



EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA

INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze
Tél. 05 59 93 25 25 - Fax. 05 59 93 06 84 - eke@wanadoo.fr

Egilea - Auteur : Amets ARZALLUS
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AMETS ARZALLUS

By the age of 22 Amets Arzallus was already considered one of the most promising improvisers in the Basque Country.

BIRTH OF A PASSION

“I inherited this passion from my father, who was also an improviser. I sometimes feel like it’s a world I was born into. When I was a child my father took me in his arms to the improvisation school he was in charge of in Hendaye. Before I even learnt to walk, I already knew the way to the school. At home my father began to improvise then he let me continue: I’m not sure whether I managed to make my verses rhyme, but I did at least say something. I’ve never thought that my father wanted to pass on this passion to me at any price or that he consciously forced me along his path. He very often sang verse at home and he took me to listen to improvisers. And it turned out to be something I really liked. So this passion was passed on naturally. When I was a child, a lot of us went to the improvisation classes my father gave. It wasn’t strange or rare. I remember that many of my classmates, who today play rugby or have other activities, came to improvisation classes with us. But perhaps after that the world of improvisation seemed too far away from their concerns. At that time I wasn’t the only one and improvisation was seen as a normal activity.”

IN THE TRADITION OF GREAT IMPROVISERS

“When I was a child, I didn’t have a model, except for my father. Later on, at the age of 13 or 14, I began to realise that I had a preference for a certain type of versification, and I began to know what direction I wanted to take. Since then, whenever I’m asked who’s my favourite improviser I answer: Jose Agirre. My father felt very close to him, because they both came from the same background. We, on the other hand, were born in towns and for us Jose Agirre is the opposite of our own experience: he was brought up in a farming environment, in the countryside, he began to work at a very early age ... He had other references, and you can see that in the way he improvises. To my mind,



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he's a model because his language was rich and full of colourful expressions, and because he represents a world which is the opposite of our own.

We all have these types of references. At the end of the day, improvisation comes from what we ourselves heard or what we admired and remembered, and which remains within us. Also, there's no doubt that we all create our own mark, but in this creative process, I'm convinced that we all try, even if unconsciously, to imitate those models who we respect and admire."

PATHS OF CREATION

"When you're given a subject, you immediately have to put yourself in someone else's position, or think how you'd react yourself to a specific situation, and theoretically you start by imagining the end, because it's the conclusion which is behind improvisation. If the end isn't good, the audience will think the improvisation is bad; if it's good, the audience will think that the verses are good. Even if the development influences the quality of the improvisation, the conclusion accounts for 90%. It's what gives you the ending and the rhyme. For example in: "Hendaiara etorri gira gezur batzu erratera... ' ("We've come to Hendaye to tell a few lies"), you need to find words ending in *tera*, or *atera*, or even *era*. And according to these words, you structure your improvisation point by point. Very often once you have the ending, you begin to sing without even thinking, or if you have a little time, you take advantage in order to polish up your verses. It's not easy to analyse this process. As soon as you're given the subject, there are thousands of ideas which come to mind, very quickly and in a disorganised manner, and you must decide how you're going to deal with the subject, the tone you're going to sing in, and sometimes you even have to find a context. I've often thought about what I could have sung on a subject I'd been given. I've had some regrets, in so far as I wasn't completely satisfied with what I'd done. It's a way to continue to improve, to add depth to your own work and to look for new ways for the next time."

THE QUALITIES OF AN IMPROVISER

"Firstly, an improviser must have a good master of Basque which enables him to play with the language, because in most improvisations that's what marks the improviser's originality and quality of reasoning. Also, you must enjoy it: if you get no enjoyment out of it, you won't learn. And I think there's also something "else". In the field of sport, if you're not in good shape to start with, even if you acquire a great technique, you won't ever get past a certain level. Likewise, in the field of improvisation, you need to have this "trigger", this ability to give things a personal touch. Some improvisers do their best when they deal with a subject in



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detail, they give their verses a lyrical dimension. Others are unrivalled when they use humour. Each improviser will give his improvisation his own personality. That requires specific qualities.

Also, an improviser must be able to talk about anything. You need to know a little about everything. Most of the time you start with just one idea, it's a kind of game which enables you to give a specific touch to the improvisation. That means you have to read the press and keep up with current affairs. One day in a contest the improvisers present were told that there had been a plane crash somewhere in the world. Their improvisations were all very serious, they were convinced that it had really happened. They all managed to improvise something. That proves that, even if you don't necessarily know the subject very well, you'll will always find something to sing about."

PREFERRED SUBJECTS AND VERSES

"What I enjoy is singing as myself because most of the time we're asked to put ourselves in someone else's shoes, sometimes we have to pretend we're people who are the exact opposite of ourselves. I've lost count of how many roles I've had to play: restaurateur, teacher, parent, footballer, pelota player, writer ... Someone like Jose Agirre, I mean a 75 year old improviser has enough experience to do that, but we've much less experience, the roles which we're given are sometimes totally foreign to us. Of course we can use our imagination, but it seems artificial, and it's not something that's easy to do. That's why I believe that when we have to sing as ourselves, it's an opportunity that enables us to express what we truly feel.

I remember an improvisation by Lazkao Txiki, who people often teased because he was single. The subject given to him during a contest was that every year the San Antonio festival is held in Abadiño, the occasion for men to ask the Saint to give them a wife.

These are the verses improvised by Lazkao Txiki:

*Azken aldian nola nabilen
nesarik bildu ezinda
berririk ezin aurkitu eta
lehen neuzkana galdeginda,
nik neska zahar bat eskatzen dizut
egongo zara jakinda
eta zaharrik ez badaukazu
gaztea ere berdin da.*

It's excellent!"



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CONTROLLING STRESS

“In our case, we had began to perform in public before we even knew what stage fright was. I think that’s why we were never really intimidated in front of an audience. We undoubtedly asked ourselves, at one time or another, what we were doing there, but when it happened, the fact that we’d been doing it since childhood certainly helped us. For others, performing in front of a audience is a traumatic experience, they get really stressed. That was never my case. At meetings you might feel a little shaky and get a tingling feeling inside, but it was never a problem. It’s more problematic when you feel this way and it’s cold. You start shaking and you become even more nervous because you don’t know whether you’re shaking because of stage fright or the cold. But a little adrenalin is good. It helps you concentrate and it creates a situation which enables you to give your best.”

FIRST EXPERIENCES

“I first began to learn at improvisation classes in Hendaye, and then we went to Oiartzun for two years: there were only two of us in Hendaye, which wasn’t enough to keep the class going. It was only later on that there was a larger group in Hendaye. When I began to study journalism in Bilbao, I took improvisation classes in Azpeitia. And currently, on Wednesday or Thursday evenings we go to classes in Oiartzun: we go to sing and to keep it up.

The first competition I took part in was the Gipuzkoa inter-school championship. I was 8 years old. We sang there because there was no-one to else to represent the Northern Basque Country, that’s why we set up a group in Hendaye. There were three of us: Sustrai Colina, my sister and myself. We sang in front of an audience in Beasain. We didn’t know what stage fright was at that time. And if we were successful, it was because it was an amusing situation: there we were, three small children singing with 14 year olds ... The following year, when I was 9, we sang again and we got as far as the final. That was in Donostia. I don’t think we realised what we were doing. We moved up a rung and we competed with the adults.”

TODAY AND TOMORROW

“At present, Sustrai Colina and I run the improvisation school in Hendaye. Children are aged between 14 and 16 years old. These youngsters have been practising improvisation for years, and if they weren’t motivated they would have given up a long time ago. Over the last few years in the Northern Basque Country the situation has become normal again. When we were at high school in Cambo, improvisation was of no importance whatsoever ... It was more important to play



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football. If you played football, people asked you how you did at the weekend's match ... If you improvised, you couldn't speak about it with anyone, or hardly anyone. Nowadays, it's more normal. Not because improvisers are any better than others, but because hearing about improvisation or seeing improvisers is seen as something normal today.

To develop this discipline, perhaps more contests should be organised, especially in the Northern Basque Country. Whatever the case, improvisation is linked to the situation of the Basque language. If Basque progresses, then so will improvisation. Contests are a pretext to revive enthusiasm for this discipline. This has always been a concern for improvisers: if there are no more contests, there will be no more improvisers. Those of us who are part of the world of improvisation need these meetings. It's one of the concerns of the association "Bertsolarien Lagunak" in the Northern Basque Country: we wonder about how to spread improvisation, and that leads us to constantly think about what we can do to make this discipline develop further."