilian cast because we wanted to have a complex set of languages and modes, so *Hotel Medea* wouldn't only be operating on the exotic level, it operated on a number of layers. So it became this mammoth operation because we wanted to get it right. We invited DJ Dolores as well to create the soundtrack, and DJ Dolores has a history of political engagement with folkloric traditions and his music is predominantly digital, it has been for a long time, electronic music, the early Brazilian electronic music. So we were looking for these complexities and that's when we started working in technology – in terms of communication technology – with the audience, because we knew that having this very strong, deep, 'heat' element of the ritual, the participatory rituals, the gestures, the kind of overwhelming sensations that the audiences would feel because as Jadé said we knew they would work on a human physical level, needed to be also accompanied and followed by very nuanced other ways of interacting to carry them through the night, because we were there for six hours – you couldn't just keep on going for six hours on the same beat! And that's when we started also looking at instruction-based work, so sound and audio became not just the voice, the singing, the speaking voice, which was already there, not only the percussive rhythms that carried the rituals through the night but then were there, or the DJed exchange with audiences, they started to become also instruction-based, game design-based, rule-based – structured so that we can have the audience experience something entirely new every few minutes, so they never feel like something is stuck during that whole period.

PJM: Yeah. And it was also there that we started looking at modern communication tools, wasn't it? In *Hotel Medea* that would allow for new methods of interaction between the audience and the artist.

JLR: From 2006 we started experimenting a lot more with mobile phones, with closed circuit TV...

PJM: In terms of storytelling, in terms of narrative itself, it was not only about how game playing might be taken out of a physical environment and put into people's phones – facilitated via phones –but also how narrative and storytelling might result out of that. So like Jorge told, those communication tools – I think that's really the beginning of when we started working with things like telecommunications, text, really low, low, low, low, low-fi stuff, very ubiquitously.

JLR: And we used to talk at that time, from 2006 onwards – I remember us talking about not just being site-specific but audience-specific and time-specific. And so the time-specificity of midnight to dawn, the audience-specificity in terms of how does my experience of a mobile mirror Medea's experience of a mobile and Jason's experience of his mobile, how does that become intimate? Not just as a funky tool but where the technology becomes invisible. It's so integrated with the meaning of what's happening that I don't see the technology anymore, it just becomes another layer for me to enter this universe.



DR: Is there a way in which we can talk maybe about this process of translating a ritual from one culture, i.e. Brazil, where you spent time engaging with different kinds of rituals with the local communities, to another kind of ritual in what we might call a 'cooler' culture by opposition to the 'hot' culture? So what does the ritual in a 'cooler' culture consist of, and how did that process of translation work for you?

JLR: I remember this guy – it's just an anecdote, sorry. This guy, I don't know if you remember, after the first test we did in Salisbury – maybe he was in his 60s, almost 70s, glasses, he looked like someone who went to the theatre every week – and he finished *Zero Hour Market*, which was the first part, which was the most, let's say 'Brazilian', in terms of the amount of content from various researches in Brazil. And at the end he said: 'At first I didn't really understand what was happening and then I realised – the moment I realised I was Brazilian. Oh! Then I—'

PJM: 'Then I relaxed!'

JLR: Yeah! And then I thought: 'Well, that wasn't our intention.' But what that exposed is that permission. What he meant by: 'When I understood I was Brazilian', was another way of saying: 'Well, when I was given permission to behave in this way, I loved it.' So our thinking was: 'Okay, how do we give people permission to participate, to behave not just in the way that they're expected to in their culture, but in other ways?'

DR: Jadé, you mentioned earlier the fact that when you were working with Para Active you were working in this context of the rave culture and so on. Was there any level of translating that particular experience into this particular show?

PJM: Yeah, actually. It's quite hard to pull back out of the dredges of my memory but for sure, because we were very into – and I still am – very into bass sounds. Bass sounds as a way of exciting the nervous system, right? So working on sound just on that level, and the patterning of the beats, like the repetitive... You know, in terms of rave music, you've got this repetition, and in *Hotel Medea* we've got a working repetition of the drumming, which again is something that is completely linked, it's a way of keeping – certain drumbeats can keep people awake all night. That's on a neurological level, on a psychoneurological level we're working with those patterns. And where Para Active left off is that although we were creating this huge gladiatorial game pit, or sort of boxing ring, and you have audiences that are booing one character and cheering another and we're trying to get them excited – they were still audiences, even if they were in the performing arena they were still always audiences. Whereas what Jorge and I started to work with was a lot different, was the fact that we were in the here and now and that we were sharing the same pulse, we're sharing the same breath, we're taking the same oxygen and we're sweating next to each other. But I'm not just doing that thing of – well maybe we did in bits of *Hotel Medea*, we did do that thing of: 'We're acting and we're just acting really close to you and somehow that should be meaningful', which it isn't, right? But it was [a matter of] how to change people's behaviours and I think that one of the biggest surprises to me as a Brit now is that I was really surprised at how little, if you did it in the right way, how little it took to unlock British audiences' sense of play, sense of wildness, sense of exposure, vulnerability, risk. Because the way I was approaching it was all wrong, which was something like: 'Oh, you know, this is how people do it in these other cultures and now we have to just teach, we have to just bring it to England and then once we've taught them the right way to do it...', as if there was something wrong with them! And that was the wrong way round because actually it just made us work much harder to find out the exact technical points of entry we needed to unlock an incredible amount – I mean audiences are always, always, always underestimated and we learnt that. That was our lesson: do not estimate the audiences and what they will do and how far they will go.

DR: And what was the secret formula that unlocked that?

PJM: Lots of different things: physicality, we work a lot with physicality, with space, with instruction, the right instruction, with never bullying, with mirroring techniques. I mean there's lots, it just depends on the context. We're working with this across many, many different orbits, like we're working in the orbit of sound – so what kinds of sounds, what kinds of presence, what does the actor need to be doing? I think there was a lot of actor training in how to stop acting and just be a human being that is making an invite to another human being, and I think we were really at the beginning of forging a vocabulary



around that sort of invitation language, which I think from what I hear now is becoming more commonplace, but then, nobody was working like that, and we were kind of building the plane as we were flying it. The problem really was that I was in the show – so I was directing the show as well as being in the show, and so through the show I would be going: ‘Okay, that didn’t work, that didn’t work, we have to do–’ And I would have to remember many different types of how the actor had to use improvisation, had to use their voice, had to use their breath, how to be in touch with people, the level of touch, this was a huge thing, which was to just get an invite. Maybe you could say that we were at the right moment because you’re still in that slightly dirty, dodgy phase where we were taking liberties with audiences that I wouldn’t now, not at all! But in those days because it was all a bit punky, anything went. So I could just arrive and start taking my clothes off in front of an audience member and they were like: ‘Aaah!’, and I’d be like: ‘Aaah, here we are! I’m doing my stuff and you’re just having to, you know, you’ve paid for it!’ [*Laughter.*] So it was lots of different, lots and lots of different ways of interacting with audiences meant that there were lots and lots and lots of different techniques for different moments or the situations that we were creating, each one required a nuanced and detailed and specific approach.

JLR: And the thing that became necessary and very clear for *Hotel Medea* and everything else that we did since is testing and testing and testing. One of the many problems around the overproduction of so-called immersive work is the speed at which it’s demanded and the lack of experience and ethics behind it. And when something is tested or rehearsed, it’s done for the very people of privilege to whom usually that belongs. And so you have something made and consumed and tested by the same people and then wonder why it doesn’t connect to a wider audience, why it doesn’t work. So we’ve committed – we did at the time, we’ve tested Brazil and the UK and tested in Brazil and tested in the UK and tested in Brazil and tested in the UK with different audiences, different venues, at different times, exactly so we wouldn’t assume anything. We would be developing with the people this was by and for: we would be constantly engaging in this, and any problematic thing that would emerge – excellent! We would address it in the next test and so on. So by the time *Hotel Medea* was what it was, it couldn’t not be that. It couldn’t not have worked in that way because it’s only the result of that iteration after iteration after iteration after iteration. So how do you do that without having that amount of infrastructure, expenditure, a model that in terms of business doesn’t work? It worked as a piece but it can’t just be replicated so now it’s about how do you embed that testing throughout any making process that is interactive or participatory?

[00:59:00] ZU-UK IN BRAZIL

DR: Have you taken any of your work back to those Brazilian communities that have, in a way, given you some tools to discover these horizontal ways of interacting with the audience?

PJM: Yeah. We work in Brazil all the time. At the moment, in fact, we work with a project in a favela in Belo Horizonte and that’s phenomenal because we work with a group of young people who are very, very gender-fluid and concerned with LGBT issues and they’re sort of trapped between religiosity of the evangelical churches, and between the police, and between gang culture. So it’s projects that are deeply meaningful to us. And what we tend to do is just share stuff with them so that they also then make workshops – we’re quite keen for them to be leaders in an educating capacity, so it’s about sharing tools. So I would say that that’s our main thing at the moment with Brazil. Would you say something different, Jorge?

JLR: Yeah. I think, as Jadé just said, one of the shocks of doing *Hotel Medea* at the Hayward Gallery, as well as the touts selling tickets outside, was: who isn’t able to access this work? And when we realised that we had spent that long time making it that so many people, ourselves included, had devoted so much of our lives, lives that we didn’t spend with our young children, that we didn’t spend with loved ones, money that we didn’t have, why isn’t it available to those that we would very much like to experience it? So we stopped to take stock. That’s when we merged Para Active and Zecora Ura into ZU-UK and we took some time away and we didn’t go out and make any work and we didn’t go out and exchange anything. We just sat and reflected and tried to understand what can we extract from this learning and not replicate a model that doesn’t work, that is exploitative to others and to ourselves?



So it was from a few years after *Hotel Medea* we started going back more regularly to Brazil, and also to Colombia, working with vulnerable artists in areas that are usually not supported or very barely supported in terms of artistic development, and do projects that shared methodologies and also equipment for makers who had an interest in interactivity but didn't have the tools, didn't have the equipment – they couldn't afford the equipment. And also with this group in another favelinha in Belo Horizonte where we would run workshops and go like: 'From this, is any of this relevant to you?'

PJM: It was sound, wasn't it? Because they were really into – they were mostly interested in how we were using headphones because of their DJing stuff. So that was the main issue.

JLR: Exactly. So then we left a set of headphones, wireless headphones, we taught them how to use it and then some tools, and then were like: 'What do you make with this?' And now they're creating, mainly for sustainable fashion, this kind of income through sustainable fashion and performance – they use some of that equipment.

DR: What is sustainable fashion?

PJM: So what happens is that in Brazil very little gets thrown away anyway but things that do get thrown away – in the favela they started a project, and we worked with them on a project called Garota Hacker, which is the name of our collaboration with them, to create a new fashion line out of found and discarded clothes. So that's what the sustainable element is and the work that we did with them specifically was just about upskilling and also platforming. And they're already really ahead in terms of being on Instagram, and they're all over it. But what we were bringing was a little more of a backbone. They were already running a Favelinha Fashion Week, which was a fashion show. It's a fashion show and it's only called Favelinha Fashion Week because they didn't know what 'week' meant in English, they just heard it, that 'Fashion Week, Fashion Week'. So they used this for the name of the event, which is the catwalking event, and then the favelas, you know what the favelas are like, they have lots of narrow alleyways and passageways, and so they would use these alleyways and passageways as if it was the catwalk itself. That's the project that we do with them and they've come over to London as well and we've done stuff.

JLR: Bristol.

PJM: In London and Bristol. Yeah.

[01:03:51] MAKING #RIOFONEHACK (2015)

DR: So the next big show was *#RioFoneHack*, which you did in 2015 in the Olympic Park.

PJM: Yeah. That's right.

DR: Tell us about that. What was the idea there? What was the intention and how did you—?

PJM: So it came out of another show called *Humble Market*, and we did *Humble Market* for the Olympics in Preston in the North West of England and in Belo Horizonte actually funnily enough, Belo Horizonte in Brazil. *Humble Market* was this amazing show where we were using lots and lots of different kinds of vehicles: so there was a huge empty landscape and then these vehicles would come in, and at that time I was thinking about it on a much more British level. I was thinking about an ice cream van and the sounds that it makes, the ambulance, a limousine – really kind of iconic vehicles. But then the funding we got was, I think, across countries or something like that, which made that idea not quite as fitting. We did a version there, we did a version here, and we used a Rio taxi, we had a shaman in a van, we had dancing gorillas and a rave moment and a limousine—

JLR: A big church.

PJM: And a church. One of the things that we made was we managed to get hold of some – I don't how, this is so random – but some telephone boxes in Rio. We worked with somebody called Alastair Eilbeck here, who's a Manchester-based artist and we still work together, and we just wanted to basically hack this phone. I just wanted to put an experience inside the phone that would ring and you pick up and there's some kind of interaction. So that's how it started – as one pillar in a five-pillared piece called *Humble Market*. So we took that out and started working on it alone, because it didn't require any actors you see. It was at a moment when we needed to be a little bit more quiet. So it was



something that I could work on, I didn't have to work with actors and didn't have to have that physical presence of other people – but we wanted to start making work for public space as well. And at that time the Olympics was handing over between England and Brazil so it was an obvious link. And the phone is very, very iconic – the Brazilian phone, it has a very specific look. The *orelhão* [public phone booth] was this big – you know like a kind of, I don't know if you've seen those – I think they might have them in America as well, but they're like an oyster-shaped shell and then you stand inside the shell. We just got to work really, started working on it, and developing these pieces that were responsive to site, and it was all about the audience member being, you know, the participant being at the phone and what they could see and what they could experience and me writing something that was totally unique to that spot, to that exact coordinate in the world. And we had one next to a river, so we made it more of a meditation on the river. We had one on a bridge, so we made it about measurements and things like the measurements of experience, and then the other one was about in the middle of the hill thing. Yeah. And that was a Brazilification, that was much more of a light-hearted one. So we had these three phones. The thing about the phone, the very cool thing about the phone, is that we were working with just basically motion sensors and linking it to, in the beginning Arduino, but then we moved to Raspberry Pi, and we were just making it that when a person walked past it, they would trigger it and then it would ring. First of all the artwork already happened because it was there and it was just so weird: a Brazilian phone in the middle of the Olympic Park. And then the second thing, second layer, second mode of interaction would be this phone ringing; and then the third would be picking it up. And then we also made versions which integrated, which triggered an actor. So you'd be on the phone and then halfway through the phone call there'd be this person and the person would get very, very discombobulated between what's happening and this stranger and it would be a very intense experience. I think that is the exact point where all my work is located, in this sort of: 'Wait, wait, what's happening?', this, sort of layers, of slippages in your perception triggering these very multi-modal effects. So you don't quite know what way up you are and what you're hearing and what's real and what's not real. And so *#RioFoneHack* is one that we've continued – there's still one up at the moment in Trinity Buoy Wharf, for example, and we've done it in various places. But they're very useful because they are very quietly political, I think that's why they're one of my favourite artworks really. Because my voice and the way that it starts is all very unassuming, but then it starts to get quite edgy and can be either uncomfortable on an emotional level or it starts to get uncomfortable politically. Like, with the Olympic Park I didn't expect them to be so involved in the script and I thought I was going to get away with a lot more than I did eventually get away with. They did veto a lot of my stuff and they sent the script back and they said: 'There's no way you're going to be saying this.' I was a bit shocked. So Jorge did a really great job of negotiating between us and it was hard because the land is very contested, you know?

JLR: We managed to – out of 14 requests to change, I think we only had to change one! One thing from *Hotel Medea* to *#RioFoneHack* is that you have this entry point for *Hotel Medea* which is really high, where you not only had to purchase a ticket but you have to risk this whole night out. It's a time when most of us are most vulnerable, not sleeping, not knowing what's going to happen in order to access that artwork. With this one, if you walked past and it rang and you decided to pick up, that's all you needed. So I think there was, as Jadé just said, this wanting to go to public spaces to find out what do we gain, what do we lose and what strategies can we use with a passer-by? Is it possible to have a meaningful engagement with someone who wasn't expecting to find an artwork? And maybe someone who will leave that phone and still not call it an artwork and yet have engaged with it meaningfully and talked to others about it in their own way. So I think that was a big shift in that way and every work since then has predominantly been about the public space.

DR: So this line of your work that is about engaging with the public space or intervening in it. What's the political, ideological background of the way in which you do this sort of work in public space?

PJM: I don't know if there's one defining thing. I would say that it probably, like Jorge said, I think that there was an idea that – once we got to Southbank I think that there was probably just a little bit of an awakening there for me in particular where I saw that the audiences were so of one type. There was a kind of eliteness and over-privileged, very, very white, very, very middle class and I was looking around and it was that question of: 'When did my world get so white?' And I think that zipping all the way back from being there with that demographic of audiences to suddenly wanting to make work in the public



space was part of that revolt against that. It was very, very new for me because I was really having a change of focus, like I had really – not Jorge, because Jorge already was making a lot of, doing a lot of public artwork stuff when I met him – but my work, coming from that Grotowski canon, was all very controlled and you want to protect the energy and protect the space and there's a sort of like a sacredness to it and there needs to be a formality around in the space and out the space. I found it very difficult to move into that realm. I think for me the Olympic Park was my first moment of being really confronted with politics and art in quite a brutal, confronting way that from then on really I was always looking at this public versus private domains. And since then we're quite interested in POPS, which are 'privately owned public spaces', and why and how they mean for us as a society and how they are very, very dubious in terms of neo-liberal politics and what they mean for how we perceive the environment and what's really happening in terms of power–

JLR: Just about the private space. As Jadé was saying, that this resistance is really natural, I guess, if you come from a theatre environment. I can also see how peers and other theatre-makers might also have that embedded fear about the quality of the work or the assumption that to put something in public you have to lower the bar, that you have to do something not as good. That was very much a shift of paradigm of understanding that there are layers to anything, there are nuances, there are modes. And so, just like with the phone, you will have some engagements that are about someone admiring it from a distance and that's all they're ever going to get from that artwork. And with others there will be that moment of surprise: 'Oh, that phone's ringing for me, or is it?', and then walk away. And there are others who will take that invitation and go: 'I want more', and they will stay. With the *Binaural Dinner Date*, for example, it was about looking at a space that is not threatening to an audience: so a café, a restaurant, a shopping centre, to the majority of people this is not a threatening space. You don't need to have a sense of entitlement to enjoy those spaces. You're not going into a gallery or a theatre or even a cinema that people will feel something about those spaces, and who is allowed in them or how much it costs to get in. Whether they're paying or not, there's always a sensation of: 'Do I belong in here, who else is in here?', kind of scanning the room and feeling like: 'Is this for me?' And if you're in a café because you're drinking coffee because you're there for a meeting or you're waiting for something else, and suddenly a little opportunity is offered the fact that we dealt with a) the dating scenario, and b) the headphones, the earphones, the binaural earphones, means that there's two different access points that are very familiar and they're very little to do with art. One is you might meet someone, or you're already in a couple and you can do this together. The dating scenario might be threatening to other people but not anything to do with art. It's just – you get it: 'Oh.' And you also know that if you go into a date it might be excruciating, it might be hard and embarrassing but that's part of the universe of the date, you're signing up for that. But secondly, people are used to sitting somewhere and just listening in to something for a little bit – it doesn't feel like you have to drive it or participate or if you don't join in, it'll all collapse. Tables and chairs are also very secure, you know? You sit down, there's a table protecting you, between the two people. So there's a lot of sense of security in that particular piece, and other things in other pieces, offer a lot of reassurance to people who might otherwise not want to have anything to do with it.

[01:16:40 to 01:19:11] Excerpt from *Binaural Dinner Date* (2017)

[01:19:10] POST-IMMERSIVE THEATRE OF EMPATHY

DR: It's really interesting that your work then moves more explicitly into this territory that you talk about in your paper on post-immersive theatre that is the territory of empathy and care, and opportunity to establish some sort of communication, meaningful communication between strangers and so on. So that's kind of happening in *Binaural Dinner Date* but also more explicitly in some of the other works that you are currently developing like *Goodnight*, *Sleep Tight* and *Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight)*.

PJM: Thinking about neurophonics for a small moment. I'm just talking in a very sort of crude way, how sound affects the brain and if we believe that and if we know it to be true, how does it then affect behaviour? In terms of psychoacoustics we're talking about how sounds can connect people and also disconnect them and what sounds internalise the human. I don't know if you know what the term 'entrainment' is, but entrainment is basically where something that you're hearing or experiencing,



there'll be a shared tendency on a physical or biological system to respond in the same way. So audiences could respond to music or to beats in the same way and you can make a feature of synchronising these responses. People have done it a lot with synchronising heartbeats or their other involuntary systems, like breathing and stuff. So for example, in *East London Workers' Party* we used a lot of rhythmic Rio funk-based tracks, and they were focused on choosing particular music that were absolutely impossible to stay still to. They've got a very specific kind of attack on the involuntary systems. And in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* I also did a lot of research online and stuff, reading from sound therapy and my goal in that was completely the opposite: it was to lower and slow down the participants' blood pressure, it was to lower the stress levels obviously, but also the heart rate. And I wanted to try and take it, you know – imagine your end goal would be to take those levels to as near as possible to a death state. *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* is a VR experience that you do lying down in a bed, having been put to bed in pyjamas with hot chocolate. It also is about death – so the child's bed that you start in ends up as a sort of metaphorical death bed. And we created music and sounds and a soundscape where the participant can follow the movement and the layers in the piece, which induce this sort of dreamlike state, but their heartbeat is going to naturally slow down because our heartbeats tend to match the track's BPMs. And so what was interesting is that the length is also critical: the length of the soundtrack cannot be shorter than five minutes really, because it takes about five minutes for entrainment to occur. And in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* we also used a child's voice, a six-year-old child's voice, which has a very soft and whispery quality but it's talking about death and it has an effect, you know, these things, these sonic effects. The other thing, for example, that we used, which is opposite to what we've already spoken about today, is that there is no repeating melody. So in *Goodnight, Sleep Tight*, where you create signatures that don't repeat and that allows your brain to completely switch off, because when your brain is no longer trying to predict what comes next some part of it switches off and there's a kind of relaxation.

[01:23:04 to 01:26:45] Excerpt from *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* (2017)

PJM: How I work with sound is very physical. And then there's the instructional work, which I think is like a whole other talk, like what it means to give instruction to people. And it's interesting now, isn't it, in terms of us living in Covid and instruction because everyone tunes in, like there was a moment, wasn't there, when we were tuning into say: 'Okay, what does the prime minister say, what do we have to do, what are our instructions?', and we are listening out for those instructions. Our default position is to obey, is to listen and to obey but that requires trust and the trust is completely broken! And after the recent, last straw that broke the camel's back, which is the Dominic Cummings episode, people aren't tuning in in the same way that they were. They don't give a shit what the new rules are, everyone's just going to do what they want because the instructions were not to be trusted, they were not to be trusted. So this is really interesting in terms of our work and how we give instructions, and I think all of our stuff is very, very different from instruction-based work that I've seen in general. I mean there's somebody who I know that you know who I really love and I feel very aligned to her, which is Silvia Mercuriali. And her stuff is something that I feel a lot of synergy with. Again she is a woman, she is foreign woman, I don't know if it's something about that, but there isn't that use of that kind of normal voice that you get in headphone work that I find can be a little bit, just too smug, it's too smug for me. It's just too middle class and very assured and very in control. And it is important to have control – control is something that is super important because we create very highly choreographed, very specific personal experiences for people. So, at a granular level, we're controlling and mediating every minute. There's a tempo rhythm that we keep to, especially in *Binaural Dinner Date*. I really enjoy this musicality to the work and I'm always thinking about when time is very elastic within a piece, and time is very digital. You know, digital is where a machine keeps the time, there's a click track, you've got six minutes, it's like this, it goes da-da-da-da-da, you know, and things have to be delivered along that. But in musical terms, when you have live music there's this phenomenon called 'tempo rubato', which means 'robbed time', and it means that you can, you're in a swing – it's like ginga [capoeira footwork], you borrow from this bar but you have to give it back in the next bar. So stolen time is when you can take a little bit extra and then you have to give it back, and you can be borrowing, and that makes time very flexible. So in terms of performance and how I see pieces, it's very much on this kind of tempo rhythm score. And I learned that really from the work of Grotowski, which was to create a score, for it to be very specific. In *Binaural Dinner Date* it's less of a show, isn't it, it's much more of a phenomenon,



you know, you do *Binaural Dinner Date*.

DR: Experience.

PJM: It's an experience. And in terms of using sound as a way to hear yourself, it is completely unique to other things I've seen. Because a lot of headphone work is just you receiving, you receive, you receive, you receive, right? Which is like just normal, just part of it, that's why it goes through the headphones and et cetera, et cetera. But in this situation there are tropes that we have in common with other companies I would imagine: a disembodied voice for example, instructions for example, poetic content that's nice, makes you think of nice things, for example. That tends to repeat over the sector, doesn't it, really? But I think what separates us from the other groups is that we really, really are always fighting for ways of audiences being able to speak and interact with each other. And to create situations that augment that affordance, i.e. we usually have a mic or we use special headphones in *Binaural Dinner Date* that have microphones embedded in the headphone so we can open and close the headphones as we're going along. That approach that started with *Binaural Dinner Date*, giving the audience a mic is important to us because – and it's not about this idea of agency, let me just be really clear here, because that's a different issue. That's a different subject, it's huge, I'm not talking about that right now. I'm talking about giving someone the microphone. Even that phrase in our culture is, like, 'give him the mic' or 'give her the mic', that means have a voice. That's the thing that underscores that: it's framing the participant as the one that can speak, it's framing and elevating by literally giving her the mic. So that is important in *Binaural Dinner Date* – I mean lots of things are important but that comes to mind. The other thing is this thing that I referred to earlier, which is like the slippages. The slippages in time and space, do you know what I mean? It's like when you think you're on this plain and you thought you were listening to something and seeing something but it's actually live and you thought it was pre-recorded. We have a lot of games like that in *Binaural Dinner Date* and we're really interested in how you can experience the world and mistrust the world. You have a voice that sounds like it's recorded but then it slips into real time, real world, so actually it's live. Another example is where we recorded audiences at the beginning – which version did you see, Duška?

DR: The one at Stratford Circus, you know, in the café at Stratford Circus.

JLR: Okay, so that was 2017.

PJM: Oh my god! Okay, yeah. So it really moved on from there. I think there were some new parts that we added in that you haven't seen, and one of those was being able to record the audiences when they sat down and playing it back to them, only to them, and then destroying the recording immediately afterwards. You would repeat the audiences' own conversation back at them and ask them to analyse it, and therefore what you're doing is you're putting them simultaneously in the past as well as in the present. So there are all these worm holes between time dimensions that I really think that sound can do for you in a way that nothing else can do, nothing else can do that. So lots of these like 'glitch in the matrix' stuff that I really enjoy doing, triggering these multi-modal effects and also destabilising the participant a little bit so that in the destabilising you create a sense of unknowingness. And in fact, unknowingness, or not knowing, in the human being, immediately effects a kind of openness and those sorts of behavioural states. With *Binaural [Dinner Date]* I think we made a huge leap in terms of headphone work – I think we really took things much, much further on than they are. And the next thing we're doing [called *Brega Parque*] takes it on even further because it syncs with post-immersive manifesto. It's not like I'm trying to stay ahead of the curve because I want to be cool and all the rest of it, it's just that things get tired so quickly as I think we speak about in the manifesto, you know? There is no avant-garde if the mainstream has already swallowed the avant-garde, you know. It's like there's no alternative, there's no alternative scene. So what we're doing now and the technologies that we work with now is I'm very much thinking about building our own equipment: making our own headphones and we've started to do this at the moment with a really important bit of technology, which is the bone-conducting headphones because the bone conductors are not as all-consuming as normal headphones. They sit on your bone, on your face, and they bypass the ear canal completely and they speak directly into your brain via your bone, which means – that's not the important bit, the important bit is then your ears, which is actually your own natural sound technology, are open again to the real world. And so that is something that we're looking into. We're making pieces where audiences can just be normal like you and I are being normal now but I have to do it, I'm doing it now – I've got one ear



covered, but I have taken this off so I can hear myself. So this is the same thing. The bone conducting is doing that but much better. And creating a lot of work where audiences can hear us, hear the makers – i.e. if there're instructions or if there's music that we want to play – but they can also just be in normal talk with each other.

DR: Presumably that level is also accessible then to people who are hearing impaired, the bone conductor?

JLR: No. Well, it depends on the level of hearing loss. If someone can't hear at all it depends also on that person's ability to interpret the vibrations, which is an area that we started working on but it's very early stages. Similarly, with *Binaural Dinner Date*, people who had hearing aids, we just had different types of headphones. The ones we use the most aren't compatible. So we'd just swap that ahead of time so that people could adjust their hearing aids but to shift to complete accessibility for deaf audiences we're not able to do that yet. As Jadé said, with *Binaural Dinner Date* we managed to create the social space where usually when experiences are defined or described as immersive or someone feels immersed by sound, it usually means a noise-cancelling, in-your-bubble world. When actually, if we are completely concerned with the space between strangers and how people create those social exchanges, then that is completely counter-intuitive because it shuts you away from – you can only be a crowd but you can't have an interactive exchange with someone. So in *Binaural Dinner Date* you could do that but it was a system and a technology that is not mobile. You could do that as long as you're sitting down at that table we can map all those channels. So you can shift without noticing from epic to intimate, from this table to three tables, to six, without a problem. With Quest, which is the one that we tested in Leeds last year – with the Quest technology Jadé was just explaining – you can do that and you can be mobile. You can be in a public space and you can move between spaces, people can come and go. That's why I guess it's such an exciting bit of kit.

[01:38:21] TECHNOLOGY

DR: So actually your paradigm shift to a more empathetic form of post-immersive theatre is also closely tied with technological developments.

JLR: The thing we stress a lot about technology is: technology is everywhere from a piece of paper, pen, to obsolete payphone to high-tech new release. So we are no more interested in the latest technology than we are in the oldest technology.

PJM: Yeah. To be honest the bone conducting actually is absolutely not a new technology and, in fact, binaural sound is really old. It's way older – people think that binaural sound is now but it's a hundred years old!

DR: Right, right. Okay.

JLR: So I guess one example would be when we started developing *Binaural Dinner Date* – we were working with live 3D rendering, head-tracking, the full binaural kit. And the moment we realised that that was putting people off from interacting with each other we started removing bit by bit and what we got left with was a very, very small fraction of what binaural technology can be. We're not interested in being an expo tech fair to demonstrate the use of technology! We're interested in: 'Does it work for this intended purpose?' The moment that it puts people off, it's no longer something conducive. So with *Hotel Medea* the reason why we brought technology in is because we were literally looking at the audience's body: what are the ways that they receive information and experience the world around them? We were looking at embodied cognition, we were looking at sound, at image, at movement, and it just so happened that the mobile phone had become already, an extension of our bodies. It vibrates and we feel it as if our body's vibrating, it's not a separate thing standing in the corner. So it would be silly for us to ignore that this is a pervasive thing, that people feel very intimate with their mobile phone. So it's sort of in that sense that this is a natural part of how people interact with the world and with one another, and it might further this engagement that we're interested in exploring. And the moment that it doesn't, there is no – tech is not god in any way – it goes. The moment that it doesn't work for us, it goes.

DR: How has your work been interrupted or not, or in some way stimulated by the current situation of



lockdown?

PJM: One thing that it has been really good for, which is why I was really happy to get your email and be able to talk about this stuff, is it's given me a lot more time to do a bit of research around the kind of sound projects, and really what sound means from the optic of that kind of stuff that we were looking at in terms of like the 'emancipated spectator' world of agency and participation and what the sound technology, current sound technology, and the affordances it gives us might be able to link in that. That's what I've been able to spend a little more time doing. Looking at a new piece that I want to create with transducers and making sound come out of walls and using these prayers that I was telling you about that I learnt when I was a child and to create a sound project out of that. But that's a very new thing because the big thing, the *Brega [Parque]* thing, is about people, and about bringing people together and it's very much about the '80s and '80s politics and where it all kind of – where current neo-liberal politics is flourishing, had its seeds were sown back in the '80s, so it's looking at that. Yeah, and when society kind of started falling apart under Thatcher and seeing whether this kind of technology is a way of fixing society, a way of going: 'Oh, yeah, this is how we used to talk to each other, and we used to mobilise, and do these things still exist in our bodies, in our blood, in our DNA, or have we lost it completely?'

DR: Great. But presumably the *Pick Me Up (& Hold Me Tight)* is not affected by the social distancing?

PJM: Well people going to the phone boxes is going to be a problem, just in terms of whether they feel safe enough to pick up things. But that will definitely happen – because it's so time-based – on the 1st of January [2021].

JLR: Yeah. And I guess if anything this period has just magnified what was already happening. So our interest in investigating intimacy became all the more relevant and pressing: how do you redesign intimacy in a state of confusing government instructions, fear of infection, social distancing rules? So the redesign of intimacy for us is very important and within that – again, very incrementally with testing different models without any rush to achieve anything straightaway. And the other is continuing to challenge privilege, which is something that again was already at the forefront of our concerns and with a moment where people are told to stay home or to connect only via technology then the gaps become even bigger, where people are forced to work and to put themselves at risk or have to share a house with loads of people and so on. So I guess the different fronts that we have at the moment during lockdown and post-lockdown are about engaging with our community of students, of peers, of colleagues, and testing things in a very slow way in terms of what we're able to do or how we can support each other, and also modelling, and a kind of a transition in a way. But instead of waiting for the government or universities telling us what to do we're trying to start now by just sustained engagement and testing, really. Testing is the way to create it together so that we are with everyone who is involved and who this is for, we are talking together and testing together and creating it together.

DR: Great, thank you so much.

PJM: You're welcome. Yeah. You're welcome. Ciao!

JLR: Ciao everyone!

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:31:27 to 00:34:16] *Hotel Medea, Chapter 3: Feast of Dawn* (2008-2012)

[00:43:13 to 00:46:56] *Hotel Medea, Chapter 1: Zero Hour Market* (2008-2012)

[01:16:40 to 01:19:11] *Binaural Dinner Date* (2017)

[01:23:04 to 01:26:45] *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* (2017)



Works Cited

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Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery3-zuuk/.

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