



# EUSKAL KULTUR ERAKUNDEA

## INSTITUT CULTUREL BASQUE

Château Lota Jauregia - 64480 Ustaritz - Uztaritze  
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Egilea - Auteur : Miren ARTETXE

Iturria - Source : Kattalin Totorikak 2004ko urrian egin elkarrizketa / Entretien de Kattalin

Totorika - Octobre 2004 - Itzulpenak - Traductions : Kattalin Totorika-Phillip Basterra

Urtea - Année : 2004

### MIREN ARTETXE

At the young age of 20 **Miren Artetxe** has managed to make a name for herself in the male dominated world of improvisers. With Amets Arzallus and Sustrai Colina she personifies the new generation of improvisers in the Northern Basque Country.

#### BIRTH OF A PASSION

“My father, and above all my grandfather, were very fond of improvisation. When I was 9 or 10 I began to take improvisation classes, which at that time were organised by Jexux Arzallus. At the age of 12 Amets Arzallus and I went to classes in Oiartzun. But after several years we stopped going there and the teacher from Oiartzun came to Hendaye. That’s how we created a new group in Hendaye. It almost feels like I was born knowing how to improvise. I know that’s not the case, but it’s the impression I have. I actually decided that I enjoyed improvisation when I was 16, when I realised that I couldn’t do everything: dance, drama, music, improvisation and pelota. When it came to the crunch, I realised that if there was one thing I really didn’t want to give up, it was improvisation. From that time on I think that I accepted it more easily. I’m convinced that it’s the people, the group that makes you stay ... because it’s not easy when you’re young. Not many of us were improvisers, few girls, and the group got smaller. I think that today things are easier. There are more groups, and improvisation is encouraged more.”

#### THE ROLE OF WOMEN

“I’ve always been the only girl in the group, and the youngest. Personally, I’ve never felt discriminated against. But it’s true that it’s a men’s world, with men’s humour and a men’s way of life in a men’s atmosphere. Men don’t necessarily realise this, and that’s something we need to think about and share with others. I’m convinced we have something new to offer. I realised, for example, that I didn’t sing in the same way when I sang with another girl. That doesn’t happen very often: in an improvisation session it’s politically correct for there to be a



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girl, and if she's from the Northern Basque Country that's even better. I suppose we could call it positive discrimination. And if that wasn't the case, perhaps there wouldn't be any girls performing at all. But, on the other hand, that doesn't do us service because there's never a session with three female improvisers, unless if it's a women's day, or if it's a feminist association which has organised the event. Yet when we sing together we realise that we don't necessarily follow the same established code of humour and we're not systematically opposed, we're complementary. For me that's very rewarding. In fact, we know more or less what we're going to give: sensitivity, a little more humanity, perhaps less disputes and arguments, another point of view. It's obvious that there are going to be more and more women in the world of improvisation and that the balance between the sexes is going to change. It's better to anticipate that this is what's going to happen in order to think about and envisage new paths for exploration. That's the situation today. Men know something needs to be changed, but I don't think they expect a revolution from the girls who are newcomers. I'd like that to happen."

### **PATHS OF CREATION**

"When you're on the stage and you hear the subject, you must first of all ask yourself what you want to say to that audience on the subject. It only takes twenty seconds: thinking about what you want to say and organising your ideas according to what you want to say before singing. The listener hears the improvisation backwards, it looks like you've thought it out in the order you sing it, and that's the trick. You control the situation: you know where you're going, but the listener doesn't. That's one of the charms of improvisation. And the end is important. Improvisation is a concentrated speech, whose impact is in its conclusion. Improvisation must be efficient. Until now efficiency was associated with a good argument, a strong image or a solid comparison. But there are other simpler ways. I may not be a great explorer of these ways because to explore new ways you must first of all know the old ones well and have a good level. But I think there are improvisers capable of innovating. That's the case of Maddalen Lujanbio, Iturriaga and Maia. Currently, the level of improvisation is so good that the way is open to creation. I think that's the direction we need to go in."

### **PREFERRED SUBJECTS**

"I'm not overkeen on very selective subjects which end always up in clichés. I prefer open subjects, for example: you're at the top of a cliff and you're not sure whether to jump off or not. That's up to you to decide. If you want, you can express your feelings, or a problem you have, whether a problem of society or a personal



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problem ... I find this kind of subject more motivating and I'm prouder when I please the audience with this type of subject rather than with a traditional subject. I've even surprised myself, often in the negative sense. We have progressive ideas, in favour of equality and against racism, but when you don't have time to think out your improvisation, so many prejudices come to mind unconsciously. It's difficult to admit, but we always claim to be open-minded without preconceived ideas, and yet we're the first to have them. I've also pleasantly surprised myself. If you see that something you've said has touched the audience, or simply makes people laugh, or whilst you're officiating with another improviser, you realise that you've managed to dismantle all his or her arguments ... In those moments, you say to yourself: "I've really achieved something!". These are small steps you accomplish. Seeing my grandfather crying with joy after an improvisation, or a friend, especially someone who isn't very interested in improvisation, laugh listening to verses, that's what counts most. If I'm happy with what I've done and I can see that others are also happy, then I can't ask for more."

### THE QUALITIES OF AN IMPROVISER

"One day someone asked Uztapide if you're born an improviser or if you become one. And he answered: first of all you have to be born. He was right. We all have certain qualities, and there are others we don't have. To compose an improvisation, you need to have a good mastery of language, have a minimum amount of eloquence and the ability to express yourself. It's something you learn. On the whole, as an improviser you must be an honest person because you're in the public light and improvisation isn't a profession. It may earn you some money, but I wouldn't like it to be a profession. I don't think it should become a vocation. Improvisation should remain human, modest and popular, something to be experienced at the present moment, here and now. Improvisers should adapt to the audience and not the other way round. Improvisers should above all be humble. Nowadays the media talk a lot about improvisation, improvisers write in the press, they give their opinion in films, they do all sorts of things. Of course, we develop many skills, but it's not because we're good at improvisation that we're good at everything else. Improvisation was a system of communication specific to our country and that's what it should continue to be. And we are at its service. It's a discipline which gives you a lot, both in terms of relations and knowledge. Thanks to improvisation, we've discovered a thousand worlds. I think that's what we get out of it. And it should also be an exchange. We shouldn't try to get anything more out of it than that."



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### THE ATTITUDE OF IMPROVISERS

“Last year the international improvisation festival took place. There were Mexicans, Argentineans, Cubans, Catalans and Georgians. They were all struck by our lack of expression. We don’t move our body, we don’t modulate our voice, we don’t use any means of expression. We certainly have a lot of work to do in that field. But, just as when you lose one sense you compensate it with another, just like the blind hear better than us, in improvisation it’s the words which are important, they’re what convey the message. Content has always been the priority and we’ve achieved a high level of quality in that respect, but perhaps the time has come to take a look at the form. But without scarifying the very nature of improvisation. The body should not take priority over the word, the word must remain at the centre of the message. Another criticism is that improvisers don’t sing very well. It’s true, but there again, what’s important is the word, and we concentrate on words. It’s not singing. The melody is there to help convey the words. So whilst it’s true that we do need to work on improving the singing and expressivity, I don’t think, as if often said, that anything is missing from improvisation. It lacks nothing.”

### FIRST EXPERIENCES

“I remember the first time I performed in front of an audience. I was eleven years old, it was in Arrasate, in the final of the Basque Country inter-school championship. I went up on to the stage wearing shorts ... I was nervous, but, I didn’t feel any pressure at all. For me, improvisation has always been a game and I’ve never really apprehended it. I was more ashamed afterwards when the verses I’d improvised were read out! It was a wonderful experience which could actually have been quite traumatising: at the age of eleven to suddenly find yourself in front of an audience, having to improvise verses, when that’s something you’ve never done before, in a championship, and being judged, also knowing that it’s all going to be published in the press ... But in the end, the audience was very generous. Perhaps too generous. Until that time they’d always seen me as a girl, and a little girl at that, and that was enough for them. I must admit that, on the one hand, it suits me for them not to be too critical, but on the other hand, it’d be better if everyone was judged in the same way. I won several prizes: in the inter-school championships, in the Northern Basque Country the Xenpelar prize and in September 2004 the Lizardi prize. The only one I’m really proud of is the last one. When I won it I said to myself: “you really deserve this one!”. It’s the first time I’ve ever really accepted winning an award.”



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### TODAY AND TOMORROW

“I give improvisation lessons to 9-11 year old pupils in Hendaye. What’s important is that the children have a good time. It’s no use trying to explain to them that improvisation’s something magical: it’s something they need to experience for themselves. I think we should use improvisation as a pretext for them to enjoy themselves, make them speak in Basque, indirectly practice expression while they’re getting used to it all, and work on relations and the group, because the group is essential in improvisation. And I think it’s what we have managed to achieve thanks to the what’s currently being done in the Northern Basque Country. Those who began three years ago are still there this year. My objective is not to turn them into improvisers, but for them to enjoy improvising verse and playing with words, and if there’s an improvisation session near where they live, for them to go ... For me that’s enough.

I’m quite optimistic about the future. In the Northern Basque Country people talk about saving improvisation saying it skipped a generation and that there’s a severe lack of young improvisers. But today, it’s not a new generation. It’s a culture we’re creating, and we have a lot to do in order to attract new listeners. In the Southern Basque Country improvisation has never been in danger. The environment is very favourable for improvisation, and improvisers develop in this environment; but there’s another part of the population which has no contact with improvisation, and nothing in particular is done to reach out to those people. In the Northern Basque Country, nothing’s been done, there’s no active support. We have to introduce people to improvisation. Improvisation is alive, it adapts to places and situations. And from that point of view, the situation of our language is decisive. Each situation needs to be treated individually. We need non-Basque speaking groups who are learning Basque, we need Basque-speaking groups who work with expression, we need to form groups of improvisation followers ... Each case has its own solutions.”