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[Episode 72: Sophie Cameron](#) – (June 2016)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Sophie Cameron – **SC**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 18/04/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello. My name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Today I'm in The Royal Festival Hall on The Southbank in London and I'm joined by Sophie Cameron. Hello Sophie, how are you doing?

SC: I'm good, thank you.

DT: Good. We're going to start with your reading and then we'll get on with some questions.

SC: Okay.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be included in the transcript]

[02:17]

DT: Cheers. Oh, I forgot to say at the beginning, it might get a bit 'blue'. In the best possible way Sophie, why are you pissing about with poetry?

SC: That's a very good question. I think I've always liked writing and I've always loved reading, all different types of literature. But I think poetry's got that sort of immediacy. In terms of being able to, sort of, write something really quickly and crystallise emotions and thoughts, rather than something longer. So, I've always, sort of, fallen into poetry because it feels very immediate and when you have an idea you can really go to work on it and feel like you've achieved something very quickly.

And I think poetry just offers that, sort of, coming together of, you know, performance and language and the voice. Loads of things all come together so, you know, my poetry I think brings together the, sort of, live performance element. Which with, especially, performance poetry allows the words to become more than what's just written, I think. And in terms of the type of poetry that I write, I mean, I wish I could write beautiful poetry but that's not my voice.

I think I write shocking poetry because I feel like there are certain things that no one's said and I think I need to, sort of, make people feel uncomfortable. You know, a female saying these things... I like the idea that, you know, we can idealise love till the end of eternity, and that's brilliant, but that said love can be horrible. You know, it's got to be real at the same time. So, in a way I probably try and tip that balance back, maybe too far, but then I think that's the beauty of it, in a way.

DT: I completely agree. I always think it's strange that the majority of people seem to have the view that they want their poetry to be beautiful, or traditionally beautiful. You know, it doesn't mean you can't be shocking and not still have some beauty involved.

SC: I wish I could do that. I mean, there are lots of modern poets that do, you know, capture stuff in a way that I could never. Certainly, like, if you look at Shakespeare, I mean, why even bother? Because he, literally, wrote everything that was ever beautiful, so in a way it's a bit like... You know, there's no point in competing with that.

DT: Your work... I've seen you perform a few times and you seem to be quite interested in story-telling. What do you feel you can achieve by having a shorter amount of time to tell a story?

SC: That's a really interesting question. I suppose in a way, I like the challenge of being able to capture a moment or a feeling. So, I think when I find I'm inspired to write a poem, it's normally either like an image or an idea that I have that I want to convey. So, in the poem that I've just read this idea of, you know, a young woman being trapped in a relationship but that young woman also having a sexual desire of her own.

So, converting what supposedly leads you to believe that it's going to be a traditional, fairytale, type romance. But those people that are in fairytales don't really exist because we all have desires and we all, you know, have irrational thoughts and we all do things that are horrible. You know, so this idea of a man taking a woman and carrying her off into the sunset is just complete bullshit because, you know, at some point she's going to turn around and go well...

DT: Yeah, do you feel that poetry, and I suppose we should talk more about the performance side, particularly. Do you think that shocking [audiences] is still the preserve of the male performer?

SC: Yeah, definitely, I think it's a bit different though because I think my power of shock comes also [from] the fact that I look quite innocent. However, however I might dress myself up I always just look like butter wouldn't melt [in my mouth] and I've always found that really frustrating. So, I've tried to use it to my advantage with the performance [stuff] because I think people just look at me and go, "What I'm hearing is not what I'm seeing" and that's part of the power.

SC: With a man I think there's loads of stuff that men could do... I don't know if it's that innovative though, in terms, of the male performers. Especially with the poetry I see. I certainly think sometimes, you know, sex and love as a topic can be quite dangerous for a man if they, sort of, stray down certain routes. So, maybe it is quite a challenge for a man to be shocking about the sex side without erring into dangerous territory?

DT: Yes, certainly. I mean, if I read your work and it was a male lead character it would be completely inappropriate, wouldn't it?

SC: Yeah and I've seen male performers, you know, talk about sex in a way that I think may intend to be empowering and shocking but then actually comes across as misogynistic or trivial and the vibe can just be really wrong. So, I do think, you know, as a female I recognise that there's certain things on my side that maybe... But I think what I'd like to see maybe is a few men trying a few exciting things, in terms of shock.

[TANNOY ANNOUNCEMENT]

DT: Hopefully, the crowds will disappear now the performance starts in one minute. I wanted to follow up with a question about how much your writing is now influenced by your performing and which feeds into the other? You seem to have two personas when you perform, one is appearing to be... I suppose you can do it once at the beginning of a set... Appearing innocent and then to just be very bored by the subject of sex. How much of the

performing style came out of the writing and how much has the performing style influenced your writing?

SC: That's really difficult, because I remember when I started out, it was a dare. Me and my university friends went to Edinburgh to do a comedy show and all the sketches that we did bombed. Then they all did stand-up and I was too scared to do stand-up but I couldn't do the rest of Edinburgh not doing anything so, I decided to write a funny poem. Something really light that leads you to believe it's going to be really innocent and then just goes really obscene.

And that went down really well with the, like, two people that were in the audience for, like, the whole month. And then my friend dared me to do it at a really serious poetry event, really to just take the piss out of people and everyone loved it. But they were also very shocked as well and I got such a buzz out of that and I, you know, wore a really nice dress and I went up there and smiled really sweetly and then people were just like, "Woah, this is awful".

It was for my own amusement really, which is quite selfish, you know because I was taking it into a forum where there was a lot of serious poetry going on. Then I realised that there was some real value in it, I think my performing side is informed by that to some degree, you know, realising that I do have a character on stage. That said, I think, the performance element and the poetry will always come first, I don't think I'd ever perform a poem that I'd written for my own personal...

I think there are poems that I'll outperform and want a certain reaction from people or I want to put out there and see how people react. My onstage persona maybe adds to that as well, so this idea that I'm quite outspoken... Yeah, it's really difficult for me to see how I am on stage, especially now, that I host my own gig. That's kind of made it a bit difficult because I can't hide away from this...

DT: I had the same problem when Lizzy and I ran Silence Found a Tongue, I always found it easier when I read to have, at least, some sort of character even if it was just an exaggerated version of me because I had something to hide behind. But you can't continue that through the links between [the various acts] and jumping from one [character] to the other can seem really odd. Like I was saying before you've only really got one chance to play 'the surprising character' [**SC:** Yeah] and if you shoot that load at the beginning of the night...

SC: And with a regular night it becomes very cheap, you know, when you're getting people back and you're playing the innocent one every time. It just don't work and it also becomes a cliché and I wouldn't want it to be, you know, my thing that I was hiding behind. But it does make it really difficult because, you know, when you think about performing in the context of the poetry it's clearer. But then when you host a night then it is like, "Who am I? What do I want to portray on stage and how does this relate to the poems that I'm going to read? Is that going to be consistent or not?"

I don't know whether I've usually thought it through, it was kind of a bit of a whirlwind and I suppose the stage, for me, is an exciting place. Maybe, I am a bit of an enigma on stage, maybe that's what I hope I would be. Whereas some people don't go, "Well that's who she is", I think I'd hope... Because in a way I suppose my hosting style is to confuse rather than create clarity and that's what I like.

DT: That was always my style... I say style, it just came out of not really knowing what I was doing. I'm assuming it's Jack Nicholson in my head but there's a quote about how if you were in a position of being an actor why you wouldn't give to any public interviews because you want to remain enigmatic, in some way. Being a host, unless you design two distinct characters; one as performer, one as host, which complement each other. You will end up giving away too much of yourself, won't you?

We'll come on to talking about the night you run a bit later on so we can go into a bit more in-depth. I just wanted to ask you about the video work you've done because you play around a lot with personas there. I was just trying to think [of the title] of one. The word 'virtual' is in the title, it starts off like a period drama. [It play's with] that romantic idea of what a woman is supposed to want and then switches to what might be more like reality.

Would you hope to do more of that kind of work? It seems like an even more immediate way of playing with personas, with video editing you get quick costume changes and it's easier to change the scene, isn't it?

SC: Yeah, I mean all that stuff was really really exciting and it was just exploring different mediums because that presented a really exciting opportunity for me to think about poetry and how it's presented and the sort of images that would coincide or conflict with what I was saying in the poem. So, yeah, I think the poem you were talking about is called, Virtual Love, it was a while ago that I did it.

A fantastic photographer who was dabbling with film, Ben Meadows, wanted to get involved with, you know, trying some stuff out on camera and it was just really exciting and that was the one poem I wrote specifically for us to do. The other poems I'd done with Ben were poems I'd already written and we decided to...

DT: And were they his visual interpretations?

SC: Yes.

DT: So, how did 'Virtual Love' work, had he'd given you an idea for how it would look, visually, and then you wrote to suit that?

SC: It was kind of difficult. I think we had a chat about some ideas because I was, sort of, fascinated a bit by this idea of two different personas. Especially with the rise of social media, the fact that social media becomes a fragment of your persona as well. So, this idea that, maybe on Facebook... Everybody knows there's that cliché that you're way more popular on Facebook than you actually are.

Everyone's checking their Facebook desperately and, you know, looking at all their friends that they knew from school and thinking like, "Your life's shit" and stuff like that, you know. It's this, kind of, like voyeuristic thing but it also presents you this space where you could, almost like, manipulate your own life and tell your own life. I can go, "Well I want to portray this exciting female to all my friends"...

So, it was that idea and just trying to play around with that a little bit and [the question] what does that leave... You know, with our reality, our every day... Does that leave us a little bit more bitter about that because we create this, sort of, false thing around social media? You know, the idea that [with] social media, everybody's got a really big voice so everybody's become a writer. What does that mean for people? Does that mean that, you know, we're all kind of Shakespeare, in a way? That's, kind of, a quite a liberating thing.

But what does that mean for the people who are really pushing writing? Does it make your feelings more profound than they should be? Are we all becoming self-absorbed and, sort of, telling this narrative in the third person about ourselves? So, it was exploring those things really.

DT: I was having a similar discussion with a photographer about this and I suppose both Twitter and Facebook have had a similar effect on literature or poetry and short story writing as Instagram has had on photography. Yes, everyone is a photographer, everyone is essentially a writer. So, even if you have the physical capabilities to write that doesn't mean your work is of any value to other people. I don't mean to sound pretentious and it's not about judging anybody else's work. But just because tabloid newspapers decided to stop paying photographers and are now using images from the public domain doesn't mean those pictures are as good or tell a story in the way that someone has spent a lot of time thinking about the worth of their work and what their practice means.

We should probably get back to some more swearing and sex. I just want to say, in case you can hear some deep bass, it's Guy Garvey's fault because he's in concert upstairs. So, blame Elbow. We'll take another reading please.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be used in the transcript]

[18:51]

DT: Cheers. That's quite a good segue into your new night, I think. Yeah, so you've started a new night which is called Red Raw, it's monthly and in Bethnal Green. What's the gallery called?

SC: Resistance Gallery.

DT: I'll certainly put a link under the video to the event and hopefully some information about the gallery too. How did that come about, because it's quite heavily themed and deliberate, isn't it?

SC: Yeah. So, I mean, I think it was just one of those things where it was something that I'd always wanted to do. You know, I really like challenging forms of art. I really like being shocked and I'm really curious about all different types of art, so in a way I was, kind of, sad about the fact that either I could go to poetry nights or I could go to comedy nights or I can go to cabaret or music.

I, sort of, really craved this kind of a night that was like really really challenging and brought together different art forms. From people who actually felt, you know, gritty and had stuff to say rather than prim and proper. So, I had been complaining about it for a while and I was like, well why don't I do it? And I think I'd been quite scared about doing something of that enormity on my back. Because, you know, organising something like that and being arrogant enough to say, "Yeah, I'm going to curate this and hope people are going to come aboard".

You know, I don't have any money to pay people but hopefully, I can inspire people to do it for free and I suppose I've been hesitant because of all those complexities about then I just thought I should do it. You know, I've reached a point in my life where I, sort of, felt that there's so much stuff that I'm not doing, that I want to do. So, I found Resistance gallery and they do really really challenging stuff and I thought they were perfect. Gary, the guy that runs it, you know, lets me put it on for free and that's really the only way I could do it.

And then you know everyone who performs does it for the love of it. I wish I could pay everyone but unfortunately that's just not possible. But, for me, it's just about creating this space where audience members can feel comfortable in feeling uncomfortable, you know. So, getting people that are coming from a different space, who've got a voice that's different from the mainstream voices that you're going to get.

You know, someone who is going to be challenging and whether that's burlesque or music or poetry or comedy or performance art or whatever I think it's just, for me, about feeling excited and inspired by someone. You know, seeing someone and wanting to talk about it. And that's the thing, after we did the first night the next day on social media people were talking about it being the best [night].

And I thought that the biggest compliment was that everyone just wanted to talk to each other about what they'd seen and how they'd felt and I think that, for me, was just like, yeah, that means that I did something great. And if I can try and do that again then there's some value in what we do and hopefully, you know, these artists who aren't necessarily given stages all that frequently are getting new ears to inform.

DT: So, I've only been to one night but I know people who have performed and I've spoken to a lot of people about it. It does seem like there's a deliberate attempt to... Although you're trying to make people uncomfortable, you're trying to make people uncomfortable as a whole. It's not like Jongleurs [comedy club] where they're picking out an individual in the audience and taking the piss out of them.

I think you're right, it's a very interesting thing when you've made the audience as a whole feel uncomfortable because it unifies them. [**SC:** Yes.] and there's a safety net in that. You're able to talk about... I write a lot about my mental health history and having been in

psychiatric hospitals and stuff and those issues can be equally as shocking as sucking the skin off of peaches... I think what is interesting is, as long as you shock everyone then everyone comes together.

SC: Well there's certainly loads of stuff that people still feel uncomfortable about, things like mental health, that should be talked about more. And, like, sexuality and gender issues and, you know, all of the things that we tense up about, I think should be talked about more. And certainly, I want more mental health issues to be discussed. A lot of the time I'll get really aggressive female performers and I don't want it just to be female.

Sometimes I get scared about that because I don't want it just to be like some sort of strongly female thing where men are chased out. I don't want it to be that, I don't want it to be sort of defined in any way. I just really like it when someone has an honest opinion to share. So, you know, with the Tinder stuff that I do, that's actual real stuff. So, having been on Tinder and been sent loads of cock pics and the fact that you can't show an erect penis in public, so I've had to modify them on Photoshop. So, although it's absolutely hilarious and the modifications are pretty damn grotesque, there is a serious point to it.

You know, Tinder, sort of, represents some male views... Or is it the online platform that gives people this feeling that they can behave in certain ways towards women. I mean, it has certainly empowered women, sexually, because the women on there are like saying, "Well maybe I do want a sexual relationship". But in the same breath you know my experiences of Tinder... Is it okay for a man to introduce himself by sending a picture of his cock and he's got a blatant STD?

I mean, I would question the rationale of that man that does that. Because, you know, it must hurt him. I just don't... I still try and think about it and that's actually where the name of the gig came from, Red Raw, because his cock literally was red raw. And he was asking me, "Do you like what you see?" and it's like, "I think you should go to the doctor". And I'm not saying that these men are bad people, what I'm saying is that, you know, maybe they are not able to speak to women in the right way or they've got a distorted view of how women are going to take them.

Maybe, actually, these people are never going to meet me, you know, and they get some sort of kick out of sending this stuff? I don't know. But I think it's just interesting to talk about these things and try and understand.

DT: I was a bit... Yeah, I will say sceptical because I'm openly sceptical about most things. I come from a fine art background and sometimes... It's always a bad sign when a show or an exhibition claims to be provocative or shocking because the easiest thing in the world to do is to shock people. It's what you do afterwards with that reaction and I was really glad to see that...

You made two really good points on the night. I think that the Tinder thing and anonymity of online dating profiles and being able to somehow think that a reasonable way of introducing yourself is with a picture of your erect penis. Shot at a ridiculous angle with too much flash

is just something... For one thing if we could just put the inappropriateness to one side, who thought that was a good picture? Who thought that was flattering in anyway?

But before I get too distracted, I also was really impressed with... I mean, I'd seen the kids from The Sex Worker's Opera before. I've seen them actually workshoping this, so I've seen this whole thing in development and they've just been really well received tour. Some of the sex workers that came on and performed and the way that they spoke about what they did to earn money so candidly and so openly and portrayed their bodies... Was, firstly, shocking but the reason it was shocking is because it's completely out of our control. I don't remember the performer's name but she did a striptease while eating cake and singing at the same time.

SC: Malia.

DT: Malia. The one thing I remember most from the whole night is when everyone did that burlesque... Because we were all, mainly, an English audience and burlesque is mainly an American thing. At the first view of her nipples and everyone sort of 'whooped' and she turned and said, "I don't get you people, why are you cheering my tits?", "Why not my shoulder?" Yeah, I think, if it's done in the right way having those shocking elements... But you have to do something with it, don't you?

SC: Yeah, I mean, the first gig I did Molina did a performance piece and she wrapped herself in bondage tape and she had a recording of her voice saying, "Why is my cunt so controversial?", she wanted to see if she could unwrap it by the time the thing finished. I didn't know what to do, this was the first gig, the first act I didn't know whether people would just leave. Like everyone would just be gone and whether I'd pitched it wrong.

And we did it and it was silent but the silence was so powerful and people were absolutely in support of her, it was so profound. I think that was the best risk I've taken and I think people do want to hear... If you think about The Vagina Monologues and stuff, this stuff has been done before. But actually, people want to hear genuine experiences, you know, we still don't talk about this stuff enough.

DT: And also, it's all very well talking about those subjects but if it's packaged in a way that you're 'allowed' to perform it at The Old Vic [Theatre] and it's moulded into a traditional box... You know, you need to be in spaces... Actually, I wanted to make the point that Resistance Gallery is perhaps a little bit misleading, it's not a white box with overly bright lights it's in an arch under a railway bridge.

SC: They've got velvet on the walls and it's been rubbed in different directions so it's all different textures.

DT: So, it's not the usual setting for that kind of thing by the look of the interior. You're right I mean, these things have been spoken about but I agree, I don't think they've been spoken about in the right way. You can't re-package these things, they have to be honest and they have to be told, hopefully if the person's up for it, by the person that's experienced it, I think. That's where the real power comes from and I think that's why Molina's so good.

She reminds me, a lot, of a very good friend of mine, Ofelia Jarl Ortega who's an amazing performance artist and works with her body in the same way and just completely de-sexualises her body immediately and it becomes sexual when she wants it to be, on stage. It's really powerful and when it's done properly you can't fail to be affected by it. How difficult is it to run that kind of night? It must be a nightmare.

SC: It's scary because when it goes well... That's the thing, after the first one went so well there was so much pressure on me and it was like, "Oh my god, how the hell am I going to ever do as well as that or create that again?" You know, it was so much pressure even just on me writing and working out what I wanted to do and who I was going to get on. I also don't want to be exploiting people, I'd love people to come back but I can't be saying, "Can you come and do the next one and the next one."

You know, I want to reach out and find people as well, I mean, I don't know everybody and there's only so many gigs that I can go to and it's just trying to find people that you know are on the margins and who maybe haven't even got up on stage yet. [I'd like to] just inspire them to, sort of, share something that maybe isn't even ready to be performed but they've just got something to say.

I think it's trying to get the tapestry right, so I don't want it just to be like all poetry on the night. So, it's got to be this kind of a richness. So, it is a lot of pressure and I always say, when it goes when it gets rubbish and when it loses its intention then I'll stop it. I do need to reach out to the right people, you know, I want people to contact me that would like to perform in that sort of a context. It doesn't matter who they are or what they have to say.

I think it's really important that we get the right people on and, like I say, I don't want it just to be all female or all poetry. Yeah, so it's scary looking into the future and saying yeah, I'm going to do it every month. In a way, I just look at the next one and think I just have to try my hardest and try and find people and put it together and then, you know, try and inspire enough of an audience to come. Because, every time, it's so scary because you never know how many people are going to turn up.

DT: Yeah, we experienced exactly the same thing. We went one month from having people couldn't get in the door and the following month we had six people. That was including three performers, I think. Both nights were equally as good but it never got any easier waiting for the last-minute rush of people to turn up. Actually, it wasn't an issue for us, myself and Lizzy, as organisers but you want an audience for people that have come for free [to perform]. If you're not paying them they at least need an audience.

SC: I mean, that's the thing, I don't feel so bad for myself because I know I'll get over it, but it's the people that you've asked to come and do it and who've paid to travel there and then suddenly they're faced with a tiny audience. And however much you know it might be fantastic if you haven't got the atmosphere there and you haven't got enough people... I mean we've all done gigs to a few people and they can be fantastic but in the same breath, you know, there's nothing like looking out and there's people standing up because they can't get in and that's what you want.

DT: Yeah, and on that note I think time is ticking on so we'll probably finish there. Although, we could talk a lot more about this. I find the whole thing of starting nights up fascinating. Mainly because it was so draining for us trying to book features and, like you said, it gets so difficult to go out and see new people. I don't know what you've found but there was a marked decrease in my attendance to other things. [**SC:** Yeah.] Our night was on a Tuesday and for another seven days I couldn't bear going to anything. Because there was so much stress involved with getting to our event.

SC: Yeah. Definitely, it is difficult. You'd think that London would be like an absolute hot bed of really interesting stuff but there seems to be this huge divide between very very pricey, formal stuff and kind of niche stuff. And, in a way, London needs to be better than that and need to find the audiences, we need to get those people in because I think they're out there. It's just reaching out to them and letting people know. You'd think in the age of the Internet you'd be getting huge audiences, you know.

DT: But the problem is that people are now spoilt for choice. I think for us it was bad timing when we started our night, you know, the country was still pretty badly in a recession and people just weren't going out. So, it's very difficult, you have to find the right balance between a venue that will let you in for free or very little, so you can encourage an audience to come in for nothing. And then also that they don't charge too much on the bar because I've been to events before where it's free to get in but then £6 for a beer.

Your audience then don't save much money, they may as well have just gone to the pub. Especially if you're trying to... Poetry audiences and cabaret audiences will come anyway because they're already invested in that scene, but if you're trying to encourage new people... This is a really big discussion and maybe it will be something to come back to for the podcast. Maybe you could come back and talk about it then? Because it's a very difficult one to approach.

SC: But, I mean, if you look at everyone, you know, your venue owners, like, how do they exist in London? They need to make some money somewhere and that's the thing, if you put a gig on for free then yes the drinks will have to be maybe a bit more pricey.

DT: But there is a difference between, if you only sell craft ales of course drinks will be more expensive. For the Lunar Poetry Magazine launches we use the Peckham Pelican because they have a wide range of beers but they also have cans of Red Stripe for £2.50.

SC: That's great.

DT: And coffee for £1.20, it's just filter coffee but, you know, there are options for people whose budgets don't stretch that far and they don't charge too much for soft drinks. But, what I wanted to say was, all those things aside when it works it is definitely worth it, isn't it? It's just an amazing feeling to bring people together like that. Maybe we should take a final reading?

SC: So this one's actually titled. It's called to Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall.

[The author has not given permission to include this poem in the transcript]

[38:35]

DT: I was hoping you were going to read that. Thank you very much, that appeared in The Morning Star, didn't it? In the Well Versed section. Thank you Sophie.

SC: Thank you very much.

DT: I really enjoyed the chat. Like I said, I'll put links to as much of the stuff that we've been talking about underneath the video. Cheers, bye.

End of transcript.