

# Q&A

## Corin Sworn e Bina von Stauffenberg

### March 2015

#### **Abstract of the exhibit catalogue *Silent Sticks***

*Corin Sworn discusses the development and ideas behind her new work for the Max Mara Art Prize for Women with Guest Curator Bina von Stauffenberg. Sworn won the prize in January 2014 following her winning proposal for a new art commission resulting from a bespoke six-month artist residency in Italy. From March 2014 she travelled to Rome, Naples and Venice.*

**BvS: *The Commedia dell'Arte originated in Italy in the 1550s as a mélange of popular culture and literary societies, one foot in the street, the other one in the academy. What attracted you to this particular art form?***

**CS:** I was interested in how this Italian based form of migratory theatre was able to travel through Europe successfully crossing lingual barriers when, as a form of art, it was so language reliant. How could it be successful in communities that did not necessarily speak the same language as was used on stage?

My choice of topic could seem sometimes a little overwhelming - it is a long dead but iconic form of theatre. It was like coming to Britain saying, "I am a contemporary artist and I have come here to make work about Shakespeare".

**BvS: *You have worked closely with seamstresses at Max Mara to create costumes for your performance. The results are period outfits layered with contemporary elements. Could you elaborate about the process? How important are these costumes for your piece? What are you hoping to achieve with the contemporary layers?***

**CS:** When I encountered the sheer expanse that was research in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, I decided that I had to narrow things down a bit. I did so by focusing on a particular period, around 1585 and choosing a basic question as a spindle to organize my thoughts around. I was drawn to a frequent trope by which one person dresses up as another and then is read socially as the figure they dress as rather than who they are underneath. So a woman might dress as a man and would then be recognized as a man consistently.

I wondered what this meant in terms of how clothing signified. I wondered about costuming if the ways people identified each other socially was shifting. I also looked into the circulation of cloth and costume and the relative cost of clothing compared to today. Garment costs could be enormous, many people did not change clothes often simply as they did not own many. There were also quite strict sumptuary laws\* about who could wear

what; a Master may give a servant an item of clothing that they would be unable to wear themselves but could take to the theatre and pawn it. The theatre became a place of economic circulation through cloth. Those pieces of clothing also got reused on the stage, rendering some of the signifying systems of rank, mobile. At the time, this was a point of incredible fascination and anxiety.

I wondered what it meant. Might it have to do with gender and agency as it allowed women action in the public sphere they could only have while dressed as men? Might it be a reflection on the actors themselves as figures who are able to simulate various people on stage?

***BvS: Commedia plays with mistaken identities as part of the art form. You have an interest in the French/Basque peasant Martin Guerre, whose real life story of mistaken and stolen identities resonates with this theme. Could you talk about why this story has been integrated in your work?***

**CS:** Throughout my research into mistaken identities on stage, I asked myself what were these cases? Some say that by having women on stage, stories couldn't travel outside of the bounds of the home. One of the ways to allow them more narrative agency was if they dressed as men. Another possibility is that this is a meta-reference, these exchanging identities or performed roles through costume is a kind of reflection on the actors themselves, this new form where people performed figures that were others than themselves socially. The story of Martin Guerre was a popular tale at the time, because it encompassed a lot of the anxieties of the day. It spoke to people who could recognize and know each other. Levels of society that had been fixed were in flux. I wanted to use the court cases that describe the event and reflect back on some of the *Commedia* stories and this trope of mistaken identity.

\* *“Laws made for the purpose of restraining luxury or extravagance, particularly against inordinate expenditures in the matter of apparel, food, furniture, etc.”* Black's Law Dictionary, Sixth Edition, p. 1436 (1999)