‘The Power of Language’

A transcribed interview with Roxana Vilk, for Liberated Words

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Rebecca H: Hello, you are listening to Liberated Words. I’m Rebecca and today I will be interviewing Roxana Vilk.

Roxana is an award winning British/Iranian artist, working in music, film, TV and live performance. Her work often explores migration and identity. My father is also a British Iranian, his Iranian family have long histories of migration within and around the neighbouring countries to Iran. Roxana is now based in Bristol, writing and performing music with her band, Vilk Collective and working on her theatre project, *Lullabies*, where she is gathering and presenting lullabies in the different languages, spoken by those living in Bristol. This project is part of her artist residency with IGNiTE, an initiative set up by Bristol community arts centre, Trinity.

Hi Roxana, thank you for taking part in this episode. How are you?

Roxana V: Hi Rebecca! I am fine actually! I’ve only just woken up, I was working quite late last night, so feeling good, now I’ve had my coffee! It’s an up and down time, isn’t it? During this lockdown, some days feel more up and others feel more down. But today is a good day! The sun is shining, the kids are on half term so there is a little bit less stress!

Rebecca H: How are you staying positive and hopeful during this time?

Roxana V: That is a really good question. I am carrying on with my creative practice which helps me stay hopeful and gives me positivity. Whether its practising music or working on an artistic project, somehow that discipline, or that daily discipline on checking in on my artistic work, helps me a lot. Even though, sometimes I really don’t want to do it. Like yesterday, I really didn’t want to be practising some music. But then, as soon as I was into it after about 10-15 minutes, this sort of heavy mood shifted. So, I’m grateful for having an artistic disciplinary practice because I think that has helped me a lot. And, going out! Getting out into nature! With the kids on the bikes, everyday! Just looking at the beauty around us and focusing on everything that we have like health. Beautiful flowers out and about!

Rebecca H: Yeah, I’m finding the same actually with my own work, I feel very blessed to actually have a creative practice going alongside, because it’s just such a brilliant way to absorb your mind into something totally different which is so important right now; feeling free, not feeling constrained. So, I totally

understand where you are coming from.

I wanted to begin with asking you about your current theatre project, *Lullabies*. I believe this is a fantastic way to engage with the people of Bristol and the variety of languages, spoken across the city. What does the project mean for you and what does it look like today?

Roxana V: So, the *Lullabies* project grew out of my artistic residency at the Trinity Centre. I applied with an idea; they put a call out for artists in residence and I had only just moved to Bristol from Scotland. I've always been singing Iranian songs as lullabies to my sons, as a way of keeping my culture alive and introducing them to a country that they haven't had the opportunity to visit yet. It always felt like this magical time of night, where there was this sort of invisible thread, connecting me back to my motherland, through song! And one night, I was looking out of the attic window and I was just imagining … because Bristol has over 90 languages, which is phenomenal really! I was imagining other languages that might be being sung to babies in the night and that was the seed of the idea really!

I had been doing some Farsi translation at the Malcolm X [Community] Centre for refugees arriving from Iran and Afghanistan. Some of the mums had young babies which meant they couldn't go into the main English class, so we had to teach them English in little groups and we decided to do that through songs! I realized there is this unifying sense in music where we can share so much and learn so much about each other's cultures through song. It is a universal language, music. So that is how the project started, and then the Arts Council gave us some research and development money, and I put together a team of practitioners and I went out into the communities and collected some lullabies. From that, we created a, sort of, scratch piece, which had sound design, film, live performance, big community involvement, food – very important! Lots of delicious Somali food! It's kind of grown from there!

Fig. 1 *Lullabies* workshop at Trinity Centre, Bristol, Roxana Vilk.

So, just before lockdown, we were about to start the next phase of the project. We got awarded some funding from, Hear and Now, which is to celebrate 25 years of the national lottery and they chose the *Lullabies* project to represent Bristol, which we were really excited about! Then lockdown happened and we thought, we can still keep making the work, let's take it digital! Let's take it online! So, it has gone from being a Bristol-centric project to a pan-UK project! Two weeks from now, I'm going to be doing workshops online, *Lullabies* workshops, and then also putting a call out to see if anyone would like to share a lullaby with me. So, if you are listening to this and have a lullaby – it doesn't have to be a lullaby in the kind of anthropological, historic sense of the word! Just anything you might have been sung, or you have sung, to someone. Please feel free to share it with me!

Rebecca H: That sounds amazing! We will include some links below so people can find out more on how to send you their lullabies!

Voice and where it is located, seems to run throughout your work. In *Lullabies*, the work is gathering a multitude of voices, whereas in films like *Tehran Backyard* there is one central voice. So, your film, *Tehran Backyard* won best documentary at NextFrame Film Festival in 2008. In the documentary, you present us with the life of Pari, a 65-year-old Iranian woman who works in Tehran as a cleaner. She supports her husband who is blind and her five children. In the backdrop of her life are a series of protests from the Iranian people, against the nuclear arms sanctions posed on their government from the US. We see Pari at work, quietly cleaning, whilst the television presenter is interviewing those who are able to go out and protest. I'm interested in how you shine light on a voice like Pari's and her family, bringing the interview to her, so to speak. And how being a filmmaker means you can create a platform for the forgotten or silenced speakers.

Roxana V: Really beautiful question and thanks for watching the film!

So, I made that film quite a while ago now! As you say, 2008; I had recently had a baby and I went back to college as a young mum. I went to Edinburgh College of Art and studied a Masters in Fine Art, specializing in film and *Tehran Backyard* is one of my graduation films! So, it's actually the first film I made! I'd written for drama scripts before but it was the first film I kind of 'directed' in that sense. It is a documentary, a whole new genre. And I knew that when I was doing the course, I was very lucky to have an incredible professor called, Noe Mendelle, who is the Director of the Scottish Documentary Institute and a phenomenally inspiring woman! She is all about empowering women and she was the one who told me to come and study film! And she offered me a scholarship and some childcare money after seeing some of my theatre work. The reason I'm giving you this background is because I entered that film world, very much as an

outsider. I was the only woman on the course, there were five of us on the MFA and the other four were men, none of them were parents, they would all end up in the pub talking about the next film project and I would go home and feed my baby! I felt so different and isolated and actually quite unhappy. I was questioning myself the whole way through my film MFA. Deep down, was this desire, almost like an umbilical cord, to go back to my motherland to make a piece of work, because I just didn't feel connected to anything that was going on for me in the UK.

Fig. 2 *Tehran Backyard*, Roxana Vilk, 2008.

I knew that if I made a documentary, it would be a lot easier than making a drama, because I didn't have official permission. So, making films in Iran is quite a tricky and, often, dangerous business. We decided to make this 'under the radar', so to speak. We smuggled the camera into Iran. I also took a Super 8 Camera, because I was really excited about playing with that form! And took a British cameraman with me, dressed up as a tourist! We were a team of three which meant we could move very quickly and quietly through the city. I was very keen to tell a story that started from an aesthetic perspective: in the sense that, without words, we would be able to tell the story of the enormous difference within Iranian society, from the rich to the poor. It is something that is echoed in the UK and obviously, every country.

Pari is cleaning lady who works uptown in North Tehran in the upper middle-class houses, which have this French motif of gilded gold-framed, mock watercolour paintings – French paintings, and furniture with again, slightly European touches aesthetically. Then she would travel 2.5 hours each way and her house was on the outskirts of Tehran and has a completely different aesthetic: a huge family living in one space and very much a traditional Iranian house in the sense that everyone slept on the floor and there is a big Persian carpet on the ground. Just in her journey

from North Tehran to the outskirts, we could feel a story happening. Once we hear her voice, then we can go deeper under the layers. So, when she walks in the street, she walks in full chador and then the hijab underneath. I wanted to go deeper under the layers of all the clothing she is covered in, to tell a story of someone who is religious, who is Islamic, but from the outside. When we look at Iran and tend to see characters like that and think and the broad brushstroke is that they are all terrorists and it's a violent country and the colour is black. I wanted to go under the colour black, and show all the different shades of all the colours that make this phenomenal woman's life. She is the main breadwinner, she is incredibly strong, she is not a victim, she is very proud of being the breadwinner and supporting her family.

Fig. 3 *Tehran Backyard*, Roxana Vilk, 2008.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that, I wanted to give her voice because we don't often hear that voice; but also, wanted to make sure there was enough nuance so we could really appreciate the complexities of portraying Iranian women right now. My MFA essay had been actually about the depiction of Muslim women in cinema, as a whole. It's something that, until now, is really in our history. The idea of a woman in a veil and wearing hijab has been used by American rhetoric as a way of justifying wars: 'let's go free the women that are so subordinated by their systems that are oppressive'. It is a simple narrative that needs to be questioned, so I wanted to delve deeper into that narrative.

Rebecca H: I think a moment where you comment on that narrative, especially a Western narrative, was when Parri says to one of her family members, 'could you go and lay the table'. There is a moment where you don't see the table, you just see the table cloth. I really liked that you then see her lay the table cloth onto the floor and everyone sits on the floor together and someone lays the plates out. I thought that was so clever, in terms of filmmaking and moving image, you can do stuff like that. The perception in

my head, through growing up in the UK, you lay the table, the table is up high and you put the cloth on top. But that was challenged in a way and it made me consider, what does it mean to lay the table cloth. To have a web of conversation drawn out of it, just from that comment, just from, 'could you go and lay the table, please'.

Roxana V: Thank you for picking up on the details! I would say in many ways, I was so free as an artist when I was making that film. I didn't have the pressures of TV executives telling me what tones and what audiences needed to see. I felt so free just to go with gut instinct. I'm actually quietly, quite proud of that work, because I don't feel like too many people got involved in how and why I should make it. So, it's really lovely you took that time to go and watch it. I haven't watched it back for a while, its making me think I should!

Rebecca H: So, I wanted to talk more about your documentary films because you are quite well known for working in this industry. I feel this area of your work always offers a sensitivity to your subject, it always feels personal and artistic, like your documentary, *The Music Never Stopped* for MTV and Amnesty International Co-production. The scene I am thinking of, in particular is, of Anahid from the band, Masters of Persia. She describes a dream – for those who haven't see the documentary here is an extract from it:

'I laid down on the ground and focused my ears on that mesmerizing sound. Suddenly, strangers started walking towards me and began to lie down next to me and put their ears to the ground.'

It is such a personal moment in the film. I'd love to know what your thought process is with documentary films; do you lead with your heart rather than your head?

Roxana V: That's a great question! It's fascinating, isn't it? The power of language! Because I would never really call myself a 'documentary filmmaker'. It is a label that has been used to describe my work, but I would often question that and say I am a storyteller, or I am a witness, or an observer.

Documentary film, like any genre, is still something that is fabricated; it is still a fiction. More and more now, we are seeing in the media and in artistic realms, and with film poems, this kind of merging of boundaries and lines. So yes, in some ways, I make documentary films, but I think I would now even question that form, because it is not a truthful form by any leap of the imagination because you edit. Because you decide what background the character is going to have. Because you decide what time of day you are going to shoot, what part of their story you are going to keep and what you are going to take out. I'm using that example because with the MTV film, *The Music Never Stopped*, we were telling a personal story about Anahid, but also, we were telling a larger story about Iran and

its history, through the musicians that were on the run from the government. A story of human rights. It was very hard for me to always lead from the heart, which is where I'd like to make work; well, I'd say it's a combination of the heart and the gut. When you are on set, when you are with the team, it's very much from the gut.

The joy of documentary is that you can respond to things in the moment! So, when we were filming with Anahid in Turkey, there was a couple of times on the street in Istanbul, when we got them to do a big death metal performance in the market. This crowd just spontaneously came around them. The reactions of the crowd and how they were reacting to these two death metal singers head banging in the middle of quite a traditional Turkish market was fantastic! And not something we had planned! The Sufi swirling dervishes: again, that was by accident. I had always dreamt of wanting to make a film with them. I told the producer and he said, there happens to be a group of dervishes who live just around the corner, let's go and chat to them! So, you have that flexibility, but that comes from the gut, I think – in the moment of going, what would work?

Unfortunately, though, when you are making work for commercial brands, as an artist, you definitely are compromising the heart, at times, to make decisions from the head, otherwise your team won't get paid. Let's say that!

Rebecca H: Yes, that is very understandable!

The fact that the Masters of Persia moved to Turkey was quite interesting to me! A lot of my Iranian family don't live in Iran. They live all over the world! Canada, they lived in Tbilisi [Georgia] as well; in the other countries that border Iran. It is very interesting in terms of your documentary *Iranian Enough* [BBC]. The documentary explores the complexity and beauty of Iranian identity and how it is kept alive when Iranians live abroad.

You have been invited to work in several countries with large Iranian diasporas, as I mentioned, like in Georgia – you were invited to organize creative projects with War Child there. My great-grandfather used to live in the capital [Tbilisi]; he had to speak Russian to get by, before moving to Iran. His son, my grandad, has worked all over the world. It really seems the Iranian identity has just become intertwined with migration and many must assimilate to their new cultural surroundings. My grandad changed his name to get work in the UK.

But they also keep their Iranian culture alive and proud of it too! I'm really intrigued for you to see what it is like to work in countries with vibrant Iranian communities outside of Iran? And how does your own heritage inspire your creative work?

Roxana V: Can I ask you a question?

Rebecca H: Yeah!

Roxana V: Do you feel Iranian in some way, do you delve into that heritage? How does it feel for you?

Rebecca H: It's something that I, as a child, it just was! It just was part of my life. It wasn't something I had actually really thought about. My grandad – I was aware that he had an accent and sounded different from my mum and dad. He would tell me about Iran, a little bit. He had things from Iran, as well. His children had their English names but they also had Iranian names. My aunty is actually called Parry, but her real name, well her English name is Angela! So, she is called Parvine, but we all call her Parry, so that is something that has stayed within the family! It has always been present, but it is only as I've got older and, possibly, having gone to university as well, it is actually becoming something I am more aware of – in terms of what it means to migrate, what it means to restart culture. My grandad and my grandmother divorced, but my grandad remarried someone from Brazil! So, there is another aspect of culture coming into the family, different countries meeting in one place!

In some ways, yes, I do feel connected to it, but I can't say I necessarily feel Iranian. It's not something we don't talk about though, it's something actually we talk about a lot! It's something that was a big part of my dad's life, growing up. He has visited Iran and has met our relatives. My cousins also have visited Iran – our [Iranian] cousins around the world. So, it's always kind of there, it is always existing, but there are not many Iranian people in Bristol, where we are recording this from right now! Social distancing though! I'm in my house and Roxana is in hers. But there aren't many Iranian people, that I have met, in Bristol. When I do meet someone who is from Iran, or is half-Iranian, there is usually a moment of celebration in that way, where they are say 'Oh my gosh! You have heritage there! That's so crazy!'

It is definitely something I am thinking about more. When I was researching you, I was thinking about the fact that you had worked in Georgia. That is more significant than maybe someone just reading, 'Roxana has worked in Georgia'. Perhaps it is more significant because of the Iranian diaspora, but that is not necessarily mentioned in your information online, but it is relevant! I'd like to know a little bit more, in terms of your heritage, as you have quite a close connection with Iran as well; you have visited and lived there! How has that inspired your work and what is it like to visit communities of Iranians outside of Iran?

Roxana V: So interesting your background, thank you so much! I hope you get to go to Iran one day!

Rebecca H: I hope so too!

Roxana V: I think you would really love it. And something just to add to the end of that, before I talk about my own heritage. Something really struck me when I went back to Iran to start working on cultural projects. I did a big theatre project there, then obviously made some films and collaborated with musicians. I felt this deep heart connection, a click, a synergy with my Iranian sisters and brothers in the artistic world. Where the ideas just flew, and flowed like water. They understood me in many ways that I have struggled to be understood here. Okay, I'm getting to make my work now, but it has taken quite a long time to be able to get across that I'm multidisciplinary, whereas in Iran, it's not even a question! It is totally normal to be a musician and a filmmaker and a writer and to just mix it all up! Because we have this word in Farsi, "Honairhi" [Farsi: هنری / English: Arty] which incorporates all the arts. It's part of our heritage and your heritage too, this idea of multidisciplinary. Finally, now, you don't have to put yourself in one box for the Arts Council. But even that annoys me, that there has to be a box! That for me was so liberating!

I remember going to a graveyard where my grandfather was buried. There was a part of the graveyard that was kept for the great Iranian artists and, again, they don't separate them! It's just an artist in the broadest sense of the word, that you don't have to choose one specific art form. That is deeply understood through our Persian history, through Iranian history, that all art forms feed and inspire and interweave with each other. It has taken me a long time in the UK to break out of that box, of being, oh she's in theatre, oh she's in film oh she's a documentary maker, or oh, she's a musician. It's all one for me and it comes back to the great Iranian tradition of storytelling. So, coming to the question of heritage, my grandfather was – and still is because he is very much alive – in his way, with me all the time. In fact, I've got a picture of him right here, in my studio, in front of me! He was a phenomenal storyteller, so I grew up with someone who would take us on car journeys from Tehran, up to the Caspian Sea, which is where he is from originally, up in the North. We would go there quite a lot because all my family, through generations, had land where they built beach huts in the forest. It was where we would go to get away from the smog in Tehran. It's a six-hour drive, quite long for UK standards. But Iran is a huge country, so six hours is kind of normal!

Anyway, he would sing and tell stories and sing and tell another story. So, there is that idea of a journey being underscored by this phenomenal story that took you out into the stars above you, as you were driving. I remember one night, Baba June, my grandfather, got so lost in the story he was telling, that we lost our way! So, a six-hour journey turned into something like an eight-and-a-half-hour journey! I remember that so deeply because I loved the fact that the storyteller got lost in his own story! That has really stayed with me. The gift of storytelling.

When we had to leave them behind, I was eight. We had to leave Iran, just as the war started with Iraq. Leaving my grandparents behind – we all grew up in the same flat in Tehran – was really painful. My grandfather, in many ways, was more my father figure, because my father was always working. My grandfather used to drive me to school, and he'd pick me up from school; so, it was really painful to leave them behind. I remember he gave my mum a cassette, an analogue cassette of stories that he'd told us. And it was always about repetition of the same stories; something very comforting about hearing the same story. We would put it on when were in Abu Dhabi and then Dubai, and then Saudi Arabia. This tape came with us everywhere and we would listen back to the stories. When I was 15, we eventually moved to the UK. So, there is this idea of journeys, leaving people behind, migration: and storytelling as a way of comfort for all the trauma of having to say goodbye. I think that is probably the thread that informs all my work.

I was reading somewhere that all artists are generally telling the same story in lots of different ways, I think mine is probably the story of a seven-year-old girl having to leave the ones that she loved behind. Always trying to go back and recapture that. The first seven years of your life, as Carl Jung said: if you want to form someone, take the first seven years of their life. That's when their deepest memories, character shaping and personality forming happens. Mine were in Iran and I think I'm forever trying to reach back and feel into that time creatively.

Rebecca H: It seems like having different avenues within your art practice, helps to access those different memories in a variety of ways. For example, your music speaks to the stories and songs of your grandfather and obviously, film is more like recalling memories. It's as if they take on the form of a language and each one is accessing a place that isn't necessarily in reach. I also work in a variety of mediums, as well. They are like languages; you need different ways of speaking to different types of themes and concepts.

Fig. 4 Vilk Collective.

Your music, within Vilk Collective, feels like a really intuitive part of your work. I loved your recent online concert with Act 4 Music. The concert title, *Wear Your Corona Like a Garland of Stars,* made me wonder on how we can reimagine the time we are in now. The poem accompanying the gig by Eugene Skeef, *Corona of Love*, was like nothing I had read yet during this time. People all over the world are working hard to stay positive and encourage others to feel happy too. But to actually see how the poem phrased this moment in history, as a time that births love, was really striking and empowering to read.

You open the concert with your new song, *Crescent Moon*, about hope and wishing, inspired by your grandmother. It was really refreshing to hear! I wanted to know more about writing that song, and in relation to hearing songs in your childhood?

Roxana V: Well, maybe I should start by saying that Eugene Skeef – who you mentioned, who curated the *Corona of Love* concert, which was part of the Act 4 Music series from around the world – I met Eugene Skeef in Bosnia.

I worked in Bosnia during and just after the war, which is where I met my partner, Peter Vilk. Because we met in a time of war and both of our families had had to flee countries because of revolution, we had a lot of connecting points. Eugene was my musical mentor and still is, very much, a mentor to me creatively. He is a phenomenal poet and phenomenal musician and he was Steve Biko's right-hand man in South Africa. He infuses politics and art; it's at the heart of his practice. That raising of consciousness and that raising of awareness, so we get each other. He is responsible for pushing me on stage to sing! Which is not something I thought I would ever do, actually. It was in Bosnia, we were working at The Pavarotti Music Centre and he was doing an opening piece with Nigel Osborne, who is a British composer, playing violin. Eugene was playing the drum. Eugene had heard me singing Persian songs, or Farsi songs, in some of the theatre workshops I had been running. He pulled me on stage and said 'I want you to sing that song that you were singing this morning'. This was "Mara Beboos! Mara Beboos!" [Farsi: !مرا ببوس / English: Kiss Me!] which is a famous Iranian song my grandfather used to sing, about embracing your loved one for the last time.

He got me on stage and I sang that song. We did an improvisation and afterwards I literally felt like a light had gone off in my whole system: that music and singing was something that I needed to do to feel good. So, my musical practice with Vilk Collective, really comes from an internal place of well-being. Because making music gives me hope, it gives me positivity and it allows me to imagine new ways of being for us as humans really! It's such a powerful practice, music.

Crescent Moon, the song, is inspired by my Iranian grandmother, Ezi Jun.

She would always pull me across to the window when there was a crescent moon, which in Islam, is a time of hope. When there is a crescent moon, you can make a wish. She always encouraged that.

The Brexit vote, which filled me with great sadness and a lot of anger actually, laid the foundations of making the *Lullabies* work. It was my reaction to the Brexit vote. On the day of Brexit, three different families in the school playground were like 'Are you going to be okay to stay in this country?' I thought, my God, I've got a British Passport, just because I speak another language to my son, why would you even ask that? It wasn't in Bristol that I was asked those questions, it was up in Scotland. But it kind of informed my move to Bristol, to want to live a more multi-cultural space. But anyway, back to your question sorry, I've diverged!

Rebecca H: Maybe you could answer, what did you think the concert maybe brought to people in these challenging times, especially in terms of hope. How does your music make you feel?

Roxana V: Making the online concert for Act 4 Music was a really interesting experience. I had never done an online concert before and I think what's really interesting about lockdown is, for artists, we are being asked to step out of our comfort zones. Most of the time I like to hide in my cave and present a piece of work when I think it's ready. Now, we are finally being asked to present process, maybe? And a chance to not be prepared, go with instinct a little bit more and not shy away from showing the insides of our studios.

We filmed the concert in our home studio, it was a mess! We managed to get the kids to be quiet for a couple of hours and we just went for it! It was meant to be a live take, so we had to just keep going, even if we made a mistake; so, we had to get over that idea of 'perfect' or 'perfection'.

From the bottom of my heart, I just wanted to allow people a space where they could sing along, so I asked everyone to sing along at the end of *Crescent Moon*. It's weird when you do a concert, just looking at your phone! So, I tried to imagine one person behind that phone. In this case, I imagined Eugene, who curated the concert. I imagined him standing there with his big, warm smile, because it was quite a strange experience performing. But, when I got the feedback from people who had watched, some people had videoed themselves watching the concert and singing along. Oh, my God, that was just so beautiful! I had a friend in the Isle of Skye, filmed him and his family singing along. Then a friend in America! People all around the world could connect in that moment! That felt really special, so I was glad I got over myself and got creating!

Rebecca H: That kind of delayed feedback is amazing! You are very much sat by yourself at the end of these things. Then suddenly messages come through,

maybe even a few days later, as well! It's a very different way of showing and making work, but in some ways, it's more direct to the audience. They are literally sat down to watch you. It's not like they happen to see you and you are playing somewhere and they have maybe gone to meet someone else. It's a very conscious decision, I would say, to go and watch the concert.

I wanted to ask now, more about your poetry films. I saw your poetry film, *Hopscotch* at ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival, last year. It struck me because of how directly and plainly the poet speaks to the audience. Your poetry films often show one person's voice, and their fight for freedom, for a life of peace where they can be themselves. When do you know that you've found a poem you want to work with, is it something you are instinctive about? Maybe like the gut feelings you have when you are making films?

Roxana V: That's a lovely question, it's obvious that you are an artist, because you get that whole idea of process and instinct! In terms of poetry films, it happens in two ways. Either I am commissioned to make a work in response to a preselected poem, or I am lucky enough to be able to choose a poem from a poet's collection.

Fig. 5 *Hopscotch*, Roxana Vilk, 2017.

Thanks for watching *Hopscotch* at ZEBRA Poetry Film Festival. That is a poem by Nadine Aisha Jassat, who is a Scottish-based poet, also with mixed heritage. We collaborated on this together for a Muslim women's film commission, which was about the fact that there had been a rise in hate crimes against women in public spaces. Women of BAME backgrounds, women of colour, women wearing a hijab, were receiving more hate in public spaces after the Brexit vote, which is well documented. We were

commissioned by the Scottish government, Rape Crisis Edinburgh and the Muslim Women's Resource Centre to make a film. I read Nadine's poem, and I said 'It's got to be this one!' She said 'Are you sure? It's really direct!'. I said 'I think it needs to be direct and I think you need to be in the film'.

You picked up on the fact that often I will put the poets in the film, often because I think, why not? It's the poem written by the poet; they could represent their work the best. Often, we don't get to see poets in films so much. Some of them tend to be quite shy, or read their poems from a piece of paper. I wanted to kind of show her taking the poem out and about into the streets of Edinburgh, that was a really interesting collaboration. I think it went quite well!

In terms of how I choose the poem – in that case it had to respond to the themes of harassment in public spaces. I felt that poem from Nadine really did. Often when I'm given free reign, I'll have to go with the goose bump theory, it's a really complex theory! Which is not complex at all! If I get goose bumps when I hear the poet speak those words. Or, if I read and I just feel a little shiver down my spine, then I know it's got to be that poem. Often it won't be the one that I immediately think, that will be great, it will be something else, coming at me sideways.

I remember working in Iraq with, Ghareeb Iskander, who is a phenomenal poet from Baghdad, now based in London. He has written a whole series of poems around Gilgamesh. This one was called 'Gilgamesh's Snake'. When I heard him read it in Arabic and then heard the English translation, it was just phenomenal. The immediacy of that poem in a war-torn ruined city – in Iraq. We filmed it together there. Yes, the goose bump theory is what I use.

Rebecca H: I'm very familiar with the goose bump theory!

It's definitely a good way to tell if the film is working. Sometimes it doesn't always work with films, it's more of, as you say, a gut feeling; even when you are editing or reviewing. I wanted to know a bit more how you plan your films. Take *Hopscotch* for example, I wonder what the process was behind making this poetry film. Is it something collaborative? Do you find that its different when you're making films in the Middle East to when you are making films in the UK, in terms of how you collaborate?

Roxana V: That is a really good question. Actually, *Hopscotch* was one of the few films I have shot in the UK, in terms of poetry film. A lot of them I have made in the Middle East. The process was very different in the Middle East because you are constantly worried that you might get arrested because you are filming in the wrong space, or you are going to get moved along. I'm very aware – like when I was filming in Iraq – I'm a female filmmaker. When I'm out and about with my camera, it would often pull a crowd of men who

weren't just watching me film, they were kind of leery and it wasn't that pleasant an experience.

In terms of storyboarding and concept, I would just have to have in my mind what I was hoping to get from that shot and that moment. I would have to be really quick about my setup with the camera, then really quick about taking it down, and sometimes having to run.

I remember in Lebanon, setting up my camera and then filming outside this beautiful mosque at the call to prayer, without really thinking through that this could be potentially quite dangerous. I was just obsessed with the colours and the sound: looking at it aesthetically and sonically. Then these two policemen turned up. Luckily, I had my friend and assistant on the shoot, Stephanie, with me. She helped me take down the camera really quickly and we just ran. I think that's always the best policy – not to wait to be talked to by the police, but to run [see example of Vilk filming on the street in *Red Burqa* below].

Fig. 6 *Red Burqa*, Roxana Vilk, 2009.

When we filmed *Hopscotch* in the UK, I thought, where is the danger element? I sort of missed the adrenaline. I realized I needed to find a

different access point for that sensation, because obviously, I had been relying on the adrenaline to help me choose the shots quickly. With digital you can shoot so much footage it gets really boring after a while, because you have got so much to edit through, that the discipline of planning ahead can get lost. So, with *Hopscotch*, I was much more conscious about let's be disciplined about what we are trying to get. Let's shoot quickly so we have still got that adrenaline charge, and let's not get permission. So, we were shooting in spaces that traditionally, in the UK, if you are going to film in a railway station, you need permission. We didn't get it, and that was great because it gave us that charge. We filmed quickly, and we had a little bit of an element of danger. A couple of policemen came towards us and we could still take down the camera and run. I think I'm slightly addicted to that now! I don't want things to be too easy; you don't go that bit deeper and further into that adrenaline-fuelled state, which I think I need as an artist. Maybe that is just the Iranian in me, I don't know!

Rebecca H: I think that element of creative risk is really important in work. You need to feel challenged by your work. Through filming these things, how else is anyone else going to see them? How else is anyone going to see these places without someone being brave and deciding to film them. Although it is quite a political risk in a way, as well as a creative risk. But that actually makes sense with your work because those things are quite entwined; the creativity and the politics.

I think your poetry film, *Road to Damascus* portrays a very honest account of the speaker's persecution and oppression. Perhaps, through creative risk and truth these things can actually take place in a film. In some ways, it is unlike a poet's voice in the traditional sense, but in other ways, it is exactly like the voice of a poet: someone who speaks a plain truth for those to see life for what it is, or, what it could be like. How do you think poetry films might help us to understand the poet's voice, more than just poetry alone?

Roxana V: That is a really good question. *Road to Damascus* we made, again very quickly, because the Syrian poet had just come across the border into Beirut, into Lebanon, from Damascus. He was threatened by Syrian undercover policemen once he was in Beirut, when he was doing a live poetry performance. So, I couldn't use his name in the film. From that moment he never went back to Syria, actually. He is now living in France as a refugee. We decided to tell a story about his dream because he had been having these reoccurring dreams. We filmed in a tunnel in Beirut. I won't spoil the film for you, it's very short, if you want to check it out.

It was more trying to capture his state of mind, as a poet, being threatened for his words. And having to now, make this decision of no longer being able to live in Damascus. It was just as the Syrian crisis was unravelling, so it felt like a poignant moment in history. Poetry films or film poems,

whatever we choose to call them. It is an interesting genre right now because it is kind of exploding. I don't think I ever set out to make poetry films, I set out to tell stories about these incredible poets, who use words to question and look at the world around them. I realized, slowly, as these films got more attraction and as I was asked to start making TV series about poets and their works, we don't often hear poets commenting right now about what's happening in the world around them. We might get them to read a poem that they have written five years ago, or two years ago. But, to actually hear them commenting on the world around them, as it's unravelling … So, the series I made for Al Jazeera, *Poets of Protest*, that was about looking at the 'so-called' Arab Spring. As coined by the Americans, it really wasn't a Spring. Through the eyes of poets from the region, the feedback we got from that TV series was really interesting, fascinating and different! To look at politics, contemporary political change and historic moments through the eyes of poets, not just listen to their poems.

I think poets are incredible on film. The art form is wonderful in itself, because everyone approaches it so differently. Jen Hadfield, who I filmed up in the Shetland Isles; she waits for a poem to come through her and that might take five years. Whereas Yehia Jaber, who I filmed in Lebanon, churns out poems, 10 a day! He writes them onto Facebook. When we were filming him, he was actually making poems about the filming process, creating these alter egos of himself! I'm just showing the two different sides of the spectrum. That creative process for a poet can be so different. Filming them is a way of getting an insight into their creative process, which is so fascinating! Also, into their views on the world. We might hear the poet laureate give an opinion but we don't often get to hear a broad range of poets talking about contemporary political culture, right here right now. I wanted to do that.

Rebecca H: Finally, can you tell me what plans you might have for your future projects? And when will be the release of your upcoming EP for Vilk Collective?

Roxana V: Future projects, I'm working on *Lullabies*. It's now going online! It's going to be a call out across the UK, then we will sculpt it into a series of performances and films. The music with Vilk Collective is very much brewing right now, we hope to have our new EP out in August! So, keep an ear out for that!

Rebecca H: Brilliant! Thank you very much Roxana.

Roxana V: Thanks, so much Rebecca! It's so nice to chat to you.

Rebecca H: You can find out more about Roxana Vilk's work from the links below, about her band, Vilk Collective and also her current project, *Lullabies*.

Thank you for listening!

Links to Roxana Vilk's work

Main website:
www.roxanavilk.com

Music:
https://vilkcollective.bandcamp.com
spotify:artist:1Pw55Rfi90ebMun8a9XOTS

Current Project, *Lullabies*, with Trinity, Bristol:
http://roxanavilk.com/lullabies
https://www.trinitybristol.org.uk/activities/lullabies

Iranian song, *Mara beboos*, cited in interview:
https://lyricstranslate.com/en/mara-beboos-kiss-me.html

About the interviewer

Rebecca Hilton is a young British artist and arts journalist. She graduated from Central Saint Martins, achieving a First-Class BA Honours in Fine Art. She is based in Bristol and recently exhibited her live event, *Seven Films*, at Fringe Arts Bath 2020.

Website:
https://rebecca-hilton.wixsite.com/rebeccahilton

Instagram:
@rebecca_hilton_