ZU-UK – Training for Interactive Performance

Persis Jade Maravala, Jorge Lopes Ramos, James McLaughlin

ZU-UK are renowned for their distinctive personal, political and sometimes humorous approach to creating interactive performance. Known for their attention to detail, care and complete respect for audience members, the company are leaders in participatory theatre and performance art.

Previous productions include the widely acclaimed *Hotel Medea* (2009-2012) which was performed at LIFT Festival, the Hayward Gallery and Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where it won a Herald Angel Award, Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2011; Prix Ars Electronica Honorary Mention; and was *Time Out* Critic's Choice – Pick of the Fringe 2011.

From June to December 2015, 7000 visitors experienced *#RioFoneHack* in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, where three iconic Brazilian phone boxes rang as visitors walked past. Those who dared to pick up were treated to an interactive, intimate and humorous audio experience. Binaural Dinner Date (2017) enjoyed a sold out season and an extended run at Theatre Royal Stratford East, eventually transferring to Stratford Shopping Centre. More recently Binaural Dinner Date (2019) transferred to Rich Mix for an additional sold out season. For further information about the work of ZU-UK, please visit their website: https://zu-uk.com/

The following is a 'conversation' held between Persis Jade Maravala and Jorge Lopes Ramos, Artistic Directors of ZU-UK, prompted by interview questions asked by James McLaughlin. They were each posed a separate set of questions. Jorge responded via email, while Jade sent in audio answers. The resulting materials were compiled by James into their current form – a virtual dialogue.

[INSERT IMAGE HERE – OR WHEREVER WORKS BEST FOR THE LAYOUT

IMAGE CREDIT: Ludovic Des Cognets, 2016]

Jade: My early performative experience is rooted in the various cultures of my background. My parents, I realise now, were an enormous influence. I had already assimilated many core principles around rhythm and presence and ritual in social spaces. So by the time I encountered the work of Jerzy Grotowski I identified strongly with many of the principles. My practice at that time was totally body-based and rooted in psychophysical experiences that centred on the transformative aspect of the actor's encounter with herself. I became fully committed to laboratory practices with Para Active and created pieces where the actor was at the centre of the creative process and our audiences were more like 'witnesses' as per Grotowski's propositions. So, coming from such a heavily embodied, ritualistic place and focussed on the live-presence it has been a considerable journey for me to come round to the advantages of technology.

The first time I realised you could have an emotional experience performing with technology was on *_Dreams of Your Life* (2011) by A.L. Kennedy and Hide&Seek amongst others, a sister project to the Film4 documentary, *Dreams of a Life* (2011) directed by Carol Morley. The way that the text, the images and the questioning were put together was just incredibly moving. This was the first time that I learnt that technology wasn't always cold. In *Hotel Medea,* technology was the cold aspect of the production and we assigned it to the character of Jason. *_Dreams of Your Life* kind of broke that a little bit in me … I realised that there was more to this. I started to be interested in the question, 'What is it that human beings won't let anyone other than another human being do to them?' It was the time of driverless cars and robots doing surgery and although it had been proven how much

safer these examples were, people were still repulsed. I was interested in this revulsion and we started experimenting with making AME (Audio Massage Experience) and creating 'conversations' between machines and humans. We experimented a lot to see how far we could go with intimacy and technology and what the tipping points were.

Jorge: *Traditional performance training methodologies mostly assume a passive audience who watches and witnesses. For the purpose of the performances we are trying to make, we are able to choose more carefully what tools might be relevant for developing, testing and deepening it. Why work with the special dynamic of a stage-auditorium relationship if ultimately the new piece is meant for a train station, a shopping centre or a field? And what about the body of the audience? If the audience has a role in your production, then that needs to be tested. If you expect your audience to participate, then you must embed ways to instruct and support them so that they are aware of what is required of them. In the context of making new pieces where audiences and performers interact, older models of physical training might inhibit this new relationship from developing.*

Though our new ways of making reject certain assumptions, they do certainly provide a very strong foundation for understanding how someone experiences the world through their body. Our understanding of rhythm, pulse, touch and the body's perception of space and other bodies have become an essential way to re-imagine the audience's embodied experience.

Some performance training approaches can be very useful for actors/performers with an interest in hosting and facilitating interactive performance. They are usually techniques and practices that value listening and improvisation. We have often used our own modified training methodologies inspired by Augusto Boal's Joker, as well as contemporary clowning exercises.

Jade: My ideal would be to have an ensemble. Unfortunately that's just not working out and hasn't for a long time. There isn't the financial stability to be able to do something like that, and in some ways there also isn't really the will; because in order to have a strong ensemble you also need to have a strong leader and the days of being that are over for me. So we work with a small ensemble who are very busy but who keep up their own training – we have to be coordinated all the time. They work on themselves privately away from our processes, meaning that I can rely on them to have a strong, coherent actor presence when we come back together. I don't have to do any kind of zero-level work which is the thing I used to do a lot of – taking non-trained people, opening the doors to everybody. The criteria were that if you want to work with us, if you think you can hack this, then you're in. Those were the criteria because the work was so hard, the training was so incredibly gruelling.

We have a few core actors with whom we repeatedly collaborate. Firstly, because they're good, but also because they know the kind of discipline I come from and they've collaborated with me under that discipline. Not only are there physical heights that they have to reach, but also the discipline of the space. I still work pretty much how I used to. We operate in a strange mishmash of a Grotowski laboratory studio approach with space for hacking, which has provided lots of room for conflict because those two things are seriously incompatible. I already had that experience of incompatibility when I went to work with Guillermo Gomez-Pena, a Mexican performance artist whose world I was trying to bring together with my then group Para Active[1] in its last iterations. And that was the same kind of thing; the tensions between those different working models were so extreme, so polarized,

[1] Para Active was an artistic project co-founded by Persis Jade Maravala and Jonathan Grieve in 1999, focusing on creative theatre production and research into performer training. It was founded on the beliefs that theatre can be the most powerful art form for affecting transformational processes in the performers and the audience, that it can positively affect individual and cultural change through confronting and subverting taboos, cultural mythologies and current political/social issues and that the importance of the role of theatre and performance in society can be increased by using it to transgress and cross our own individual and social boundaries.

that the whole thing just self-combusted and blew up. Now doing this a little bit more maturely (I would hope), I tend to make more concessions, but there are some things that I really stick to such as always start the day with physical work. I just don't care who thinks they are entitled to work physically or not; it doesn't matter what the body is, it doesn't matter what the role is for you on that day, whether you are there as Company Manager or a technologist. The people who I have found to be the most into it, or at least who have surprised us, are definitely the technologists. They are literally crying with relief to be able to get back into their bodies – people who work sixteen to seventeen hours a day, non-stop, on a laptop – being able to do something that counteracts that is really welcome for them.

Physical training is important when we're making interactive performance because it takes a lot of training for an actor just to be able to be convincing as a human being, to be trusted immediately by the audience. They need to be reassuring and responsive, and have all these qualities that are necessary for actors who are working in that grey area of acting and non-acting. We have a small ensemble for *Goodnight, Sleep Tight* (2016) because that's a very specific kind of training and those skills are about leading from the centre, having a low centre of gravity, being able to have a very steadfast presence but not scare the audience, being able to look people in the eye without overwhelming them. These kinds of practices, which come from our exploration of more shamanistic and ritual vocabularies, are important in the world of interactivity because you're talking about that bridge between the outside world and the work.

One of the things that's very different when using with technology is that there's a bigger distance between having an impulse and seeing it created. You have to wait for it to be made. Training to be a theatre artist is like being told to 'jump up and do it' – that's what humans do. Humans can also rescue situations; actors can rescue situations and computers cannot. This means that you have to strive harder to set things up properly in the first place. The technology should always be a tool for better participation. When it's not enabling better interactions between people and breaking down the space between strangers then it's not interesting to me. Using technology is just a tool to do what we would have done anyway. My friend Deborah Pearson said, 'It's a bit like saying to an artist, "Oh, I notice you use your arms in performance, so are you an arm artist?"' We use technology the way that we use our arms – they're just there. And they're there because they're helpful, and if they're not helpful, they don't get into the show. How we tend to work with technology is to get excited about the affordances.

Jorge: *The focus of the audience should suit the intended experience at any given moment. As we explore different modes of engagement, the rules need to be clear so that the audience knows what's expected of them, and what they have permission to do. In* Goodnight, Sleep Tight*, audiences are predominantly passive whilst sustaining a child-mother-like relationship with the performer who is facilitating their experience. This is a contract of care and trust, and the audience member will need to be guided throughout their experience whist wearing the headsets. Their focus is both on the sensations in their body and on the narrative that unfolds in the headset from their point of view.*

In Binaural Dinner Date, *the audience focus is predominantly on the person in front of them and on the various ways it might be socially acceptable to interact/behave on a first date. The voice in the audience's ear helps frame each moment, with the focus sometimes also shifting to other couples, to the performance by the waiter, to the restaurant or the urban landscape around them. This production utilises a variety of different live and pre-recorded audio techniques including binaural recordings, live sampling, pre-recorded instructional dialogue and live audio effects to assist the production in shifting perspectives and the direction of participants' attention. Technically, the piece has been designed with an audio application running 12 inputs, and 40 audio output signals delivering a bespoke stereo audio feed to each participant. A custom cueing system has also been*

developed to enable the operator and performers to deal with a number of conditional routes that can be followed depending on participant responses.

Jade: A lot of our work is about bringing close attention to the relationships between people; either strangers or the temporary communities set up by a live event – the technology is always in the background. I don't like going to see things where I have to do things with screens and technologies – it kind of frightens me.

Jorge: *Game mechanics and game dynamics can be very helpful in exploring ways in which participants respond to instructions and game rules. When looking at what behaviours you might want to elicit in a participating audience, you must ensure any assumptions are tested again and again to guarantee the game mechanics function in relation to the intended experience and behaviour. Ultimately, the concept of a 'player journey' in game design is a fascinating tool for performance- and experience-makers. Who is the work for? What would you like them to do/feel/experience? Working backwards from these intentions one is able to test assumptions in a very early phase and help shape the way in which the full piece is written.*

Jade: I don't like to confuse people. Theatre-going is already quite stressful. Interactive Theatre can be quite alienating which makes people feel a bit stupid if they don't know what to do. One of my things is clarity and accessibility, so I'm watching to see (even if they are feeling uncomfortable or it's not to their taste) whether or not they know what is being asked of them; do they know the rules, do they get the game?

Jorge: *Individuals may be likely to interact more genuinely if they don't feel the 'watching' presence of a performer – or a professional facilitator. Digital platforms can at times provide individuals with privacy to feel more able to express personal views and opinions. Certain digital tools also enable the scaling of participation – facilitating the mapping of different personalised content simultaneously to a range of individuals, and in a range of different locations. Importantly, the digital platform used must match the intended mode of interaction in order to enhance the experience, as opposed to distance the participant from it.*

If we imagine our work metaphorically as a 'cybernetic organism', with both organic and biomechatronic 'body parts', then we can identify various hybrid combinations of live/digital modes of engagement fully integrated into our performances. The political dimension to our work comes from ensuring we are responsible for audiences from beginning to end, and we must guide them with generosity and care. We curate a journey for them, which means that any use of digital technology, or any invitation to participate, needs to be tested with audiences at every stage to avoid reckless applications of new technologies without consideration and purpose.

Jade: The tension between creating thoughtful distance and an authentic moment is something that I'm always playing in. I don't come down on the side of one or the other very strongly. When I'm thinking about deconstructing things, being ironic, I'm always undermining that tension. When I'm being authentic, I'm trying to undermine that too. So it's like a kind of constant undermining. It's definitely important to me that criticality and authenticity are at play, but the authenticity aspect is without doubt very, very important to me. Our culture at the moment is a very pessimistic and untrusting one, and yet it's precisely because the mood is like that, that people are looking to experience authenticity, to experience earnestness. When am I doing things earnestly and sincerely? When do I want audiences to feel earnest about what they're doing? The answer comes from not being able to give up the Grotowski part of me with its very heavy-handed sincerity. Being multi-modal, not only in terms of platforms, but also in terms of engagement, means that you can have one foot in the critical and one foot in the embodied and experiential. Games are a way of being completely emotionally involved, but also of being critical. You want people to be active, and at the same time also reflexive about what they are being active about. A big issue is between the political mode of engagement and the personal mode of engagement. How can you be intimate, but on an

epic level? In some ways punk culture has got that connection with the work of Grotowski, which is very much about the tension between spontaneity and discipline. With punk it is total spontaneity and no discipline, that quality that's unpredictable, perhaps a little bit unhinged, because you don't know which way it's going to go. I like all the parts of the situation that are led by the actors to have that uncontrolled nature – looking like it's uncontrolled, looking like it could go off. I quite like that tension.