



## **Pedro de Senna & Caridad Svich: Rumble Dramaturgies**

### **[00:00:23] INTRO**

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello and welcome! Our guests in the Salon today are Pedro de Senna and Caridad Svich, thinkers, makers and writers of and for performance who share an interest in multilingual dramaturgies and polyphonic theatre.

Pedro de Senna is a theatre practitioner and academic. He is a Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Theatre Theory and Practice at Middlesex University, where his current research focuses on the relationships between futures studies and performance studies, theatre education and society, and performance and right-wing politics. He has published on theatre translation and adaptation, directing and dramaturgy, and disability aesthetics. In his practice, Pedro has extensive experience as a director, workshop facilitator, performer and dramaturg. He is an associate director with SignDance Collective, a disabled-led dance-theatre company using sign languages as a basis for their choreographic practice.

Caridad Svich is a playwright and theatre-maker. She received the 2012 OBIE for Lifetime Achievement award and has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. Her plays, in English and Spanish, focus on human and environmental rights, gender fluidity, incantatory speech acts, and hybridity from a Latinx feminist perspective. She is published by Intellect UK, Methuen Drama and TCG, among others. Her most recent book is on *Mitchell & Trask's Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Routledge, 2019). Her first independent feature film *Fugitive Dreams*, based on her play, has been selected for the 2020 Fantasia International Film Festival in Montreal.

In 2015, Caridad and Pedro collaborated on SignDance Collective's production of Caridad's performance text *Carthage/Cartagena*, a piece exploring the condition of those displaced and isolated by slavery, human trafficking and forced migration through ten multilingual letter-song-poems from metaphorical places of dislocation. In this conversation, they discuss the relation between the deeply personal and intimate, and the global and planetary in dramaturgical practices, always poised between a moment of listening and a moment of speaking.

This conversation was recorded on Zoom between London and New York on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

### **[00:03:03] SALON**

**Caridad Svich:** Hello.

**Pedro de Senna:** Hello, how are you?

**CS:** Fine, Pedro. How are you doing?

**PdS:** I'm fine, thank you.

**CS:** I wanted to start with a quote, actually, which I'm sure you know. I was reading this morning and I was like: 'Oh, I love this quote!' It's from Patrice Pavis from his book on sound and theatre performance. And he says: 'We spend our lives faced with images: they stand in our way, they guide us and they absorb us. But we live inside the world of sound: it encompasses us, mothers us' [2011: x]. I wanted to use that to kick us off.

**PdS:** Okay. I like this idea of sound encompassing us. I mean, we're now wearing headphones as we speak. And there is this sense that images tend to be outside us, but the sound is inside our heads isn't it, as we hear these voices and these things. And I think sound can be very, very intimate and in that respect, extremely personal as well. In performance I think there's also something interesting that sound does which – I guess there's an alienation that you might get with images as well – but that phenomenon that we all experience that our voices don't sound the same in our heads as they do when we hear them back to us. So I think sound is very powerful in playing these dynamics between the self and the representation, the self and the portrayal of the self or the presentation, the broadcast of the



self and that is fascinating as well and I think every child has always been fascinated by this, by how we sound very different, you know from, in our heads.

**CS:** I guess it makes me think about – in relationship to performance specifically or the act of making theatre – several things. One is that at this time – globally when the idea of live theatre is not a possibility pretty much except for various isolated cases! – I've been looking at how what seems to resonate, and the irony of that word, but what seems to resonate for me when I'm watching digital theatre, Zoom stage theatre, like this, is that I've been seeing a lot of people experiment with things like digital backdrops and fancy design and getting excited by all the gadgets and toys that are possible. But actually, the work that I've seen that really moves me is work that is sophisticated around its use of sound, that actually in a platform like this one, what I'm drawn to is what comes through the ear, but also what makes me reawaken to the sound of the everyday, the everyday environment. And I think that in a theatre space, usually, I'm always fascinated by the idea of when I talk to sound designers about, you know, we're scoring a show and the text is already a score and we're laying another score on top of it that's going to counterpoint to that text or commenting on in some way. But actually, what we tend to not discuss so much is that there's the sound of the people, when the people are there: of the people seeing the thing and the kind of sonic vibrations that they're bringing to the event that also the acoustics of the hall that you're in, if you're in an indoor space, if you're in an outdoor space that changes, right? So, there's actually already a bed, a sonic bed that is in relationship to what is the staged sonic bed that's been created for us right, the theatre event and from the designer sort of working on it. And so I've become re-interested in this notion of how we reawaken ourselves to understanding that if sound is 'encompassing us and mothering us' to use Pavis' phrase, then how we kind of negotiate that when we go to the theatre or when we're in the presence of theatre even if it's digital, to reawaken that for ourselves. And it brings me back to the notion of, of course, our relationship to silence which is part of the sonic bed. How do we sit with silence, what does silence mean in a digital space, because sometimes that means that people get anxious, right? It's like silence: 'Oh no, that's dead space!', but it's actually not dead space at all, right? So, I think those are things that have been hovering a lot for me right now also related to – I know one of the things that we talked about prior to my talking today was the idea of breath, and how breath functions theatrically but also as a necessity, yeah?

**PdS:** Gosh, there's so much to unpick in what you said, it's like okay, where do we begin?

[Laughter.]

**CS:** I'm obsessed with sound, you know, so yeah!

**PdS:** Yeah, my first reaction when you started talking about sound in digital theatres is, I remember Thomas Ostermeier's *Richard III*, and the use of microphones there, and how incredible that was, and it was so–

**CS:** Oh my god.

**PdS:** It really created this sort of environment, and then you moved on to talking about the sound, the bed of sound that is in the theatre, I was thinking, yeah I've played to empty theatres before, and it sounds, performing to an empty theatre, it feels very different. And in these Covid times, if we do reopen the theatres at 30% capacity that will change the nature, not only of the atmosphere and the environment, but actually sonically and acoustically, you know, how we'll be playing. And then what did you say? You moved on to, before you spoke about breath, you spoke about something else and I should be making a note of this but I wasn't.

**CS:** I did speak about how we can, I think ignore sometimes I think as makers actually that, every time we're staging an event and we've spent hours in a rehearsal room, and hours thinking, in design meetings and all those things that happen behind the scenes basically, private-facing events, right? When we go public-facing, it's kind of like this thing that happens in relationship to an audience, but actually what sometimes doesn't happen in the rehearsal hall is – and I'm not saying that everybody, I think some people do think about this – but we don't think about necessarily at the act of making the thing, how that's going to resonate in the space, and actually, what is the sonic field that's going to enter that space, that's going to affect the space. By people, but also by the venue that you're in, and also what the history of that venue is, because I believe in kind of ghosts, but I think that the idea of



like the haunted breath that is inside a theatre space. The haunted breaths that have been inside that theatre space actually still affect how you walk into that, especially if it's a building.

**PdS:** Yeah, absolutely. I think something that probably will work its way towards our conversation a little later, but the idea of interference as well. From the sweet wrapper to the mobile phone. I remember once being in Epidaurus watching *Antigone*, you know, famous for its acoustics – this beautiful theatre, 14,000 people sitting and watching the National Theatre of Greece playing *Antigone*. And then somebody's mobile phone rings in the middle of that sort of environment, and you just want for there to be a kind of a spotlight right on that person and them to be sucked out of the theatre, you know. So, it's interesting how a sound disruption, a sound disturbance can also completely remove you, going back to Pavis, this idea that sound envelops you, but sound also is capable of completely taking you away. Another example of this, sort of similarly again in Greece is at an open-air theatre, we're about to watch *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and it was an open theatre inside of a city, in Thessaloniki in northern Greece – this relates a little bit to the notion of breath, and I have to kind of open brackets here, perhaps. Something that always fascinated me was that moment of silence between the conductor lifting their baton and the orchestra starting to play, that intake of breath before it starts. And that's I think, a really, really pregnant silence, a moment of anticipation of sound about to come. So, the theatre equivalent of that is perhaps when the lights go off and the show's about to start. And so closing brackets now: we were at this moment in Thessaloniki in this open-air theatre, lots of people coming in, milling around and so on, and then the lights went dark, and a car alarm went in the neighbourhood as the opening line of the show was about to be uttered. Luckily, the stage manager had the presence of spirit to wait for the car alarm to stop before they cued the lights on, and the show could start. But again, the kind of sound interfering, and you know we all held our breath as the lights went off, you know, okay, it's about to start. And then, you know, and then there was that sort of break, which we needed to kind of retune ourselves to the space and to the environment, which I think is fascinating really.

**CS:** But sometimes I find that, I've been going back and forth on this notion of interference and maybe what we think about as noise, for example, or disruptive noise – because I always think there's noise in a space, in a good way. I've been going back and forth on it because I feel like maybe more recently, I've just been thinking a lot about the policing of theatre spaces and–

**PdS:** Of audiences, yeah.

**CS:** Yeah, sonically and also the fact that sometimes somebody's mobile does go off and we just wait and let it happen and move on, you know what I mean, like we're all in the same space together, so I don't understand the need to not acknowledge that, you know what I mean? It just feels a little bit strange to go: 'Oh, there's an event happening, it's live.' If we're doing live theatre – 'you're there, whoops, something happens' – we actually could stop if we're on stage! You know, we can actually totally stop and just wait for that thing to occur, because we never know if it's an accident, we don't know if it's like an emergency, we don't know. And I just feel like, sometimes I feel a little bit that the policing of theatre spaces around sound and specifically around response, for example. I know Kirsty Sedgman, has written about this in [*The*] *Reasonable Audience* a great deal, but sort of looking at 'be quiet', 'be quiet at the show', you know, 'don't respond', but actually sometimes you have to. And I remember I saw – speaking of the Greeks or Greek-like things – there was a very intense, incredibly physical, sort of Pina Bausch-influenced production of *Julius Caesar*, out of all places, Oregon. Shakespeare, which is not particularly known for, I wouldn't say like massively avant-garde productions, but this production was pretty much sort of in that spectrum, and it was incredibly violent in a way that was visceral and exciting and thrilling. I mean, I had no – my caveat, was I went into that production, I was like, I have no interest in seeing *Julius Caesar* again, like I'm so bored by this play, but then I was sort of awakened by the theatre experience and how the director Shana Cooper who staged it, and the person sitting next to me was kind of like: 'Ah!', 'Ooh', 'Oh my gosh', 'Ah!', she was always emoting in terms of what's happening because she was reacting to the work, like it was so like within her bones. And so, the person in front of us turned around: 'Shut up!', quite loudly. You know, and the actors are doing it, you know I'm in the audience, the actors are still doing their thing, the thing is still happening, and I was like: 'Has anybody acknowledged that this just occurred?', you know? And then in the interval, they actually got into an altercation. She was like: 'I am responding as I respond.' And he was like: 'You shouldn't be responding when you go to the theatre, you should be quiet.' I left that row as an audience



member. I left and I went to the back of the theatre to watch the rest of the show where there was actually no one so that I could concentrate on the show because suddenly I felt like there was so much active disruptive noise in my row that I actually felt that I couldn't re-engage with the piece after intermission if I didn't leave the physical space of that row that I was in.

**PdS:** There's something about the production of sound that is in communion, if you like with the show as you were saying, and in that sense the 'shut up' is a lot more disruptive and breaks it than the actual breathing along with it. It's interesting.

**CS:** Which I guess really goes back to this notion of – and I'm not the only one who thinks it, but often when I specifically talk to students or myself – [*laughing*] if I'm talking to myself while writing plays or making theatre pieces – is that I always say it's a breathing apparatus that you're making, it's how that piece breathes through space and time – hence the score – but also how you're structuring, how you imagine the audience will breathe through that piece through space and time eventually. And I find that structuring the breathing of a piece as it moves dramaturgically is really key for me. To the notion of, like, do we want the audience to be like: 'Ah, ah, ah, ah', do we want them to be like: 'I'm just going to zone out for a little bit and then just going to be with you for a while'? Do we want them in that place of the anticipatory, right, that thing of the inhale of: 'It's about to start', or: 'This moment's about to happen', which happens sometimes when you're structuring?

**PdS:** Yeah, and it gets that with classics as well, doesn't it, you know, if you go to see a Shakespeare, and you know, *Henry V* is about to start his big speech, and everybody is kind of like: 'Okay, it's coming!', you know? There's that sort of thing that everybody holds their breath together, and this common exhalation is fascinating as well. I think it's interesting because in our conversation we are already talking to our chosen sounds even though we haven't played them yet – because we're talking about the environment and we're talking about breath, and we're talking about breath which might be disrupted somehow. So I wonder if it might be a good time for me to play the sound of that breath for you, given that I think some of the words that we've already used are all very much of today. We talked about – maybe we didn't use the word 'lockdown', but we talked about our conditions of these kind of situations, having to use digital theatre, and we used the word 'policing' and we know the relationship between police and people breathing – or not these days – is one that is very fraught as well. And, of course, the idea of the lockdown, and what it has done to the planet in some ways. I can hear more birds in my garden, and I can hear different – the soundscape around me, the environment has changed as well. So, I'll play this clip, and it's a clip of breathing of someone with advanced pneumonia heard through a stethoscope. It's something akin to what you would hear, or a doctor would hear if they were listening to somebody with Covid-19. The sound is really layered. It's about 45 seconds or so.

**[00:19:38 to 00:20:24] Excerpt from a recording of the amplified sounds of the lungs of a Coronavirus patient**

**PdS:** I find this pretty haunting as well. I don't know what your reactions to it are, maybe you could tell me...

**CS:** Yeah, I feel like – it's funny like the first word that popped to my mind was a combination of sort of antithetical words. One was soothing, strangely soothing. But also it felt like invasive, like I was privy to something I shouldn't be privy to. Yes, what right do I have to be listening to the sound of this person with pneumonia? Do you know what I mean like I suddenly was like, I'm not the doctor like so, suddenly displaced from its context, it's totally fascinating as a sound sample, but it then, you know, since you gave me the context, I'm like: 'Oh, should I – is this right?' I think it puts me in this space of trying to negotiate as a researcher of the sound, two things. One is, the soothing part of it is that could also be my body, right? How do we listen to our own bodies if we could, if we had sort of the instruments to do so, and what would they sound like? And the second part of that is that other part of like, negotiating am I the appropriate receiver of this and, if so, how do I reintegrate it to the body from which it came, so that it is restored, so that it is kind of acknowledging the presence of the human to which this belonged? So, yeah, so that's where I rest with it, actually.

**PdS:** That's very interesting because – I mean what you said there is this sense of us kind of wondering whether we should be listening to this, or whether we should be watching this, I think sometimes good theatre does this to you, you know?



**CS:** Yes!

**PdS:** Should I be, you know, should I be witness to this? What right do I have to do this? And good dramaturgy does that as well. I think what attracted me to this, and maybe why I find it haunting as well as – more haunting than soothing – is that I guess I had been thinking about the production of breath as you know for some time, and I was kind of trailing through a bunch of sort of clips of breathing and what would be considered sort of healthy, normal breathing and then there was this thing with pneumonia and the explanation, and you start being able to kind of unpick the various layers, that there is a kind of a rumbling in the background that is there, and I can't remember now the medical term for that particular type of rumbling. And then you have another sort of sound of crackling as well as the in and out breath, that in regular breathing you wouldn't get. And so it's almost as if the disease adds complexity to the breath, sonically at least.

**CS:** Yes, yeah.

**PdS:** And I totally get you that there is an ethical kind of dimension to this, like, you know, who is this poor person, did they get better?

**CS:** Do they get better, who are they, are they going to be alright? Oh my god.

**PdS:** Yeah! And understanding how the disruption manifests itself sonically and actually makes it interesting to hear. Which takes me a little bit to the idea of the aesthetics and the idea of things that are 'broken' and that are actually aesthetically more interesting and attractive to us. And I don't know, this is at the essence of drama, isn't it? I mean, I remember you tweeted once that you can write happy plays!

[Laughter.]

**CS:** I can occasionally, and I do! But you know, it has to happen – I think sometimes I just tell myself that that's what I want to do. I guess, riffing off of what you're describing, I'd also think about the notion of what's the container for that breath, and that when we're making theatre, we're – I think – as makers constantly thinking about what the container is, and: 'Is this the right container for this material or for these objects that I'm putting in this space or for this relationship with the audience, and is it an ethical relationship?' But it also makes me think about orientation and disorientation, which sound is chiefly part of. Weirdly, it reminded me of a visual metaphor theatrically which is the theatre-maker John Jesurun and his staging of *Philoctetes*, his version of *Philoctetes*, because he designs his work as well as directs it, and does everything. When I saw his production, he had a sort of projected screen behind the actors for the first maybe ten minutes of the show [which] was just a series of what looked like moving cloud formations, you know? It felt very innocuous, it was blurry, and it was interesting cloud formations, and occasionally there'd be like something that looked like – we couldn't decipher what it was – but it was like a particle, a breath particle we thought maybe, and then as the play moved forward it got less blurry and they were bullet casings, that he had shot.

**PdS:** Oh, wow.

**CS:** And suddenly it reoriented us to what we were seeing, or we thought we were seeing, and I think sound functions similarly that we are conditioned to, we are oriented towards something, we're literally oriented: we're sort of brought into something sonically as listeners or as receptors of sound in our bodies. And I think in theatre we're trying to constantly disorient, you know, once we create the orientation to disorient through that sonically as a dramaturgical tool, and sometimes it's subtle and sometimes hits us over the head. Or sometimes it's playful, like I think, of course, of *Complicité's The Encounter* and its use of binaural headphone technology and how it sort of constantly displaces where we think the sound is coming from, including the notion of lip sync and how it reawakens us to the idea of that: 'Oh, actually that's not a live voice that I'm hearing, I'm hearing somebody speaking to a pre-recording', but the illusion is that it's live, in the moment, and kind of the privileging or an accustomed orientation around: 'Oh if I'm sitting in a live theatre, everybody's live' when in fact maybe they're not, part of the time. That's something that I'm really fascinated by, this notion of how lip sync can be an interesting tool to actually also disorient an audience toward the presence of a performer, toward their vocal presence but also their bodily presence and their corporeal sonic, their own corporeal sonic beds. But also like that pre-recording is them at another time – so, it's not them in the moment, but it's them maybe like three weeks ago when they recorded the thing. And so, we're getting almost what I call kind



of a time lapse effect. Like, that's a pre-recording of that performer three weeks ago, that I'm now hearing live in the space decontextualised. It just makes me think about that, which might be a good segue from my clip weirdly, in a weird way. But I know you have it up already so I will, I won't say what it is, I'll say what it is after.

**PdS:** Okay, yeah, I'll play it.

**[00:28:41 to 00:29:12] Excerpt from a recording of the sound of an ice shelf melting in the Antarctic**

**CS:** So it's the ice shelf in Antarctica, recorded – 33 seconds of that. I'll preface that by saying that I've been working on a piece about Antarctica – partly about Antarctica and partly about Ushuaia in Argentina – for a while, and one of my ways into it as a writer was doing a lot of research and I actually had to read a scientist's work and all this stuff. I just really wanted to listen to the sound of the ice, I was like: 'I want to feel –' The scientists kept talking about, for his film photography of Antarctica and his own research there, it's like: 'Oh the glaciers!' And I was like: 'I just want to listen to the ice! Can I just listen to the ice, please?', because I think that that's actually the music of the earth, right? So, I wanted to go back to this idea of our reconnection to the planet and how sound can be one of those reconnections – I mean it is, it's always around us and it's always inside of us, but it's also a way of deep listening to the earth, especially at a time when matters around climate group and climate change are prominent. So hence thinking about do we listen to the ice, and what does that mean when we hear it. So I'm curious about your reaction.

**PdS:** I mean, lots of things. I think that this idea of deep listening, again, both our clips actually come from recordings that require special equipment and not just, you know–

**CS:** Right!

**PdS:** And they both – there's something about the background rumble in that, that almost echoes the background rumble of the lung. And I don't know the full science behind the ice shelf, but I wonder if that background also has something to do with the disintegration of the ice shelf that you were saying about that clip. I read something about how scientists are using the sound also as a way to measure changes in the structure of the ice from climate change. So, it's almost again like everything is coming together – there's this breathing of the earth and our own personal breathing and the very intimate and the global kind of coming together again as the best theatre does – and as I think your theatre often does. Earlier you were speaking about the sound interference sort of hitting you on the head and I think that the example of this clip has this thing that you have this background and suddenly you have a sort of jarring thing coming in and it's incredibly dramatic and I think again to me, it's a bit like the presence of a foreign language in a play – which is something that you and I have worked together on quite a lot!

**CS:** Quite a lot, quite a lot indeed! Yeah, and I've been thinking sometimes just the act of especially in English. I'm in the United States, and you're in the UK – it's no surprise, but in some ways it is, in a weird way – we're both in English language-dominant societies where English is privileged as the language of theatre, you know, as the spoken language of theatre, but also the, I would say the structural language for the kind of theatre, a lot of kind of theatre gets made coming from kind of Western Euro-centric sources. And I think because of that, every time I hear, or a play displaces that, even if it's just for a moment, I'm like: 'Oh, thank you, thank you for reminding us that we're in a multilingual world.'

**PdS:** [*Proposes in Portuguese that from now on the discussion could take place in Portuguese, and Caridad could speak Spanish*]

**CS:** ¡Precisamente! [*Laughter.*]

**PdS:** ¡Precisamente! ¡Sí, verdad! [*Laughter.*]

**CS:** ¡Precisamente! it's just like funny, and I keep thinking about, I taught – I re-looked at *Attempts on Her Life*, which I know is like, a play that some people have problems with but, *Attempts on Her Life* by Martin Crimp. But I forgot, I had forgotten – I was teaching it this semester and I'd forgotten that last sequence where the translations occur. So, it's like: a line is said, then this translation, and this translation, and this translation. 'Oh my god, that's so exciting!' And then it was interesting, because reading it I was like: 'When's the last time – I can't think of the last time I've seen work that actually



does that!', do you know what I mean? Like outside of seeing work with surtitles and going to BAM, or going to St Ann's Warehouse or whatever, and it's like: 'Oh, I ache, I ache!' for just an acknowledgement, as simple a gesture as that toward: 'There are other languages, they sound differently. It's okay.' And I think that what I've found a lot with more parochial or provincial audiences, I would say, is that... I've been in talkbacks where – oh my gosh, I had like Spanish in one, you know, I write in Spanish sometimes, and sometimes I write in Spanglish – and I think had Spanglish in my play, and an audience member at the time was like: 'But I don't understand!' Like, literally! I think I had like maybe throughout the whole play maybe five sentences in Spanish, you know, for real: 'Why? I had to suddenly for a moment like retune my ear to something else, and why didn't you immediately translate it when the line was said?' And it's like: 'I'm not going to do that for you', you know. And I think the resistance to actually listening to a different kind of – and yet we live, I mean we both live in countries, but also live in cities that are deeply multilingual. You go down the street and you're hearing different kinds of languages on the street.

**PdS:** Yes, but I mean, this anecdote that you just told, tells us a lot about, not only the hierarchies of language, but hierarchies of listening. This is not exactly what I want to say, I think what I want to say is that there are these hierarchies of modes of perception almost, of aesthetic choices that audiences – that there is, as you said, there is, one way of watching theatre; and that if this way of watching theatre is somehow disrupted, that people feel somehow disempowered, or the ground shifts beneath them. And again, I wonder if the act of writing is – this was once said about something I wrote – that the play was trying to teach the audience a new way to listen. And so how much listening is involved in writing, and how much does writing and dramaturgy affect the way we listen? I would like to try and link back – I might not be making any sense, but hey! – I'd like to try to link this back to what you said as you introduced your sound, that you said: 'I didn't want just to look at the glaciers' – the glaciers or the ice sheets – 'I wanted to listen to it.' So how does that listening feed into your writing, I guess is what I wanted to ask?

**CS:** I think on more conceptual level – that particular project was a commission, so there were some parameters to it that I had to adhere to – on a more conceptual level, liberated from the specifics of that project, one of the things I'm deeply interested in around dramaturgy – it's interesting in Spanish 'dramaturgo' is the word for playwright. And it's funny because when I meet writers, especially from Latin America and Spain and so forth that there isn't an equivalent of the word 'playwright' necessarily, right, in the same way that we use it, so I go back to the idea of 'dramaturgo'. So, the idea of dramaturgy, scoring a text, I'm constantly thinking about, not just line breaks and where the breath is held, where the breath is released, but sometimes going, almost going to a place that seems impossible. I'm really interested in listening to, conditioned listening around specifically let's say plays, just to put that on the table. Plays that may look like they're plays to some degree, that have characters and action, all those things, and maybe about people in rooms. Although I think it's always in a room, the room of theatre. Anyway, so looking at that specifically, as you're scoring a text, there are ways that you want to play with the audience. One of them is: 'Do I lift them into the play? Do I invite them and orient them sonically into the experience of this play by a sound that feels familiar', right? So, you're like: 'Oh, is it set up like the rhythms of sit com?' I studied – this is something people don't know, but now they're going to know because they've listened to the podcast – but I actually studied comedy a lot. In fact, in my early, formative years as a playwright I was obsessed with comedy and the structures of comedic routines, and how they operate on the ear. And I think that's affected all of my work – that, and kind of my interest and study of music. So I think within that is the idea you're orienting an audience to a sound that may be familiar. Your job, part of the way, is to disorient them from the familiar to something new. Once you've done that you have to disorient them again because as soon as they hear it, they'll be reoriented and think that's familiar [*laughing*] do you know what I mean? And so, I think I'm constantly trying to play a game with having the receiver not only try to hear new sounds, as it were, which is hard to do in a kind of culture that is constantly recycling older sounds – so how do you listen to that anew? And secondly, around moments of impossibility. So, what on the page might for some people be unreadability, or, for me, more crucially around breath control and actually going past the point, like sometimes creating passages in my texts, planes of texts where I'm asking the performer to actually go beyond what may seem possible, so that they're kind of like having to really hold a lot of breath to get through the thing. I'm fascinated by that, but I know that sometimes in a more plebeian sense when



I'm working or when I'm discussing dramaturgy with students or with other colleagues that that notion kind of isn't talked about very much, that actually as a scorer of text, theatre-makers, one of our jobs is to play with, again, the breathing apparatus. What is the breathing apparatus in the piece, but also in individual moments, how are you calibrating that breathing apparatus and sometimes you want to extend it – kind of how it belongs to a lot of work –and sometimes you want them to, kind of, feel like there's very little work happening. And maybe it's just one word being thrown, and another word being thrown, or maybe just an utterance, or maybe a cry or maybe a stop, or maybe a gesture that is also vibrating sonically. And so, I think that that's what I think about, to respond to your question.

**PdS:** Actors consciously train to breathe. And I don't think there is much of it when you're training playwrights that sort of education about breathing in writing plays. That's kind of interesting to think of, you know, if we're teaching and training or educating people who're writing and educating dramaturgs, how much attention is paid to breath and to listening? I wanted to come back to this again, to this idea of listening on a planetary scale. I think we could talk about listening to voices and to languages and so on but listening to the earth as well, as you were talking about, and how much of that works its way into – I guess what I'm trying to articulate is that and perhaps I never have before, is really that first and foremost, writing is about listening.

**CS:** Yeah.

**PdS:** And dramaturgy is about that, isn't it? Whether the rhythm of one's breath, the potential disruption to that or the rhythm of life around you. From a planetary perspective, I think this is quite important and quite political that this listening is done properly. We're also at a place politically now where so many people are being finally made to and required to actively listen to others, so I don't know if we can maybe turn this final bit of our conversation, turn it a bit more political, and talk about this kind of political listening, whether it's eco-listening or Black Lives Matter listening.

**CS:** Yeah, yeah.

**PdS:** Or intersectional, all of these three things, listening, because I don't think you can separate gender equality from racial equality from planetary and eco-equality and eco-solidarity, so–

**CS:** Yes, but I think I think crucially around class, because environmental racism is at the root of a lot of what we call climate change, and in terms of climate change, most of that is human-made, yes, it's also human-made, predominantly white human-made climate change against Black and brown communities around the globe: extracting resources from their land, extracting labour, creating toxic zones of life in their immediate environments, so we're talking about environment. And it's funny because I was talking to a colleague last week and we were talking about eco-drama, do you know what I mean, like, and I said: 'No, it's not a niche subject', do you know what I mean? I think what bothers me when people use the word eco-drama is that it becomes like, oh you study it in a course somewhere, or it lives in an anthology, but actually everything we do when we make art, and specifically theatre, because we're theatre-makers, has to be eco-conscious, you know, because we're responding to it, we're in response to our environment, right. And to ignore that feels a) it's a fallacy, b) what kind of power systems is it playing into, and value systems is it playing into therefore, if you are deliberately ignoring in the making of the work the larger eco-systems of which you are a part? Related to that, the idea of, which I'm partially obsessed with, this idea of vocal hygiene, which has to do with policing the voice, policing the mouth, policing what can be uttered retroactively from that in terms of Black Lives Matter – but also we were talking about listening and what I'm seeing a lot of right now is faux listening, you know, like: 'Check mark', yes, you know, 'I'll post something, I'm listening' as opposed to actually, maybe not 'Check mark, let me post something I'm listening', but more, let me just absorb. I think part of the act of listening is actually sitting with, sitting with and being with something. And it's actually the being with that gets you to a place that's uncomfortable because you can't actually 'check, did that', that sort of attitude – 'Check, did that, we have our diversity inclusion initiative', as opposed to actually really living with that, and the ramifications.

**PdS:** How do we as artists and makers then sit with this? Because in some way we speak through our art, we speak through our theatre-making and therefore I guess I'm trying to kind of square this not necessarily contradiction but the opposition between this moment of listening and this moment of speaking that comes from the dramaturgy or the work that we make.



**CS:** Yes.

**PdS:** I think it's something that needs to be – I guess we need to take time, maybe we should, I mean, I'm saying this to a playwright, we should write fewer plays! [*Laughter.*] And not talk so much!

**CS:** And not be such a prolific – but yeah, but I think it's like taking time, I think, 'being with'. I like using that phrase 'being with', how can we be with material? How can we be with what's happening in society, which globally is exceptionally profound at the moment. It also has been historically profound at different times, so maybe we should be looking at and reading about what's happened historically in the past. It also may mean making different kinds of things if we're making, maybe it's a podcast like this, or an audio piece, or I've been attracted again, like I said, to things that are sort of functioning via audio much more. It's funny they kind of like live within your everyday life in a different way, you know what I mean? I can listen to an audio piece, an audio drama as I am also doing things in my environment, and I love the co-existence of that. And I think that sometimes theatre, in a more conventional sense – either you go to a building or you go to a site where a performance is being held, and a notion of 'holding a performance' is such an interesting phrase. It's not living with you exactly in the same way as you're like: 'I'm going through my life and there's theatre in my ear at the moment, and it's relating to how I'm moving through my life.' Which means it may be relating to how I am seeing someone else on a street, how I'm acknowledging a Twitter post. I think those are all in concert with each other. And I think that sometimes in plays and maybe play-plays that are being asked to be hierarchical in how they present their content – vertical as opposed to horizontal in how they present their content – ask audiences sometimes to not really listen actually, to pretend they're listening to something, so that when they walk out, they're like: 'Oh yeah, I listened, I carry on with my day', as opposed to: 'Oh, I listened', or 'Wow, I don't know what just happened, but I think I listened to something. I think I heard something!'. And how do we hear? How do we hear through the eye? How do we hear through the ear? How do we hear through our bodies, corporally, how does it affect our skin? I think that that's stuff I think about a lot. And related to the idea of amplification, both on a sonic level, like, how do we amplify but also – and I love how that word is used so much now, much more like outside of like the world sound design – but like: 'We'll amplify you!', you know, and I'm like: 'Well, actually maybe de-amplify for a while would be awesome.' How can we take some steps back to actually think about what amplification means, which is related to, you know, one of the first things you said when we started talking, which is the idea of broadcasting, right? So how do we broadcast but at the same time not broadcast? I mean, I think I'm interested in the idea of negation, right, so the idea of like how do we like be in a space of amplification, which is a theatre space, but also be in a place where we're not amplifying or re-ascribing through amplification existing modes, which requires deep listening in order to not re-amplify those modes, right? So it's like a very complicated web.

**PdS:** Listening to the rumbles in the breath really, isn't it?

**CS:** Listening to the rumbles, yeah!

**PdS:** Or as Barthes would have it, 'the grain of the voice', you know. I think that's what we ought to do. I mean obviously, one thing we didn't touch upon and I fear we won't have time to, but it's also the absence of sound, or the difficulty for people who are hard-of-hearing, for example. As you know, I work with sign language sometimes, and it's interesting to think about these other ways of listening, which are not necessarily aural but, as you say, have to do with this deep listening that go beyond the sonic and how they might teach us perhaps something about different qualities of listening. I fear we don't have much time.

**CS:** Yeah, so sorry! I mean, one thing I will say in relationship to that – and I've only just started reading about it, so I don't have all like all the stuff at the ready – but I was reading an article around sound design and looking at actually work made for and by deaf and hard of hearing artists and looking at how, what was the word? – I think it was 'inner tone' or 'inter tone'. There's something like a tone that's below the frequency that most hearing folks are accustomed to listening to things to, but actually, there's a tone that's much lower that actually hard-of-hearing and deaf people respond to in their bodies and that sound designers are experimenting with for theatrical pieces, with placing works at this kind of and again, the word is like 'inter tone', or 'inner tone'–

**PdS:** Infra-tone, maybe? I don't know.



**CS:** Maybe infra-tone, maybe, where it's much, much lower, but actually it will connect with a hard of hearing and deaf audience somehow because there's something in the vibration of that very, very, very, very low frequency that actually connects through the body. I've just been fascinated by that because I've also been thinking about how can that be applied? So, I think a lot in the world of sound design, but also thinking about – when I've been writing, one of the pieces that I wrote recently has to do with, which may seem unrelated, but there's a point – I'm exploring a lot of ASMR, so this notion of whisper [*whispers*] and I'm like, I'm fascinated by that as a theatrical device and a gesture, because it also makes an audience kind of go: 'What?', but you're also playing very intimately, usually with a microphone when you're doing that. And it actually does get inside you in different ways. So, the notion of intimacy gets recalibrated. So those are things I'm thinking about in response to what you're saying, but yeah. What should we end with, two words or three words?

**PdS:** Oh, what should we end with?

**CS:** A bold statement, a bold statement!

**PdS:** I think silence might be the answer.

**CS:** Silence would be great, yes indeed. It was a pleasure, Pedro.

**PdS:** A pleasure, and I wish we could talk for hours and hours.

**CS:** For hours, and hours, and hours!

Transcription by Samantha McAtear

### Clips Summary

[00:19:38 to 00:20:24] Recording of the amplified sounds of the lungs of a Coronavirus patient

[00:28:41 to 00:29:12] Recording of the sound of an ice shelf melting in the Antarctic

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Audio available at [www.auralia.space/salon3-pedrodesenna-and-caridadsvich/](http://www.auralia.space/salon3-pedrodesenna-and-caridadsvich/).

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