



## Learning by Ear, Painting by Voice: An Interview with Quote Unquote

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

In 2015, the Toronto-based Quote Unquote collective, formed by Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadava, premiered their first show *Mouthpiece*. This was a story about a writer named Cassandra, wrestling with her conscience as she faces the prospect of giving a eulogy at her mother's funeral. In some ways *Mouthpiece* could be described as a monologue – only it featured a protagonist who had lost her voice, and was performed by two women at the same time.

In Nostbakken and Sadava's rendition, the monologue acquired a new form fusing the precision and muscularity of physical theatre with a Beckettian fascination for speech, *Sex and the City*-type plotline, and a taste for jazzy a cappella harmonies. In 2017, Jodie Foster was so impressed on seeing this show that she took it to LA, and in 2018 it was made into a feature film by the Canadian filmmaker Patricia Rozema.

In the conversation that follows, Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadava reflect on their respective journeys towards their ongoing collaboration, their creative process and their enduring interests in voice, activism and music.

This conversation took place between Toronto and London by Zoom, on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020.

### [00:01:50] FORMING THE BASE

**Duška Radosavljević:** Okay, Amy and Norah, when did you actually meet? When did you start working together?

**Norah Sadava:** We met in 2011, I believe. Right? And then we started working together in 2012 or '13 – '13, yeah.

**DR:** You're both based whereabouts in Canada?

**Amy Nostbakken:** We're both based in Toronto now, and we both moved here in 2011. But Norah was living in New York City, and I was living in London, and we both were making theatre, respectively, and we both trained abroad. Norah trained in California, at a school called – we often speak for each other [*laughing*] because we just – we know each other's histories pretty well. But Norah trained in California, at Dell'Arte, a school called Dell'Arte, and I trained in Paris at a school called Jacques Lecoq. So we both have very similar Lecoq-based training. And the reason we met is only because of that. Well, no, we met through a mutual friend, but the reason we started working together was because of that niche style of training, which is devised physical theatre.

**DR:** And going back even further, whereabouts are you both from in Canada?

**NS:** I grew up in the prairies, in a city called Edmonton, which is in Alberta, and Amy grew up in Ottawa, which is the capital of Canada. And both of us left to go to school. Amy went to Concordia in Montreal for her first theatre programme, and I went directly into a physical theatre school.

**DR:** What determined those choices, those early life choices? What were your early, formative influences that attracted you to ever consider a career in theatre and a particular approach to theatre-making that was the physical theatre that you described was your shared interest?

**NS:** For me, I was extremely – Amy and I have this in common – I was extremely shy, like really couldn't speak to anyone without throwing up out of nerves. My parents were quite concerned about me, because of my lack of social bravado. I was just – had no guts socially. I was very, very shy. I saw a play when I was about nine or ten – *Peter Pan*. And my elder brother was in it, and I sat in the theatre, and watched it, and went: 'I want to do that!' And then asked my mum if I could audition for a play, and she thought I was kidding, because I was so shy she didn't believe I would follow through. But I did and



I started doing theatre when I was a kid, like ten-11. And then I ended up going to an arts high school, and I had a teacher there, who had some background in physical theatre, and ran a club, a physical theatre club at the school. So I got introduced to the concept of starting from the body quite early, and it kind of instinctually clicked with me.

**AN:** My interest came much later in terms of focusing on physical theatre. I gradually became more interested in performing, from the age of probably 12 or 13. I just liked doing it. Again, I was shy, so it was similar – it was a similar shock to people seeing me singing on a stage or doing anything that involves public performance. And so I just followed that interest to complete a degree in theatre at a university in Montreal, and I hated this degree. I hated that the disciplines felt extremely siloed and that it was – you were a performer, or a director, or a writer, or a designer. And at the time, all felt pretty closed to females, except performing and design maybe. Whether that was overtly stated, it just – that’s how the population was divided. All the girls were interested in being actresses. Not exclusively, but it’s how it felt. So, I never considered that I could do more than one thing. And I felt really confined by performing: it felt totally ego-driven, super competitive – just toxic, you know. Being an actor is just awful. And not having much say, and the kinds of roles that were available, especially in an academic institution – it’s Shakespeare, it’s Chekhov, it’s Ibsen, it’s dead white men, and the roles that they leave for women often are lacklustre, or they’re just not written by women. So they don’t really know what it’s like – they’re kind of one-dimensional in their expression of womanhood. This of course is only in hindsight I can register why I hated it so much. So I planned to quit the industry – not that I had any foothold in it – to do something else. I applied to one school, which was Lecoq, and I happened to get in. And then, as soon as I attended the first day, on the first hour of the first day, I could tell: ‘Oh, this is for me!’, because I think one of the first things they say is to leave your ego at the door, and it’s not about you at all, it’s about the work, which was what was missing for me in traditional, hierarchical structure that is taught in most conservatory institutions in North America and in Europe. So, to classify myself as a creator, which encompasses all of the things, was right for me.

**DR:** How did you come across Lecoq as a possibility?

**AN:** By chance, really. I saw a video of Mnouchkine, of Théâtre du Soleil and I thought that looked really different, the communal – I mean, I didn’t know what devising was – aspect of it. And then a friend just said: ‘Why don’t you apply to Lecoq, because you don’t have to audition?’, because I hated auditioning. I was really bad at it. The air inside a waiting room of an audition – I hated this competitive, you know, and it’s usually not really about – or maybe not... Now, being on the other side of the table in the audition room, I can see, you know, how terrifying it is. And I wish I knew things then that I know now.

**DR:** What was the entry procedure? How was it different?

**AN:** You just wrote a letter of why you were interested, and you got a letter of reference. So I think a lot of it is luck, but also, I was interested in process, I remember saying. But I happened to get in, and I stayed for both years, it’s a two-year degree. And then I formed a theatre company in London. I moved to London, and was doing that for several years, and then–

**DR:** What was the company called again? I think I’ve read about it.

**AN:** Theatre Ad Infinitum

**DR:** That’s right, Ad Infinitum.

**AN:** And they still – they still exist. I’m no longer–

**DR:** In Bristol? Yeah.

**AN:** Yeah, they are in Bristol now. We were in London. And I’m no longer an AD there.

**DR:** And you all met at Lecoq? Was it one of those–?

**AN:** Yes, exactly, which often happens. What always happens is, because both Dell’Arte and Lecoq are such international mishmashes of humans, everybody forms companies afterwards, and those companies inevitably – crumble.

**DR:** I see. And what years were those, that you were in Paris and then came to London?



**AN:** I moved to London in 2008. So I was in Paris 2006.

**DR:** And Norah, Dell'Arte was a Lecoq-style school in California? What took you there? And how?

**NS:** Similarly to Amy, chance. I met – there was a company in Edmonton, run by a woman, who had been to Dell'Arte in the '90s. They ran a kind of circus theatre company, and she talked to me about it, and I looked it up. I intended on going for just a year to do like a diploma, see what it was like. And I was really young when I went, I was 18. I was a baby. But at the time – and I'm not really sure what they're doing now – I know they still offer a Masters, but they had just been accredited to become a Masters programme, so a lot of the people who were there were there to do a three-year Masters programme that was associated with the university, and they could actually get a degree. And when I finished the first year, the school asked if I would stay. I think I was just extremely committed, and I was finding in it what I needed, so I ended up staying for the Masters. Again, like Amy, formed a company afterwards. It was called The Hinterlands, which is still going. It's in Detroit now, started in Milwaukee. And it was largely kind of Grotowski physical training-based, because one of the collaborators had been training with a Grotowski company. And then I ended up, through a series of personal events, leaving, and coming back to Canada. And Amy had ended up coming back to Canada at the same time in pretty similar circumstances. So we had both had this trajectory of finding the thing we wanted to do, starting to do it with people we really wanted to do it with, and then arriving in the city with knowing no one. Not a lot of people here were doing it – making physical theatre, and much fewer women. So, when we met, it was kind of like: 'Thank god! Someone else, who not only has the same training, but has the same ambition, and drive, and perspective, and wanted to make work for the same reasons.' Quite quickly, when we started working together, we knew that it was going to be for the long term, that we were forming the base of something as opposed to just making a play.

### **[00:13:43] MAKING MOUTHPIECE (2015)**

**DR:** You talk about your training as being physical theatre training – rightly so, I mean, that's what a lot of people would associate with both Grotowski and Lecoq – but the piece we are here to talk about today, comes across as being primarily about voice and vocal expression, rather than physical. Even though, that's not to say that it doesn't have that sort of presence of physical theatre training in it. I'm interested in how you then arrived at voice as a shared interest, and the subject of your piece. Was an interest in vocal training there for you all along, or did this vocal aspect come about as a result of considerations of content you had in terms of making *Mouthpiece*?

**AN:** Where we have arrived is interested in taking the tenets of physical theatre, and translating that into the voice. And the reason for that has just come organically, because we're interested in music and vocal expressions of music. One of the first plays that I created with Ad Infinitum was a one-woman play, sung a cappella, called *The Big Smoke*, which was just me at the mic, very little movement. It was an experiment. For years all I had been doing is jumping around. And at Lecoq, you barely speak in the first year of training. You really barely open your mouth, and people often associated Lecoq training with mime. It's a mime school. So it's really like the opposite. But the experiment was: Can you create the same things you can create without words, physically? So, character, narrative, story, atmosphere, colour – by standing still but painting all that with your voice. That was the first time experimenting with that, and then moved to Toronto, and it's not like we planned to make a play, you know, in some academic way. It just comes from our interests, what we know how to do, and what we like to do. And we both like to express ourselves using music and our voices, as well as our bodies. But both of those things, obviously, are not standing and delivering what we call 'paka-paka theatre'. 'Paka-paka-paka' – two people, profile talking heads theatre. We're just not interested in that. Obviously, it's extremely popular, and has been forever, but both physical theatre, and what we're doing, which is – I don't know, we've never really classified it – 'voice meets body' is an alternative way of expressing all those things, most notably emotion, and what something feels like. When *Mouthpiece* ended up being – because it didn't start there – a play about what it feels like to be a woman, so much of that is hard to express using text, that's why so much of the play ended up being expressed with sound, and not necessarily something you classify even as music, but noise and grunts as well as movement, but we use vocal expression and movement as ways to try to capture something that's not



just dialogue, which a lot of more traditional forms of theatre leans heavily on.

**DR:** So where did it start? What was the development journey of this piece?

**AN:** I had a very – as all shows in our experience – a very vague idea, seed of an idea, which was just a play about female relationships. And I had met Norah, but I didn't know her. But again, as Norah says there are very few people in town with Lecoq-style training and even fewer women, so I heard about this girl – this woman, and so I got a \$1,000 grant from the Canadian government and [we] decided to get in a room for five days, and just bash around – that's it, really. Female relationships – the light and the dark, and just the multifaceted-ness of females – mother/daughter, sisters, friends, lovers. And those five days established that we could work really well together. We were on the same wavelength. And the play took three years to make. Over the first year, we were bashing around this concept of female relationships – this was 2013 – and we were also bashing our heads against the wall, hitting a wall, a creative wall. And then we decided: 'Well, if we're going to research what it is to be a female relationship, first, maybe we should look at what it is to be female.' And what better case study than ourselves? So we each – together and individually – dug down, and when we both dug down, we both simultaneously hit the same red button, which was the feminist 'a-ha' awakening. So just as two individual women, we realised: 'Oh shit! We're still under the thumb of the patriarchy, just as much as our mothers' generation.' We've been trying to make this play, which at the time we were denying was a feminist play, because at that time, in our circles in Toronto, in Canada, labelling your play as 'feminist' was a dirty word. And we genuinely thought: 'No one will come.'

**NS:** Very unsexy.

**AN:** Totally unsexy, not cute, angry! So we realised that we were mahoosive hypocrites. And we decided: 'Well, we have to make a play about that, and it's got to just be about one woman, and we need at least two – two women to play one woman, so that's what we'll do.' And we hit that around, I don't know exactly, probably after about a year. And after we realised that, and realised that the best way to uncover that content was to reveal all the things we were most embarrassed about within ourselves, and the things that were hardest to admit, then the writing came really easy. We just had to confess everything!

**[00:20:49 to 00:22:27] 'Around Here' from *Mouthpiece* (2015)**

**DR:** I want to dwell a little longer on this idea of it having to be one woman, played by two women. There was a bit of a jump in how you arrived at that decision, and what the significance of that was.

**NS:** A lot of the writing that we were doing at the time was allowing ourselves to write the many voices that are happening simultaneously. So in the same piece of writing, writing about how much you love being catcalled, and the other voice saying how offended you are being catcalled. The things that are happening at the same time with different voices in our heads. It just came out that there were multiple voices in a lot of the text that we were writing that felt congruent with our experience, which is: 'I'm not one thing, I'm so many. And they're all happening at the same time. And they're often contradicting each other. I'm not just this way or that way. I'm this way and that way at the same time, and they directly oppose each other.' And so once began to articulate that through the writing, we realised that to put out there the truth that I do feel both ways, felt like the main thrust of how we were going to communicate the message, that we can't just paint a portrait of a woman, who's just one way, we have to show so many ways she is. And the play could be probably ten women playing the one woman. We decided very purposefully to flip back and forth, and mix up who's which personality and what has what opinion, because we wanted to make it very clear that it wasn't the angel and the devil on your shoulder. It's not the virgin and the whore. It's the mess of things in between. And they often happen in a less binary way. So coming to the conclusion that it should just be one person, and we should both play her, felt like the clearest way to make that point.

**DR:** And then what was the process? You mentioned, Amy, it was quite long. Did you say two or three years?

**AN:** Three.

**DR:** Three years. And you said after the first year, you actually made this decision around having one character, played by both of you. And you said then that writing the text came easily when you decided



to admit to the difficult things. What was the rest of the process? I'm particularly interested in your interest in the sounds and the vocals, and the building of the performance that then followed from that point on.

**AN:** The way we look at creating, generating content is we don't trouble ourselves too much with linear narrative to begin with, if it ever ends up linear. But we generate whatever comes up that day, based on whatever happened that morning, perhaps. And that content can be a physical sequence. It could be a song. It could be some text. It could be dialogue. And then, when we're crafting it into the narrative and we're making episodes, we look at that episode – so, let's say it's 'being catcalled' – and we think: what is the best tool? We have three tools here – we have text, we have sound/music, and we have physicality. Which for this exact feeling or happening is the best to communicate this part of the story? And sometimes it'll be a combination of all three, but which is this highlight? Which is the highlighted tool? Mixed metaphor. But the important thing is that we have all this content. So just to be technical: in those first five days, where we had just met and started working, we generated a physical sequence of two women in a bathroom. Because we're doing a thing about female relationships – what's a place that is intimate and vulnerable? – a bathroom. Let's put two women together, and let's build a sequence that's very simple – toothpaste, toothbrush, toilet, wiping. And that sequence is still in the play today. Another way of generating would be: I would go into another room, make a piece of music, or I had made it walking to rehearsal, or recorded it on my phone, something like that. But a lot of the music – almost all of the music – is generated not knowing where it would go, based just off the theme of, at that point, female relationships, and then it ended up being 'what it feels like to be a woman'. And then the musical narrative became clear later. But also, where that music would fit, we didn't know. So, we had, let's say ten pieces of music. You have, for example, this physical sequence. So, we would try puzzling them, singing them, vocally, a cappella. *Mouthpiece* is all sung – there's no recordings. This physical sequence, we tried it with a folk song over top, we tried it with something else, and eventually it landed on the sort of church-like [number], we call it 'Father, Father'. The lyrics are like 'Father, Father' as in referencing God and Jesus, and gospel hymns. For some reason, you know, when you're building theatre, you click two things apart, and suddenly, it's a whole bigger than the sum of its parts, and you go: 'I don't know why necessarily, at this moment, this is so much bigger, but it really works.' And then later you can analyse, and say: 'Well, because referencing the church, it is a patriarchal institution.' Or we never do, and somebody else analyses it for us, and we go: 'Yeah, that's very smart.' [Laughter.] But in terms of answering the question of how we generate this, we have pools of content that feel strong to us and then we match them. And we literally take a piece of cardboard, or in our case the back of a pizza box, and then a bunch of stickies, and we stick them, you know, like a visual – we have a visual reference of pairing things together.

**NS:** And oftentimes, that doesn't land, it continues to be shifted until the very last minute. Like, it really is a matter of supernatural science, where you're working something, you're working something, you're working something, and then you switch the order of a scene, or move them around, and suddenly, everything makes sense. And that only comes by trying it, which is another part – you know, our process is so much based on giving shit a try. Going: 'I have no idea what this means, and what it's for, but let's do it and then see what it makes us feel.' And that – I mean, that's devising.

**DR:** Great! And at what point did the plot decision around the death of the mother come about?

**NS:** Quite late in the process. I'd say two years into the three years. Am I right, Amy, two years? Something like that. We knew that we needed the character to have an event happen to her that would make her have this awakening, and really look inside. And we also wanted it to be able to resonate into past generations. And so we came up with the idea of the mother's death, really as a vehicle to talk about feminism – it was not really our intent to be going into grief or death and dying as the theme, but it really was as a kind of trigger point for our character to have a feminist awakening, and look back at previous generations and where we are in history. It ended up through touring the show a lot, being really impactful for people – death, and dying, and grief, which was not where we started, but just ended up being part of the package.



## **[00:31:03] BLURRING THE LINES – CREATING ACCOUNTABILITY**

**DR:** And then, you brought it to Edinburgh. Which year was it that you came to Edinburgh? Was it 2015?

**AN:** '17

**DR:** '17. What was interesting about it was – and this struck me at the time when I watched it but even more so now when I've seen the film – the way in which your rapport with the audience was also quite important to this piece, when you performed it as a theatre piece, in the sense that the audience even gets involved. You have members of the audience come on stage to help you move the furniture, in a very ironic way, but still, it seems like it's not about virtuosic display, it's still about that communication with the audience. Is this something that was foundational in terms of the dramaturgical thinking around the piece and its development, or is it simply something that comes through how you like to perform? This rapport with the audience – how central is it to the way in which you were making the piece?

**AN:** We definitely like to fuck around with character and performer – with those lines – in all of our work, at some point it's blurred. And we tend to – without thinking about it – write not dialogue, but either inner monologue out, or speaking to the audience, or speaking to a different audience that we're pretending – like, you know, in *Mouthpiece* that she's speaking to the congregation at the church for the funeral. So it's a blur there again. Is it this audience, or is it the fictional one?

**NS:** I think that for that piece, particularly, but also for most of our work, it's not about creating discomfort, but it's about creating accountability that we're all in the same room. It's not about making people nervous that they're going to be called up on stage, no one likes to be in that environment, but it's like: 'We're all here! I want you to know that this is really happening, and that our actions, they do have consequences, and your actions after leaving here have consequences, and you can't separate yourself from the performance, put a fourth wall up and feel like: "Well, I did a good thing by seeing a play, and I'm going to walk out of here".' There's like a kind of piercing of the gap between, like Amy is saying, fiction and reality that I think we're using quite purposefully as activists as well. That it's not just about seeing a play, it's about: 'What are we talking about, and what are you going to do about it?'

**DR:** And how did the film come about? What prompted you to adapt it?

**NS:** We fell into a lot of luck. A very wonderful and well-regarded film director in Canada, Patricia Rozema, her daughter was an intern at the theatre company, who was producing a remount of the show, and she came to see it – out of obligation to her child – and she loved it. She thought that the concept, the duality of the two playing one, was something that she hadn't seen before. And she's a really brave film-maker. Some of her work in the '80s was like extremely on the edge of where cinema was moving, experimental and feminist. We went for coffee with her and she said: 'I'd like to throw my hat in the ring to direct the film version of this play.' And Amy and I, neither of us had ever had the intention of doing any screen work – never really considered it, just always been in theatre. But we were just so excited to give it a try with someone who was so great and so generous. We collaborated with her on the screenwriting – we adapted the script together – and we also starred in it. We were just really involved in every creative aspect of it, which was because of Patricia's attitude, which was: 'We're making this together.' Because we'd spent so much time making the play, and touring the play, and it was our baby. If someone had tried to come take it away from us, I think we would have hesitated, but because she was bringing stuff to us and saying: 'Let's do this together', it was a real pleasure and joy.

## **[00:35:46] MAKING *MOUTHPIECE* (2018), THE FILM**

**DR:** Am I right in thinking that when you made the theatre piece, it was just the two of you, you didn't have any other collaborators? Suddenly, there was a much bigger group of people that you were working with on the film that had other characters, played by other actors. Actually, the mother is present in the film. What was that like for you, seeing your baby, your work, grow, and transform into a different sort of collaboration with others?

**AN:** It was wild. It was shocking. Also, our theatre company is just the two of us. I mean, we make all the decisions, and we do all the work. We have touring producers, and lots of help in that way, but then, to allow ourselves to release some of the control, was a big thing. Having 40 people making



choices about props – it’s just such a mindfuck. But it was just so enjoyable, as Norah was saying, a unique, once-in-a-lifetime, really, situation, where we had a lot of control compared to every other story of what it’s like to make a movie we’ve ever heard. We had a say – even though we had zero experience – and this is just because Patricia is the kind of woman she is. It’s a standalone piece. And the play has not changed because of the film. And so we have these two pieces of art, which exist the way they do, because of the medium. When you’re on a stage, a bare stage, and it’s two people playing all the characters, or even just describing a character, and the audience is filling in all the blanks, as opposed to having a real-life performer who is three-dimensional, you can’t get away with having the sort of caricature of an aunt, for example. In the play, we sort of have this larger-than-life voice. Most of the characters in the play, if not all – yeah, all of the characters in the play, who are not the protagonist, Cassandra, are really the – it’s really just their voices isolated. So, we do a kind of caricature of that person’s voice. Once you place that on a real actor – it’s a cartoon if you try to remain at that level, and that affected the narrative. So the role of the mother, we went: ‘Oh damn! Yeah, we’ve got to write this woman’, instead of just the ‘mother through the lens of Cassandra’, which is what you see in the play. So this affected the angle on the subject, if you understand what I mean. The play is much angrier, it’s much more of an activist, feminist piece. The film is a bit softer, it’s a bit more about the actual mother/daughter relationship that leads to a feminist awakening. On that note, I’m just going to grab my baby! I’ll be back with a baby. I’m just going to feed him.

**DR:** Thank you for that! That’s really illuminating, this aspect of how the vocal content of the theatre performance then has to be re-thought, and re-channelled into something else. But did the film offer you opportunities in terms of sound? Did it excite you in any new ways in terms of your creative interest in sound and vocality?

**AN:** Absolutely! The way we translated the vocal score-ness of the play, the way that translates on screen – because in the theatre you expect a lot of live performance. You expect the performers to do a lot of the stuff, the singing and the dancing, the soundtrack. In film, you absolutely do not expect the performers, the actors, to be performing the soundtrack. And for us to be able to do that – the score of the film is our voices, are the voices of the actors, the two actors playing the one woman. So, like, just this idea to us was like – it’s so internal, it’s so meta and super interesting and intimate – that alone, in terms of voice, was really exciting.

**NS:** One of the main differences between the film and the play – in the play, Cassandra wakes up with no voice – she can’t speak – which is a phenomenon that happens in times of extreme stress, losing one’s voice. But it’s a metaphor, obviously, for her feeling voiceless and not knowing who she is, and how to speak, what to say. In the film, we took that out. She doesn’t wake up with no voice. She’s a speaking person. And that was a decision based on the form – that she’s a character, if she doesn’t speak for the whole movie, we’re not going to really know her, and we found other ways, I think, to showcase her lack of ability to speak, or understanding of what she wanted to say, her finding her voice. Whereas on stage, the kind of metaphor that flies in theatre, because you can still speak, even though you’re saying: ‘I have no voice. I woke up this morning, and I have no voice.’ That layer of ability to suspend your disbelief is so powerful – is why we make theatre, because there’s so many things possible at the same time. And then, when we were writing the film, we just realised very quickly that that kind of metaphor, that kind of suspension of disbelief, can just break a film – just make people not care or separate them from the character. So that was a really interesting aspect for me about where the rules of metaphor and vocalisation [are] – because also in the play, we are, like, singing, and screaming in people’s ears in a small theatre. How that translated into film was just a totally different – it just changed completely, because it had to.

**[00:42:12 to 00:43:15] ‘Imitating Life’ from the film version of *Mouthpiece* (2018)**

## **[00:43:16] THE EXPONENTIAL ABILITY OF HARMONY AND DISSONANCE**

**DR:** And what about your other work? You sent me a trailer of another piece you’ve made, which is again a collaboration with others. And presumably, there might have been some other work that I’m not aware of as well. Has this interest in voice and sound persisted in other pieces that you’ve made, and in what way, have you taken it further?



**AN:** I think there is a very clear progression. The music and sound takes over more and more with each piece. And the sort of linear, narrative-type story also leaves – or I guess, we open it up more and more. The piece we made after *Mouthpiece* is called *Now You See Her*, and for a time, we were calling it *The Six-Woman Rock Opera*. We ended up not calling it that, but we liked calling it that just because it seemed to capture – the rock was our outrage, and opera was the fact that there was a lot of music in it. [It was] about disappearing women in Canada, we had six different narratives, woven together, and yeah, largely musical. This time, we introduced instruments, so we had guitar, electric guitar, piano and drums, double bass, organ, some other things I can't remember.

**DR:** When was this made? What was the year?

**AN:** In 2018, right?

**NS:** Yeah, premiered in 2018, but again, we started talking, and thinking about it in 2015.

**AN:** And the show, we're making now is called *Universal Childcare*, which is a ten-person choir, essentially, that is entirely musical. It's totally taken over. There's very little spoken text, and there may end up being none. And it's music. We're just really interested – [*Amy's baby is making sounds*] ooh, singing! – we are just really interested in the power of music, and how it can communicate, as I said before, so much more than words.

**NS:** Singing baby.

**AN:** The singing baby.

**NS:** With Amy's previous show, *The Big Smoke*, it was one voice. With *Mouthpiece*, we had two voices, and we're excited about the capabilities of multiple voices, and – like we were talking about earlier – doing the same thing physical theatre does with painting, colouring atmosphere and character with the voice. Just the kind of exponential ability with harmony and dissonance in larger numbers is really exciting to us. We've tended to grow, which becomes less manageable production-wise, but more exciting musically and aurally.

**DR:** And does it feel that the work is becoming more Canadian? You mentioned that the rock opera was dealing with Canadian issues, a specific problem. And I don't know what the content, the subject matter of the *Universal Childcare* is, but to what extent do you feel like you're becoming more embedded in your local landscape?

**NS:** I think, as humans and activists, we've become really interested in tackling issues where we are and that really need to be handled, and that we can point out, or shed light on, and ask for change in localised ways that resonate on a universal level, because anything that's happening here is happening all over the place. You know, like *Now You See Her* was dealing with the many ways women are erased: when they reach a certain age, becoming invisible; racial politics rendering them invisible. In Canada, we have a huge crisis of Indigenous women actually disappearing, being murdered, and the police not looking into it. It's a huge, huge problem, and the government for a long, long, long time wouldn't even acknowledge it, which they say it's starting to happen, but no action has been taken. So that specifically is Canadian, but that is happening everywhere. I don't know, I think that maybe we're becoming more motivated by activism.

**AN:** [In] *Universal Childcare*, we're also comparing four countries – Canada, the US, Japan, and Denmark, in order to shed light on childcare, because we're screaming for federally-subsidised childcare in Canada, because we are Canadians, but it should be. We're comparing four wealthy nations who have the means to do so, and how we've been screaming about this for a long time, and how close we've come – certain countries – and we keep crawling forward and then taking steps back. In this case, the text is translated into six languages. I sort of feel we're actually becoming less Canadian. *Mouthpiece* was very autobiographical, as close as an autobiographical piece I think we will ever make – it's just so our dreams and fears and thoughts, wrapped in fiction, but just pulled from our guts. And then, I think the two shows we've developed, and are developing since then, are opened up to include other voices.



## [00:49:23] MUSICAL INFLUENCES

**DR:** In terms of the sort of musical content, can you characterise what kind of musical influence is present in those shows?

**AN:** Well, *Mouthpiece*, the musical narrative ended up being a sort of abridged history of the female voice. So, we have gospel-type hymn, we have Andrews Sisters – the harmonies of the Andrews Sisters, Billie Holiday, Tina Turner, Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell, Beyoncé, Britney Spears – I'm missing a few in there.

**NS:** Gregorian or Georgian female choir.

**AN:** Opera. In *Mouthpiece*, we sort of take you through in order. Not that everyone would notice, or anyone. Very few, I think, have at least commented that they – definitely a lot of them you can hear. Certainly, they're so disparate, like, the Andrews Sisters versus Billie Holiday versus Beyoncé. But the fact that that's what we're doing strengthened the piece but was perhaps not overtly acknowledged. And then *Now You See Her* – oh, I haven't thought about the music of that in some time – each character had their own music associated with them, and then, an overarching, largely a cappella, vocal score. *Universal Childcare* is almost entirely a cappella, and with so many voices. It's like a field day. It's just so delightful to compose for so many voices. The genre is again kind of all over the place, but with an underlying theme being a certain genre of modern/contemporary, weird – I don't know how to label it, but not too closely tied to any genre, a lot of it is just mishmash. We haven't finished the show, so haven't really thought about how to articulate it yet. But there are – how many compositions? There's a lot.

**NS:** There's like 30 or something.

**AN:** There's a lot. But some of them are very short. Some of them are like clearly based on a style, but most of them – we have jazz and–

**NS:** But I would say that the way that Amy composes is really instinctual. Like, not tied to music theory. She always works with her own voice, layering her own voice.

**AN:** Norah and I are not musical – have no training, musically.

**NS:** But to me, when I think about genre, it's like 'Amy'! Because whatever the influences musically that she and I have taken in our lives – that are like spewed out in different ways – there is a kind of uniqueness to the way that she processes and produces music – a cappella music, particularly – that all comes out sounding related, even if it's very different stylistically. So, I think it's like modern/contemporary – I associate some very different things with. But there's a kind of a lack of formal structure that I think is right for categorising this.

## [00:52:55 to 00:56:35] 'Fall Dance' from *Now You See Her* (2018)

**AN:** There is an interesting observation I had when doing a piece for *Now You See Her*, which was – I wanted a techno number. I wanted a big techno dance number. And I struggled a bit to find it – and using a drum machine and vocoder – and then I found something that I was pretty happy with. And I gave it to our sound designer to listen to, and he came back the next day, and he was like: 'Oh, it's so great. I added this. I did some stuff to it, to make it sound more of the genre.' And what he showed me was like amazing, because it sounded a lot like techno. And I felt really bad, because I was like: 'The thing is, techno is a very male-dominated music genre – first of all – a lot of like dudes in their basements. And what you've done sounds a lot like that, and sounds like fucking great, put it on the radio. But I don't – I don't want that.' And that was kind of the approach for the entire process of *Mouthpiece* as well. We didn't show it to anybody. We did not want a man's hands on it. For that show specifically, just because it was trying to capture exactly what it felt like inside of us to feel like a woman. We didn't want any influence – even if it would make it like better, or closer to what people like, or have seen or heard before. We specifically don't want that. So musically, yes, even though there is like a 'techno number', it's our version, being untrained, and not really knowing what we're doing. Similar to when we were adapting the *Mouthpiece* film script, and Norah and I kept saying: 'But we don't know how to write movies.' We'd be saying like: 'How about we do this?' or 'I don't know if you can do this.' And Patricia – the gift she gave us was saying: 'Your inexperience is your asset, because you're just coming up with shit, because you don't know how to make a movie', and I think that's a great



provocation. And I think that's how we approach certainly music, or certainly I do. It's taken me a long time to admit that I'm a musician, or a composer, and I still find it hard.

## **[00:57:16 TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS AS COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE**

**DR:** How do you compose when you are not initiated in those processes? What does composition look like in your practice?

**AN:** It's me in a closet with GarageBand.

**DR:** Okay.

**AN:** Me in a closet with MultiTracks, and without thinking too much.

**DR:** Okay.

**AN:** Me with a microphone and some way of recording that. Sometimes, it's just my phone, because everything we're making is more than one voice. I use any kind of software that you can – you know, if this were 30 years ago, I would be using an eight-track recorder. Like, it's any kind of – it can be analogue – any kind of way of layering of my voice. And even that's how I approach instrumentation. I will first do it vocally like 'boom, ba, boom, boom, ba', and then, if I want it to become real drums, I'd use that as a reference. I started using a drum machine to replace that. But my instrument is my voice, first and foremost, and I feel very comfortable, extremely comfortable with that. And I love doing it – I love composing in that way. I find it very hard to compose when someone else is giving me the direction. It's very hard, or if I know I have to deliver something very specific that isn't – essentially, what I'm doing is devising with myself, because devising is all improvisation, right? You improvise, and then you build on that, refine and improvise. And so the way that I compose is: don't think too hard, lay something down, even if you kind of like it, lay something on top of it. And almost always the first improvisation I like best. For the soundtrack of the film *Mouthpiece*, almost all of those pieces – I made a bunch of stuff and sent it to Patricia. Half of them were done on the first day. And I had weeks to compose, which I don't know what that means, but I find it really interesting. I think it's because the more you think about it, the less true it is to what it is you're feeling, or wanting to say. And then you start overthinking it, and it becomes a bit fake, or trying to sound like something else, or yourself previously. But yes, as Norah says, it's all very instinctual. And we teach workshops, Norah and I – 'Physical theatre meets voice' is what we call them. So, it's all like three days of experimenting, really. And one of the things we often say, since they're almost always only women – because they're mostly female-identifying participants, we tell them to trust their instinct. It's like such an important thing to remember, because often we don't, because we don't feel like experts, because we're untrained, because it's a male-dominated industry – film, theatre, music – all of them. I don't know what's female-dominated industry in entertainment.

**NS:** Childcare.

**AN:** Childcare, there you go. But it just took Norah and I such a long time to believe – I mean it sounds cheesy maybe – to believe in ourselves, believe in our ideas, and believe in our instincts. So, if I had been younger, and I gave my techno song to the sound designer, I may have been like: 'Oh yeah, that sounds much more legit. Let's go with that one', instead of: 'That sounds like closer to what everything else sounds like. Why don't we go with a thing that doesn't really sound that much like techno song, but it's something else? It's techno through a woman.'

**NS:** The other thing that affects our music processes is that we both learn by ear. And we normalised it very quickly, because it's how we both work – is just hearing it, and reproducing, and there is no piano, there is no relative key. Like, you saw *Mouthpiece*: every night, there's a bunch of songs that we have to start simultaneously in harmony, and it's relative to what – I mean, there's a key that we think it should be in, but because it's a cappella, we find each other, and that's where it is. So, that kind of ear, and that kind of ability to find notes out of nowhere, and–

**AN:** At the same time.

**NS:** And do it at the same time, it became really kind of normalised to us as the process through which music is made and learned in our work. And then when we brought other people in, we very quickly realised that's a big ask, and a lot of people have been trained with a piano, and with perfect pitch, and



with technicality, sheet music. So again, insisting: 'No, we're not going to learn with a piano, we're going to learn the way that we make work' was a process for us to defend it, to like stand up for this as a legitimate way of learning music – which, similarly to composing, it's hard to defend because the whole world has done it a different way. And it's also hard as a person – as a singer, it's hard, but to us it felt really worthwhile to insist on.

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

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

### Clips Summary

[00:20:49 to 00:22:27] 'Around Here' from *Mouthpiece* (2015)

[00:42:12 to 00:43:15] 'Imitating Life' from film version of *Mouthpiece* (2018)

[00:52:55 to 00:56:35] 'Fall Dance' from *Now You See Her* (2018)

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