13
LECOQ (1921–1999)

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13.1 The life of Jacques Lecoq

A theatre school should not always journey in the wake of existing theatre forms. On the contrary, it should have a visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself.

(Lecoq 2000: 162)

Jacques Lecoq (1921–99)

When Jacques Lecoq died in 1999, world theatre lost one of its most imaginative, influential and pioneering thinkers and teachers. Compared to many of the figures featured in this series, little has yet been written about Jacques Lecoq. While this can be partly explained by that phenomenon common to many great artistic and cultural innovators of not being fully recognised until after their death, it is also because Lecoq is celebrated almost exclusively as a teacher and thinker, rather than for plays he might have written or for the productions he directed and choreographed.

Jacques Lecoq’s real influence lies embodied within thousands of performers, writers, movement choreographers and theatre directors across the world who were once his students in Paris – and elsewhere – during a period of forty-two years. To a greater or lesser extent, his signature rests inscribed in the theatre these ‘students’ have constructed, in the performances they have made and in the plays they have written or directed. This chapter attempts to bring that signature into sharper focus by offering responses to the following sorts of questions. Who was Jacques Lecoq? What did he do? Why was his work important? How did his thinking and practice connect to other significant figures of twentieth-century theatre? Why is his legacy still important for contemporary theatre?

The first part of this section attempts to paint a picture of Lecoq’s life in France and Italy from the end of the Second World War, tracing his development as actor, director, movement choreographer and theatre teacher. Following this early history, I examine the foundations of the Paris school and consider its organisation and structure. The rest of this section considers the broader historical and cultural context into which Lecoq’s life and work may helpfully be placed and understood. Conventional wisdom suggests that, historically, Lecoq’s legacy from
Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) was the definitive influence that most shaped and framed his work. However, in so far as Lecoq ever chose to invoke other twentieth-century theatre practitioners as sources of authority, the figure of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) should be equally acknowledged. Here, I focus on Copeau, while arguing that what primarily drove Lecoq was not some kind of self-conscious attempt to place himself within any particular tradition of European theatre, but an overriding curiosity with the body and how it moved. Having speculated about historical influences, I then consider the recent dramatic rise – in Britain and parts of Europe – of theatre forms which foreground the performer’s body and its movement in space, and reflect on Lecoq’s role in these developments. Finally, in continuing an attempt to locate his work upon a bigger cultural canvas, a brief account is offered of the ways in which the human body has become a central concern in other disciplines apparently unconnected to theatre and performance. . . .

To think about the life and work of Lecoq; to understand the how, what and why of fifty years of pedagogy; to consider his theorising on how things, materials, humans . . . animals move; to reflect upon his ideas on how performance communicates itself; to debate his views on theatre’s stake in the politics of place, identity and internationalism is to engage with issues utterly germane to the problems and challenges of contemporary theatre practice. This is a chapter about how one of Western Europe’s great teachers of theatre, working in the second half of the twentieth century, implicitly and explicitly presented a challenge to much of the received wisdom on actor training and – hence – the making of contemporary performance.

To put it another way, Lecoq is important to our understanding of contemporary Western drama because he was a central figure in a loose movement of practitioners, teachers and theorists who proposed that it is the actor’s body – rather than simply the spoken text – which is the crucial generator of meaning(s) in theatre. Lecoq’s school in Paris thrived (and, at the time of writing, continues to flourish) during a period when many young European theatre-makers were creating work which they – or the publicity departments of theatres and arts centres – wished to describe as physical theatre, movement theatre, body-based theatre, visual performance, or even occasionally modern mime. Whether these labels help us to understand a particular theatrical form is debatable. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt – especially within Britain – that, from the 1970s, there was a significant increase in the amount of devised performance which emphasised movement, gesture and mime as the main expressive tools of theatre. That this development was particularly marked in Britain reflects a reaction against a dominant tradition which has given an almost deferential authority to the playwright in the construction of theatre – a tradition that has placed the spoken word at the centre of the theatrical experience, and one that, arguably, has been more pronounced in Britain than in other countries of Europe. Translated into actual live performance this has been a theatre culture that applauded and celebrated actors with a rich vocal range and virtuosity which often, however, far exceeded their talent or aptitude for expressive movement and gesture. Many British drama schools offering training for the aspiring professional actor have consciously reinforced this perspective by prioritising vocal expertise at the expense of other physical skills within their curricula.

The reasons for the upsurge in forms of theatre which have privileged the expressive potential of the actor’s body are complex, and cannot simply and unproblematically be reduced to the influence of those theatre practitioners and teachers who also chose to explore the power of movement and gesture as tools of communication on stage. While Jacques Lecoq and his contemporaries, such as Jerzy Grotowski (1933–99), Eugenio Barba (1936–), Peter Brook (1925–) and Étienne Decroux (1898–1991), have all had a major impact on the shape and direction of what one might wish to call ‘body-based’ theatre in the West since the 1950s, to understand
their work fully it is necessary to consider the wider cultural movements within which their own specific practice existed.

The significance of the body in late twentieth-century Western culture goes well beyond the performing arts and permeates the discourses of – for example – cultural studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology and feminist theory. It is not the place of this chapter to examine those wider cultural forces that provide a framework for theatre movements celebrating movement and physicality, although much of what follows implicitly engages with these broader issues.

So, if Jacques Lecoq is but a single player in a larger pattern of cultural circumstances all concerned with the significance of the body, he is nonetheless a very considerable one within the field of contemporary theatre and performance. His influence on a wider debate about actor training and the meaning of movement and physical expression within theatre has been substantial. However, his impact on the actual production of theatre and approaches to performing in Western cultures over the last thirty years has been equally significant, though perhaps less straightforward to detect. The roll-call of directors, writers and actors who at one time trained with Lecoq is extensive. Among the better known we may identify: Philippe Avron, Luc Bondy, Michel Azama, Yasmina Réza, Steven Berkoff, Ariane Mnouchkine (1939–), Geoffrey Rush and Julie Taymor (1952–). Of the companies which have acknowledged a collective debt to Lecoq, the most significant include: Théâtre de Complicité, Mummenschanz, Footsbarn, Théâtre du Soleil, Moving Picture Mime Show, Els Joglars and Els Comediants.

The issues with which any investigation into the work of Jacques Lecoq must engage, and which this chapter attempts to examine and analyse, may be summarised as follows:

- Play and the creative actor
- The performer’s body and the generation of meaning(s)
- Bodies: culturally inscribed or universally constructed?
- The subversive clown, bouffon or grotesque
- Matter: texture, movement, sound and taste
- Rapport and complicité in the creation of ensemble
- Preparing the body for theatre
- Mime and nature: mime and theatre
- Internationalism, humanism and theatre
- Connecting two centuries: the legacy of the modernist avant-garde
- Against interpretation: the practitioner as art form
- Space, architecture, mobility and stillness
- Releasing mime from the closet
- Mask and anti-mask: from neutrality to the red nose.

**Lecoq, Grotowski and other bodies**

Jacques Lecoq died on 19 January 1999. By one of those strange coincidences of timing which invite us to reflect on the cultural forces that frame and shape artistic innovation and development, the Polish teacher and theorist of actor training, Jerzy Grotowski, had died only five days earlier. Although their approaches to the training of actors differed in many significant respects – and there seems little evidence that either invoked the other in his writing or teaching – these major figures of twentieth-century European theatre are connected in at least two significant ways. First, they were both deeply influenced by a way of looking at actor training initiated through the radical experiments of the French theatre director, Jacques Copeau. For Grotowski, the link was through Copeau’s nephew, Michel Saint-Denis (1897–1971), whom he called ‘my
spiritual father’. For Lecoq, the connection is by virtue of his ‘apprenticeship’ to Jean Dasté (1904–94), Copeau’s son-in-law. Second – and crucially – is their joint insistence that the creative ‘pulse’ at the heart of theatre is the actor’s body, its movement and its stillness. For Copeau, Grotowski and Lecoq – but in varying ways – it is the actor’s body that is both starting and finishing point of all live performance. Such an apparently unexceptional observation – shared by other significant theatre practitioners – however, disguises often contesting assumptions about what the body actually is, and whether through theatre training it can be stripped of all its cultural habits and dispositions acquired through socialisation. Arguably, the body of the performer and its ability to generate ‘presence’ and/or to ‘represent’ authentically has been the most significant challenge for Western theatre-makers over the last three decades. At the same time, this issue – how the performing body is constructed and communicates itself – has perhaps been the central problematic facing academics of theatre and performance studies. As this chapter attempts to illustrate, the work and thinking of Jacques Lecoq lie at the heart of such debates.

Although he was a prolific movement choreographer and director of plays between 1948 and 1956, while working and living in Italy, Lecoq’s impact on world theatre, from the inauguration of his Paris school in 1956 until his death forty-three years later, can only really be measured directly through his teaching, research and occasional forays into writing. Almost all the other key figures of European (and American) modernism whose work has interrogated the theory and practice of acting – from Stanislavsky (1863–1938), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940), Copeau, Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) and Michael Chekhov (1891–1955), through to Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin (1935–), Brook and Barba – have also directed, devised or choreographed work for the stage.

For practitioners such as these, teaching and research existed alongside directing and making professional theatre. For them, explorations into the nature of acting have been partly realised through the theatre productions for which they have been responsible. To the extent that such work has been documented – and within the considerable limitations which any documentation of live performance, however sensitive and sophisticated, places on the suspect notion of a single ‘accurate record’ – we can at least see or read about what apparently happened on stage. Here, it is theoretically possible to unravel the connections between pedagogy, dramaturgy, mise-en-scène and performance.

Modernism is a complex historical and cultural phenomenon that embraces a wide – and often contradictory – range of ways of thinking about and explaining the world. Linked historically, but elastically, to a period from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, modernism embraces a wide variety of political, cultural and artistic movements which shared little other than a belief that nothing is as it seems, and that appearance and meaning have an awkward relationship with each other.

Mise-en-scène means literally – from the French – the ‘action of putting on the play’. It refers to all elements of the staging of a piece of theatre – lighting, design, props and costumes – and their relationship to each other and to spectators.

Dramaturgy is the process of thinking about – and realising in practice – the appropriate theatrical vocabularies and languages for carrying the meanings of the piece to spectators. Dramaturgy or ‘looking with knowledge’ (Keefe 1995: 12) engages with the process of considering all the possible texts for a work of theatre and how these will fit together to shape the structure of the piece in question. ‘The specific link between form and content’ (Pavis 1998: 125).

For Lecoq, given that his experience of directing theatre in Italy chronologically predates forty-three years of theorising, research and practice-through-teaching at the Paris school, we
have no such opportunity. What we do have instead is a shadowy legacy of the traces left by those companies and actors who trained with Lecoq and who will readily invoke his influence when their work is described, analysed and assessed. Section 13.2 of this book is devoted to considering the work of two companies – Mummenschanz and Théâtre de Complicité – many of whose actors trained at the Paris school. By focusing on these companies we are presented with the opportunity of tracing where and how Lecoq’s influence is manifest through, for example, approaches to acting, deployment of dramatic space, manipulation of props and other objects and – above all – in a conscious devotion to the power of movement and gesture.

Jacques Lecoq: actor, director and teacher

Early career: foundations in France and Italy (1940–56)

Jacques Lecoq was born in Paris in 1921. He was active in a variety of sports at school and throughout his life retained an interest in the way athletes effectively organise and use their bodies. At the age of twenty Lecoq attended a college of physical education at Bagatelle in the Paris suburbs and began to teach physical education, as well as coaching athletes to swim. At the college he met Jean-Marie Conty, an international basketball player who was in charge of France’s policy on physical education. Conty also had a strong interest in theatre and later set up a school entitled L’Éducation par le Jeu Dramatique (Education through Dramatic Performance). Here, in 1947, Lecoq was to teach classes on physical expression.

By the end of the Second World War he had started to undertake rehabilitation work among the disabled: ‘he saw how a man with paralysis could organise his body in order to walk, and taught him to do so’ (McBurney 1999a). Between 1945 and moving to Italy in 1948 Lecoq made his first connections with a number of theatre practitioners and teachers who provided a link back down the twentieth century to the pioneering work of Jacques Copeau and his laboratory for the renewal of French theatre and acting at L’École du Vieux Colombier. Lecoq’s connections to the various ‘technical’ traditions that have shaped contemporary mime and movement theatre will be explored later in this section, but at this juncture we should note that the four key figures of twentieth-century French mime – Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–94), Étienne Decroux, Marcel Marceau (1923–) and Lecoq himself – can all trace their artistic lineage back to the teaching and thinking of Copeau in the 1920s. While this heritage is neither uncomplicated, nor a simple affirmation of Copeau’s legacy, various writers on modern mime and movement theatre – Myra Felner (1985), Tom Leabhart (1989) and Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow (1990) – have all noted the interconnected and ‘incestuous’ nature of the French mime tradition.

Shortly after the liberation of France, Lecoq joined the Association Travail et Culture (TEC). This was an influential organisation that, during the war, had served as the cultural wing of the French Resistance movement and had the purpose of opening up opportunities in artistic activities for working-class people. Frost and Yarrow note that TEC ‘gave shows and organised spectacles for 10–15,000 people . . . echoes here of Fo and Piscator’ (Frost and Yarrow 1990: 61). Here, Lecoq received his first formal theatre training and began to explore ‘mimed improvisations’ (Lecoq 2000: 4) with members of the company, a number of whom had been pupils of Charles Dullin (1885–1949).

Somatic means relating to the body and implies an activity, or a process which is ‘hands on’ and physical rather than cerebral and intellectual. The term can sometimes unwittingly reinforce a false distinction between ‘mind’ and ‘body’.
Dullin had also been a member of Copeau’s first company, but set up his own studio for theatre research (the Atelier) in the 1930s. It was in the Atelier that Decroux and Barrault initiated their years of somatic ‘research’ into corporeal expression and thus laid the foundations for a codified grammar of mime that many years later Lecoq was himself to reject as too constricting. Lecoq records that, at the Association Travail et Culture, he performed:

in Chartres to celebrate the return of prisoners of war . . . and in Grenoble where we participated in two large celebrations: one for the liberation of the city, and the other for the May Day holiday in honour of the work taken up again by men who had been liberated at last.

( Lecoq 1987: 108)

It is interesting to surmise at this point the extent to which the young Lecoq’s involvement in ‘popular theatre’ subsequently shaped the form and direction of his pedagogy at the Paris school until his death in 1999. The emphasis which many Lecoq disciples give to comic performance and clowning – at least in the early stages of their careers – seems to reflect a concern with the popular and accessible in theatre. David Bradby, translator of The Moving Body and writer on French theatre, regards this commitment as a significant indicator of the school’s future direction and of Lecoq’s politics:

That’s one of the attractive things about him. . . . He did not want to do Brecht, but he was very interested in discovering the popular roots of theatre. . . . So his whole practice was about giving voice to the people, giving expression to the people. His four main dramatic territories were all in their own way ‘popular’ art forms. It’s not by chance that one of these was melodrama – the popular art form par excellence. He was interested in those basic situations of people saying goodbye, people in need. He reckoned that was his political statement.

( Bradby 2002a)

It is fruitful to compare this disposition to the austerity and asceticism with which Decroux – also on the political ‘left’ – approached his own teaching and performance work. Although Marcel Marceau learned the technical grammar of mime from Decroux, his teacher was later to disavow the technically accomplished but ‘popular mime’ with which Marceau was to tour the world for over four decades.

Towards the end of this immediate post-war period, before he moved to Italy in 1948, Lecoq was invited to join Les Comédiens de Grenoble in Grenoble by its director, Jean Dasté, son-in-law of Jacques Copeau. Here, again, the interrelatedness between strands of practice within European modernism is evidenced when we learn that Dasté had also worked with Antonin Artaud some fifteen years earlier. It was Artaud, as Alison Hodge notes in her introduction to a book of essays on actor training, who ‘called for a theatre which celebrated the nonverbal elements of consciousness . . . for a more sensuous physical actor . . . an “athlete of the heart”’ (Hodge 2000: 6).

In the same period, through his exposure to Dasté, and Léon Chancerel (1886–1965), Lecoq first began to work with masks and explore the commedia dell’arte. Reflecting on this time, when he also worked with poet and writer, Gabriel Cousin (1918–), many of whose plays he was later to direct, Lecoq again emphasises the sporting connection: ‘as we were athletes . . . our fundamental gestural language was based on the sports we practised: I was a swimmer, he was a runner. Sports, movement and theatre were already closely related’ (Lecoq 2000: 4).
Commedia dell’arte is a theatrical tradition that dates back to sixteenth-century Italy and has its deep roots in the theatre of ancient Greece. Commedia has had a significant influence upon comic theatre throughout Europe ever since. Formally, commedia was improvised around a tight structure of stock characters (e.g. Pantalone and Harlequin), most of whom were masked, and incorporated various theatrical disciplines, including acrobatics, mime and slapstick. The challenge for twentieth-century theatre practitioners interested in commedia, such as Lecoq, has been how to invest it with more than merely a historical or archival significance.

During these three years in Grenoble and Paris we must register Lecoq’s exposure to, and burgeoning interest in, various theatre forms that were to become central to his pedagogy and research, first in Italy and then from 1956 at the Paris school. Working with masks, commedia dell’arte, the nature of movement and a political and emotional commitment to ‘popular’ theatre forms all continued to inform his thinking, and remained – with varying degrees of emphasis – central features of the curriculum at the Paris school.

In 1948, Lecoq was invited to Italy to teach movement skills at the University of Padua, and so began an eight-year period during which time his reputation as a teacher, director and thinker blossomed. In Padua he began to direct plays at the University Theatre and here ‘he claims to have discovered le jeu de la Commedia Dell’Arte in the markets of the town’ (Frost and Yarrow 1990: 61). As we shall see, the idea of ‘le jeu’, which at its simplest means ‘play’, lies at the very heart of Lecoq’s analysis of acting. . . .

In Padua, Lecoq met a young sculptor and mask-maker called Amleto Sartori and embarked on a partnership of great significance for his subsequent research and teaching: ‘the masks made by Amleto and his son Donato still make up an integral part of my pedagogic tools today’ (Lecoq 1987: 109). Amleto’s concept of the neutral mask was a product of detailed discussion with Lecoq, and was initially constructed and modelled around the contours of Lecoq’s own face. When Lecoq finally left Italy for Paris in 1956, Amleto Sartori presented him with a full set of leather commedia masks, which he continued to use until his death in 1999. Sartori adapted the techniques of Renaissance bookbinding to the task of fabricating leather commedia masks, and together for nearly a decade they researched and investigated the relationship between the form and theatrical function of the mask. While this ‘great friendship’ ended with Sartori’s early death at the age of 46 in 1958, his son Donato continued to supply a range of masks for the school. A comment made by Lecoq many years later gives an indication that he had already seen the potential for political subversion in the ‘Italian comedy’:

I don’t bury myself in historical references. I try to rediscover the spirit of these forms. Commedia has nothing to do with those little Italian troupes who export precious entertainments. It’s about misery, a world where life’s a luxury. . . . If you are thinking of Commedia forget about Italy.

(Hiley 1998: 40)

In 1951, Lecoq moved to Milan to join Paulo Grassi (1919–81) and Giorgio Strehler (1921–97) at the Piccolo Theatre. Grassi, an actor-director, and Strehler, a director, had founded the Piccolo in 1947 on an explicit anti-fascist ideology and with a commitment to reaching working-class audiences. By the time Lecoq arrived, the partnership had already
launched the *teatro stabile* movement that – by the 1960s – had established a network of permanent troupes throughout Italy. By 1951, however, the Piccolo already had a reputation as one of Italy’s leading theatres, and Strehler and Grassi invited the young Lecoq to open a school there committed to the pedagogy of movement. Shortly after arriving at the Piccolo, Lecoq introduced Sartori to Strehler and all three worked together on his famous masked production of Goldoni’s *A Servant of Two Masters*. Lecoq collaborated with Grassi and Strehler until 1956 and, during this time, worked on over sixty productions, not only at the Piccolo, but for *teatro stabile* theatres in Rome, Syracuse and Venice as well. He directed and choreographed in a wide range of theatrical styles, but was particularly engrossed by Greek tragedy, pantomime and *commedia*. In her chapter on Lecoq in *Apostles of Silence*, Myra Felner observes that:

> He continued the exploration of the Commedia he had begun with Dasté. He examined the ancient mime traditions – the Greek chorus, the acrobatic Roman mime. He was searching for the roots of movement in the theatre.

*Felner 1985: 147*

It was during this period in Milan that Lecoq first met and worked with Dario Fo (1926–). Both became members of a troupe committed to experimentation within a framework of popular theatre. In 1952 they created a couple of satirical and political reviews. These marked a major departure from the traditional ‘safe’ reviews which had until then been dominated by famous actors. Nearly fifty years later Fo received the Nobel Prize for Literature after a working life of writing, directing and performing theatre which had been resolutely anti-establishment – the Catholic Church, the State, the corruption of the ruling classes and the debilitating power of capitalism have all been the butt of his writing and theatre-making. Lecoq’s and Fo’s friendship and mutual respect continued until Lecoq’s death in 1999. Here, recorded for a French television profile of Lecoq shortly before his death, the two men reflected on their early work together, and on the cultural and social conditions of Italy in the early 1950s:

*DF:* We were children back then,
I was 23 and you were 25,
So we were really just kids.

*JL:* We had no idea of the results of what we were doing.
We just did it; we just made it up, but we had no idea.
We weren’t diplomats or strategic about anything.

*DF:* But there was a very important phenomenon that we were going through at the time.
We were living among extraordinary renewal.
We had to throw away everything and construct a world.
The world had to be made all over again.

*JL:* There were no more rules.
There were no more rules.
We had to make up the game again – find new rules.

*Felner 1985: 147*

This snatch of dialogue between two old men of European theatre has a resonance and poignancy to it, not least because the conversation was recorded within a year of Lecoq’s death. More importantly, perhaps, it reveals a strong feeling of optimism following the defeat of Fascism, and a sense that artists could – and should – empower themselves to invent afresh the rules of their particular creative work. For both these men the post-war landscape of Western theatre had
to be re-mapped with different conventions and methods. In any attempt to understand what drove Lecoq it is essential to imagine the times and circumstances of his life as a child and young man. The collective and individual trauma of living through the Second World War, which so obviously shaped the perceptions of those who experienced it, was often matched by an overwhelming sense of the need for cultural, social and political renewal when the war had ended. It is always important to place the subsequent working lives of both Lecoq and Fo within this historical and cultural context.

In 1956, at the age of thirty-five, Lecoq returned to France and established the school he was to direct until his death in 1999. Much of the rest of this section concerns itself with an examination of what he was trying to achieve in Paris’s tenth arrondissement at 57 rue du Faubourg St Denis. While it is clear that the school was never simply a vehicle to train actors with the skills that Lecoq himself had acquired when working with Dasté in Grenoble, and later during his time in Italy, these years were crucial in constructing a platform upon which to launch the research and teaching that followed. As we noted earlier, most of the great figures of twentieth-century theatre who were committed to rethinking the nature and direction of acting used the rehearsal studio as their arena for testing ideas and hypotheses. For Lecoq – at least from 1956 – the school was his ‘laboratory’ and students – rather than professional actors – were the subjects of his experiments. Clearly, his time in Italy was an episode of intense and energetic exploration of dramatic form, and a period that firmly established the theatrical territory he was to inhabit for the rest of his life. Lecoq’s relationship in Italy with figures such as Strehler, Sartori and Fo, and his immersion in mask work, Greek chorus, improvisation, movement and the politics of popular theatre, all provided the framework and context which were to provoke the questions he continued to pose – of both himself and his students – for the next forty years from his base in Paris.

**The Paris schools (1956–99)**

In life I want students to be alive, and on stage I want them to be artists.  
*(Translated from Le Corps Poétique for obituaries in Total Theatre: Berkoff et al. (1999))*

I am nobody; I am only a neutral point through which you must pass in order to better articulate your own theatrical voice. I am only there to place obstacles in your path so you can find your own way around them.  
*(Lecoq in conversation with Simon McBurney: McBurney (1991a))*

The school moves; otherwise it dies.  
*(Lecoq 1987: 120)*

From 1956, Lecoq devoted himself to running a school of:

Mime and Theatre based on movement and the human body . . . a school of dramatic creation; it relies on knowledge of the organic and emotional dynamics of man and nature . . . the school concerns itself with theatre to be created; this theatre belongs to the pupils, their ideas, their quest.  
*(Brochure advertising the school in the 1980s)*
During its first twenty years, the school seemed always to be on the move within Paris, apparently shifting from one less than satisfactory space to another. Lecoq records the difficult conditions in which sometimes they had to function. For example, in the early 1970s the school was based in the American Centre on the Boulevard Raspail, and Lecoq notes wryly that it was a ‘vast, unheated space in which we worked on lessons wrapped in blankets’ (Lecoq 2000: 12). Despite the unsatisfactory nature of such a nomadic existence, the experience helped Lecoq to formulate his thoughts on the relationship between space, movement and creative discovery: ideas that were later to be explored more formally with the introduction of LEM (Laboratoire d’Étude du Mouvement). Different spaces proposed different possibilities for creative work and Lecoq was happy to be provoked by these:

There were experiments with ‘danse concrète’ which ran parallel to ‘musique concrète’. It was also in this period that I tried to create theatre using the rules of sport. Two teams performed around the same theme – jealousy, for example, within the parameters of a basketball court . . . this was ‘theatre ball’. And it was also towards the end of this roaming around, at the Centre Américain, that the school discovered other artistic areas: melodrama, the storyteller mime, comic strips and tribunes.

(Lecoq 1987: 118)

Finally, in 1976, he found the premises (Le Central) ‘that seemed destined for us’ (Lecoq 2000: 12) at 57 rue du Faubourg St Denis in Paris’s tenth arrondissement. Most appropriately, given Lecoq’s early and abiding interest in sport, Le Central had been a gymnasium devoted to boxing. It had not only witnessed some of the great boxing contests of the first half of the twentieth century, it was near to Copeau’s birthplace and where Louis Jouvet (1887–1951) lived and worked. Moreover, Le Central had inspired Marcel Carné’s film, Air de Paris. When they took over the building it was, according to his wife Fay, almost a complete ruin and without electricity, changing rooms and toilets. Today, the ‘ruin’ has all the necessary facilities, the foyer and passageways decorated with photographs, posters and notices, and, at the heart of the building, a massive hall – once a boxing gymnasium – encircled high up by a precarious-looking wooden balcony. A lot of wood. Here, you can almost smell its history and feel the presence of the sporting figures who once gave life to this extraordinary space, ‘redolent of that 1930’s world of the Popular Front which was so well captured by Jean Renoir [1894–1979] in his films’ (Bradby 2002a).

Characteristically, the school does not shout its presence to the world outside: only a small nondescript plaque on a heavy steel security door leading on to the street suggests that down a long narrow courtyard lies the building which Lecoq, with his wife, Fay, has turned into one of Europe’s leading laboratories of contemporary theatre practice. Rue du Faubourg St Denis itself is a busy, raucous and noisy thoroughfare. Today, much of it seems more or less equally devoted to the selling of sex, fruit, vegetables, fast food and cheap electrical gadgets. Training actors to move at number 57 sits happily alongside a variety of other uses to which the human body may be employed – a good place for a school devoted to exploring nature as well as culture; the perfect location to explore the ‘le jeu de bouffons’; and, perhaps, the best possible site to enjoy the heightened emotions of melodrama, or the plebeian camaraderie of the Greek chorus. Far better here than in the more refined bourgeois quartiers of the seventh and eighth arrondissements.

The short extract from a brochure – . . . – hints at the essence of what Lecoq’s school was trying to explore: the philosophical assumptions which remained more or less constant over forty-three years, and which underpinned all the practical teaching strategies employed by Lecoq
and his colleagues. A school engaged with ‘dramatic creation’ rather than merely realising the theatrical edicts of other ‘masters’. A school that would spend time investigating the ‘emotional dynamics’ of – and between – man and nature. A school concerned with ‘theatre to be created’. Observe here a forward-looking stance that aspires to construct a theatre of the future, not simply re-presenting the theatre that is already known. Perhaps, above all, a school which – without any apparent awkwardness – speaks of ‘mime and theatre based on movement and the human body’ (brochure advertising the school).

While Lecoq himself led the school, a small team of other tutors with particular skills and specialisms worked alongside him. Most tutors have been students at the school and should also have attended the third – optional – year in pedagogy. His second wife – Scottish-born Fay – led a team of administrators and often dealt with the world outside the school on behalf of her husband. Fay regularly toured with Lecoq when he was conducting workshops, or offering his lecture-demonstration – Tout bouge – in different countries of the world. Where English translation was required, Fay would provide it. Entry to the school’s two-year course is upon the presentation of a satisfactory curriculum vitae and teacher’s reference, which should testify to the applicant’s movement and acting ability – or at least potential. No further audition or test of skill and potential is required at this point. Typically, about 100 students – ‘more than 50 nations have been represented’ (extract from school brochure in the mid-1980s) – enter the school every September. Although the first term is officially a trial period during which both school and pupils decide whether the relationship will work, rarely more than ten students leave at this juncture, and when they do it is largely of their own volition. The end of the first year, however, is a very different matter. At this point, Lecoq and his team would select those who were deemed suitable to progress into the second year. Sometimes as many as forty or fifty might have been asked to go at this point, leaving a core group of about thirty-five or forty.

Successful passage into the second year has never been predicated upon any formal examination or assessment and was based on Lecoq’s sense of who was ‘open’ (disponible) enough to benefit from a further year at the school. While it is stressed that those leaving the school are not being judged on the basis of their acting skills, it is hard to imagine that most departing students exit with much sense of pleasure and achievement. For first-year students it is a time of great tension as they await the verdicts of their tutors. Nonetheless, the school is anxious to stress that the decision to ask students to leave is not about perceptions of quality, success or failure. Thomas Prattki, who took over as Director of Pedagogy at the school after Lecoq’s death in 1999, puts it like this:

Maybe the student’s vision is already clear . . . they no longer need the school. It’s not a judgement about the quality of the student. Sometimes they confuse a desire for life with a desire for theatre. It’s not about whether a student ‘fits into the Lecoq approach’.

(Prattki 2001)

In addition to a third and entirely optional year on pedagogy, from 1977 Lecoq launched LEM (translated as Laboratory for the Study of Movement) as an evening class for those interested in studying the relationship between the human body and the constructed space in which it moves. In a brochure Lecoq described LEM as ‘a laboratory devoted to research . . . a place of experiment and of science’ (author’s translation). While LEM was not concerned with theatrical creation as such, the course focused on understanding the dramatic potential of objects and materials and the spatial relationships between them. Elsewhere in the same brochure Lecoq writes that the course studies ‘the dynamic of colours, their movement,
their texture, their speed . . . and their relationship with the body and human passions’ (author’s translation). From such descriptions we can detect both a poetic and abstract quality to these enquiries, although for students attending LEM the actual process is a largely practical one entailing a considerable amount of making. One task was to construct balsa wood models that sought to capture and express the dynamic of the relationship between particular objects in space. As the word ‘laboratory’ implies, Lecoq conducted these workshops very much in a spirit of research and open-ended enquiry. He led the course jointly with an architect, and one imagines that the experience provided an opportunity for him to test and play with ideas – a freedom which was perhaps less available within the structure of the two-year course. Today, LEM continues to be a popular and significant adjunct to the main business of the school. . . .

From 1956 until his death in 1999, Lecoq directed most of his considerable energy and imagination into the school. However, throughout this period – and certainly during the first fifteen to twenty years of the school’s life – Lecoq used non-teaching time to engage in various directing and movement choreography projects. Fay Lecoq records that, from the late 1950s he was movement director for a BBC production of Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf, worked with the opera in Rome, directed Mayakovskiy’s The Flea in Berlin, choreographed for Les Ballets Contemporains in Lille, and regularly produced and choreographed Greek tragedies at Syracuse in Sicily. For the latter, according to Fay Lecoq, he would take his actors from Paris and rehearse for several weeks in Rome before opening the productions in Syracuse. In addition, the school’s publicity announces that he collaborated with the Comédie Française and the Schiller Theatre and advised on various French television productions. We know, too, that Lecoq was happy to offer dramaturgical advice and support to ex-students whose companies he much admired, such as Mummenschanz, Footsbarn and Théâtre de Complicité.

From the 1980s, as the school became well established, consolidated its international reputation and significantly increased its student intake, Lecoq had less and less time to devote to directing and choreographic projects. However, the annual summer school in Paris continued, as did a master class that was only offered every four years. The latter allowed Lecoq to communicate and share special discoveries made from his research during the intervening period. The first of these was in 1964 and included Steven Berkoff as one of its participants. Alongside these regular commitments, he would also accept – but increasingly selectively – invitations to run classes and workshops in different parts of the world. For example, in 1982, at the request of the Arts Council of Great Britain, he ran the two-week British Summer School of Mime in London. In 1988 he conducted a five-day workshop and performed Tout bouge (Everything Moves) – his seminal lecture-demonstration – at London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall for the International Workshop Festival (IWF). By the time of his death, Lecoq had performed Tout bouge on numerous occasions across the world, and particularly in Japan, China, Australia and North America. In August 1990, at the invitation of Dick McCaw, who was now running the IWF, he taught a LEM masterclass with Krikor Belekian and his daughter, Pascale – both architects – at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. The workshop examined relationships between movement of the body, theatre and architecture, and was attended by architects and visual artists as well as theatre practitioners.

At the time of writing – . . . – the school that Lecoq meticulously constructed continues to accept students. Fay Lecoq maintains overall administrative and managerial leadership, working with a college of teachers. From October 1999 until he left in July 2002, Director of Pedagogy at the school was Thomas Prattki, who had begun teaching there in 1993. Immediately after Lecoq’s death, there was considerable speculation as to whether the institution could survive
without him – whether, indeed, it could attract pupils without the appeal of his intellectual leadership and provocation. However, the school recruits as healthily as ever, thus offering an interesting comparison with other similar establishments where the death of the ‘master’ – of the ‘guru’ – would certainly have precipitated closure. Fay Lecoq remains committed to overseeing its development for as long as she is able, but clearly the school will continue to change and experiment – perhaps in ways unimagined by its founder.

Jacques Lecoq and the Western tradition of actor training

Training actors

(Actor training) is arguably the most important development in modern Western theatre making. Actor training in Europe and North America is a phenomenon of the twentieth century, and has come to inform both the concept and construction of the actor’s role, and consequently the entire dramatic process.

(Hodge 2000: 1)

We have so far traced the main contours of Lecoq’s life and considered in some detail his school and its development in Paris. Earlier, I argued that Lecoq’s assiduous, but unfinished research into the pedagogy of actor training that privileged the performer’s body located him within a wider cultural and historical tradition – a tradition that regularly offered a challenge to existing notions of the business of acting and, by implication, the nature of theatre itself.

Alison Hodge suggests in the introduction to her book of essays (2000) that the development and formalisation of actor training in the West has been largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. While the systematic training of actors in Eastern forms of dance and drama such as Kathakali from Southern India and Noh theatre from Japan dates back to the Middle Ages, in the West – although we can identify some elaborate traditions and rituals of actor apprenticeship and ‘learning on the job’ – the first specialist European drama school, Le Conservatoire National d’Art Dramatique in Paris, was not established until 1786. Indeed, while in the nineteenth century a small number of conservatoires were opened in a few major European cities, it is not until the twentieth century that any significant expansion in formal actor training began to take hold.

The systematic organisation of the training of actors in the West has an interesting and symbiotic relationship to a number of other distinguishing features of twentieth-century European and North American theatre: its increasing commercialisation and commodification, the rise of the professional theatre director, the influence of ‘scientific’ research and psychology on the performing arts, and a growing interest in – and sometimes an extreme romanticisation of – Eastern dramatic forms and their associated training regimes. In this sense, training for the theatre reflects the development of mass education in the West, and is both cause and consequence of industrialising societies’ need for a partially educated workforce. Training and education are not gifted by benign authorities, but are both fought for by different constituencies at particular times, and are the necessary corollary of industrialisation and market forces.

At least in one sense Lecoq is no different from other key innovators in twentieth-century actor training – for example, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Copeau, Brecht, Decroux and Grotowski. What all these figures share are wider territories of intellectual interest, which spread well beyond the narrow inculcation of ‘technical’ skills. It is impossible to understand
different models of actor training without considering the kind of theatre or performance such pedagogies were designed to address. None of these men sought simply to equip young actors for the theatrical status quo. In often sharply contrasting ways, each was trying to shift and redefine the parameters and possibilities of what constituted theatre and what its purpose should be. If the rationale for these models of actor training had been simply to help the student actor deliver text more persuasively, or move with greater fluidity and effectiveness on stage – all in the service of a naturalistic or realistic theatre – then our interest might be equally limited.

The models of actor training practised and theorised by those figures identified above have all proposed relatively different answers to a similar set of questions – Lecoq no less than Meyerhold or Stanislavsky. Questions such as these:

- What kinds of relationship are possible between performers and spectators?
- Where do the boundaries between theatre and other art forms or cultural practices begin and end?
- What sorts of metaphors are useful to express the essence of this particular approach to training?
- What is the relationship between the actor's body and the actor's mind, and, indeed, is it helpful to pose these two as separate entities, the former 'directing', or controlling, the latter?
- How does the model of training understand the body and its construction?
- Is the attempt to define and create a universal language of theatre either possible or desirable?
- How does the training regime acknowledge, deal with and utilise (for performance) notions of the 'conscious' and 'unconscious' mind?
- To what extent does the idea of, and quest for, 'presence' have any validity in a programme of actor training?
- How far does the training model seek to engage with issues and ideas beyond performance and theatre?

Any attempt to understand how different models of actor training actually work demands that the philosophical and cultural assumptions which inform practical teaching methods are teased out and identified. While these questions may appear to be of little interest beyond the academy, answers to these enquiries have a concrete and tangible bearing on performance dramaturgy, such as the efficacy of particular approaches to acting, the spectator’s ability to ‘read’ the signs of performance, and the ideological inflections and nuances of any piece of theatre and its component elements. The intelligent and creative director or actor has little choice but to have some kind of informed grasp of these issues. Teacher and director, Philip Zarrilli, neatly summarises the argument as follows:

Every time an actor performs, he or she implicitly enacts a ‘theory’ of acting – a set of assumptions about the conventions and style which guide his or her performance, the structure of actions which he or she performs, the shape that those actions take . . . and the relationship to the audience. Informing these assumptions are culture-specific assumptions about the body–mind relationship, the nature of the self, the emotions/feelings, and performance context.

(1995: 4)

When interrogating the work of any radical and visionary teacher such as Lecoq, there is a delicate balance to be struck between locating their practice in a wider cultural-historical
context on the one hand, and grasping the extent to which their work and ideas represent genuinely new and innovatory formulations and propositions on the other. To err too much on the side of the former is to run the risk of becoming overly derivative, or determinist in explaining a particular individual’s contribution to their art form. However, to overemphasise notions of originality, or, indeed – at its most extreme – of ‘genius’, is to idealise artistic process, and to uproot that figure from both history and the contemporary culture in which he or she practised.

In addition, there are two other – related – problems: how to define what we mean by the term ‘influence’; and how to use the luxurious commodity of hindsight with intelligence and sensitivity. The issue about influence seems to pivot around how consciously and manifestly one subject acknowledges that his or her practice draws upon and develops ideas from another. The problem with hindsight is that its lofty vantage point encourages the commentator to make connections and to identify influences that were never explicit or realised by the subject at the time he or she was a practising artist. Thus, while Lecoq acknowledged both Artaud and Copeau as significant in shaping his own thinking, the linkages one might want to make with, for example, Brecht and Meyerhold are more difficult to uncover and tease out. Similarities, connections, discontinuities and overlaps are there to be unearthed, but with Lecoq this is especially difficult, since he offers few clues in his writing as to which other historical figures he either admired, or for whom he had little time.

**Copeau and Artaud: a complex legacy**

Copeau’s legacy for French and certain strands of European theatre has been well documented. His missionary vision for the rebirth of French theatre and training methods rooted in movement and corporeality have greatly influenced subsequent generations of French theatre-makers. Schematically, these can be divided into two – overlapping – groups. On the one hand, there were those such as Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, Jean Dasté and Michel Saint-Denis, who worked largely in text-based, popular and often politically committed theatre during the inter- and post-war years; and on the other, a select group of individuals dedicated to the reinvention and modernisation of mime: Étienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault, Jacques Lecoq and Marcel Marceau. While the work of Decroux and Marceau stands as a monument to the project of establishing mime as an autonomous art form distinct from dance and theatre, Barrault and Lecoq chose to inhabit a more expansive territory in which mime was redefined and had a significant, but only partial stake. In fact, Lecoq straddles both these groupings, as his early post-war theatre work was with Jean Dasté, and it is the latter who provides the most tangible link to Copeau.

Lecoq joined Dasté’s Compagnie de Comédiens in Grenoble shortly after the war and stayed with him until the ensemble moved to St Étienne in 1947. Dasté – Copeau’s son-in-law – had been invited to Grenoble by former members of the cultural wing of the Resistance, and his purpose was nothing less than the reinvention of popular theatre: ‘to discover folly, festivity, the fundamental freedom of being’ (Dasté 1977: 43). In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq remarks that ‘through Dasté I discovered masked performance and Japanese Noh theatre, both of which have had a powerful influence on me’ (2000: 5). Another link to Copeau was through Claude Martin, with whom Lecoq worked on improvisation during the immediate post-war period. Martin had been a pupil of Dullin, who too had trained with Copeau at Le Vieux Colombier.

The main emphasis at Copeau’s school, Le Vieux Columbiер, and later when he moved his company to Burgundy, was on movement preparation for the actor and on play. Certainly, Lecoq shares with Copeau a belief that movement training for the actor should not primarily
be directed towards fitness, athleticism or technique, but must be harnessed as a means towards spontaneity, playfulness and creativity. In addition, physical training was crucial in the process of generating the chemistry of ensemble. Significantly, and in line with many avant-garde artists of the time, Copeau’s philosophy was also predicated upon a wider belief that in contemporary industrial society the modern ‘body’ was atrophied and dulled of its sensations. Christopher Innes in *Avant Garde Theatre* (1993) characterises the key quality of this cultural movement as ‘primitivism’ or, in other words, the desire to return to an imagined state of simplicity. This romantic yearning for a purer more wholesome existence echoes the philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712–78) ideal of the ‘noble savage’: someone uncorrupted by the debilitating complexities and demands of modern industrial and bourgeois society.

After rejecting Émile Jaques-Dalcroze’s (1865–1950) system of eurhythmics on the basis that it led to a narcissistic approach to the body, by 1921 Copeau had wholeheartedly embraced Georges Hébert’s (1875–1957) method of ‘natural gymnastics’. Hébert was an influential theorist who had revolutionised approaches to physical education in Europe during the first few decades of the century. According to Hébert, a key feature of man’s corporeal alienation in industrialised societies was that, as we grow into adulthood, our muscular development becomes limited, constrained and deformed. As a consequence we lose the instinct for play, and hence our expressivity and ability to be creative. Thus, for Copeau, an essential task in the training of the creative actor was to rediscover the child’s instinct for play. Essentially, this was to be achieved not through accretion and the addition of skills and techniques, but through a process of ‘shedding’ and stripping away, thereby removing those socialised impediments to spontaneous play. John Rudlin, in his essay on Copeau for the Hodge compilation, notes the link between Hébert’s and Lecoq’s teaching:

> Jacques Lecoq used the Hébert method in his school in Paris: ‘pull, push, climb, walk, run, jump, lift, carry, attack, defend, swim. These actions trace a physical circuitry in sensitive bodies in which emotions are imprinted.’ Lecoq himself came from a sporting background, and his is perhaps a larger claim for the potential of the method than Copeau would have believed possible.

*(Rudlin in Hodge 2000: 68)*

It is impossible to underestimate the significance of the insight that movement can nurture the capacity for play for generations of – selected – theatre-makers and trainers from Copeau’s time to the present. It is certainly a most important dimension of Lecoq’s pedagogy and practice at the Paris school. However, the extent to which Lecoq also shares this ‘primitivism’ and distaste for the ‘modern’ with early twentieth-century members of the cultural avant-garde such as Copeau, Artaud and Hébert is open to debate. . . . For some commentators, Lecoq’s use of the neutral mask and his preoccupation with the apparently uncluttered innocence of childhood is misconceived and philosophically dubious territory. On the other hand, the lengths to which Lecoq goes to circumscribe and contextualise the use of, for example, the neutral mask suggest that – on this score – he self-consciously distances himself from those avant-garde primitivists within the modernist movement.

Beyond the centrality of movement and play to both Copeau and Lecoq’s pedagogies, the other main territories of shared interest lay in mask work, *commedia dell’arte* and Greek tragedy. Copeau introduced mask work in the early days of Le Vieux Colombier, but it rapidly became a critical element of his teaching. Instead of Lecoq’s neutral mask he employed the term ‘noble’, after the expressionless masks worn by the aristocracy until the eighteenth century in an attempt to remain anonymous. Working with these masks became central to his major project of
achieving simplicity and neutrality in his students. In this condition they could find a fresh and intuitive relationship with objects, and execute actions which, Copeau argued, articulated the authenticity he sought in acting. The mask as a training tool had the potential of representing ‘the quintessence of theatrical transformation and provided the key to the actor’s approach to the role’ (Felner 1985: 42).

When comparing the goals, strategies and techniques of both Copeau and Lecoq, it is tempting to overstress the common features of their work. Both identified movement and play as a central conceptual and practical element to their teaching; both focused on the mask, the chorus and the commedia dell’arte as instruments for educating the modern actor, and – in the case of Greek tragedy and the ‘Italian Comedy’ – as a vehicle for theatrical innovation and renewal. Both, too, were committed to wider educational goals beyond a narrow and vocational training, believing that one could not make effective and creative actors without also educating them ‘for life’. Both, in other words, seem to share a common humanism that extends well beyond the stage itself.

However, it is a great oversimplification to reduce Lecoq’s work to a late twentieth-century version of Copeau’s. In one crucial way, at least, there is a significant difference between the two men and their vision of training for theatre. While Copeau was certainly a radical in the sense that he almost single-handedly introduced the notion of an in-depth and continuous training for young actors at a time when French theatre was artistically and culturally bankrupt, the progressive innovations in pedagogy he offered in his schools were designed to return theatre to the classics. Unlike Lecoq, his experiments in training were not directed towards a ‘new’ theatre. Essentially, Copeau was trying to discover fresh ways to do justice to the traditional repertoire of European theatre. By ‘purifying’ French theatre of its tricks and by shedding it of cabotinage – the phoney gimmicks of nineteenth-century performance – Copeau believed he was preparing theatre for a return to its imagined past. Thus, although Copeau remained one of Lecoq’s main ‘reference points’, there were, nonetheless, significant differences between their practice, overall aspirations and objectives.

In an interview with Jean Perret in Le Theatre du geste Lecoq acknowledges the influence of Copeau in the early stages of his career: ‘it’s true that the proximity of Jacques Copeau and the Copiaux affected me and had a direct influence’ (Lecoq 1987: 109). However, a little later in the same interview, when asked whether he was more influenced by Copeau or Artaud and Dullin, Lecoq replies ‘much more by Artaud and Dullin’ (1987: 109). Thus, by the time of this interview – 1986/7 – it seems that it is the spirit of Artaud rather than Copeau which resonates most strongly. Clearly Lecoq and Artaud share a commitment to a dynamic visual theatre where movement and physicality are the primary motors of dramatic expression. Inevitably, perhaps, Artaud also connects with Copeau through Louis Jouvet who had set up his own school after a year at Le Vieux Columbier. Artaud attended Jouvet’s school and spoke passionately of the experience:

We act with our deepest hearts, we act with our hands, our feet, all our muscles, and all our limbs. We feel the object, we smell it, we handle it, see it, hear it . . . all to find there is nothing there, no accessories.

(cited in Bradby 1984: 5)

In this comment we can find echoes of Lecoq’s own commitment to acting as primarily a corporeal and physical project, and to neutral mask exercises in which students are invited to experience the material world in ‘a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict’ (Lecoq 2000: 36). What perhaps is more surprising – given his reputation as a wild
and visionary seer – is that, for a period of his life, Artaud worked on a disciplined and rigorous physical training scheme for actors, believing, like Lecoq, that his vision of theatre could only be realised by performers with sharp movement skills and sensitivities. Where, one imagines, Lecoq might have had reservations about Artaud’s ideas is with the latter’s mission to rediscover the primitive ritual function of theatre. Artaud’s absolute rejection of logic and reason and – in their place – his advocacy of irrational spontaneity, delirium and the generation of trance-like states among actors and spectators alike contrasts strongly with Lecoq’s suspicion of the overly mystical or therapeutic aspects of theatre. The use of trance and delirium do not figure in an inventory of teaching techniques employed at Lecoq’s school!

It would be possible to devote considerably more space to teasing out connections between Lecoq’s ideas and those of other major thinkers and practitioners of twentieth-century theatre. However, the danger in such a project is that it becomes a purely academic exercise that loses touch with the reality of how Lecoq actually worked, both as pedagogue and researcher. The argument forcibly put to me by a number of the people interviewed for this work was that, while Lecoq was, of course, very aware of particular historical traditions of theatre practice – the dramatic territories of tragedy, commedia and melodrama, for example – the pulsating heart of all his work was the human body and its movement in space. David Bradby makes this point very clearly:

He was not primarily interested in making connections with historical figures. He was really interested in the body and how it moved, and that was the centre of everything. To ask if he was more influenced by Copeau or Artaud, or whoever, is missing the point: missing the centre of his own natural passion and the way he developed his own teaching.

(Bradby 2002a)

Jacques Lecoq: the body and culture

This section . . . attempts to do two main things:

1 to trace the contours and details of Lecoq’s working life; and
2 to look briefly at the bigger historical and cultural picture that frames this particular life.

The assumption here is that to attend to the wider context of a body of work helps to bring focus and perspective upon that work itself. Having identified a relationship with the practice of two of Lecoq’s historical forebears – Copeau and Artaud – this section is concluded by briefly investigating two contemporary phenomena, an understanding of which helps to provide context to Lecoq’s life and work. Lecoq’s school has thrived at a time when we can observe two features of Western culture: one concerns the increasing production of – and demand for – theatre which has a strong visual dimension and where the actors’ bodies deliberately signify as much as words spoken; the other connects to wider preoccupations with the body in both intellectual enquiry and in many aspects of popular culture.

Physical and other theatres

At the beginning of this account I noted that Lecoq was a central figure in a loose movement of theatre artists, academics and teachers who, towards the end of the twentieth century, proposed – through theory and practice – that it is the performer’s live body more than the spoken text which gives theatre its defining identity in an age dominated culturally by film,
television and digital media. To put it another way, it is the body and its movement through
and in space that is the crucial generator of meaning and significance in contemporary theatre.
Performance work that foregrounds these features seems to have drawn its influence from dance,
theatre and the visual arts. Indeed, one of its important qualities is that it is work that apparently
cares little for the traditional boundaries between different art forms.

Over the last two decades, much of this practice has come to be labelled ‘physical theatre’ or
‘visual theatre’. By and large, the term is more of a marketing tool than a useful framework for
analysing new developments in theatre practice. Lecoq himself gives little evidence in his writing
of bothering with the term *physical theatre* – or its equivalents – preferring instead to reclaim
mime from *pantomime* and the limitations of white-faced illusion. Although lacking analytical
rigour, *physical theatre* is still a useful term to signpost a significant increase in performance work
that privileges the actor’s body rather than the spoken word. Ana Sanchez-Colberg offers a way
of delineating this loose body of work:

> The term itself – ‘physical theatre’ – denotes a hybrid character and is testimony to
its double legacy in both avant-garde theatre and dance. . . . The locating of phys-
ical theatre within the avant-garde means that attention must be given to issues of
anti-establishment within the context of alienation and transgression common to both
forms. . . . This body focus needs to be seen as arising from a progressive devaluation
of language and a move towards a non-verbal idiom.

*(Sanchez-Colberg 1996: 40)*

While Sanchez-Colberg’s account is helpful in interrogating aspects of *physical theatre* as a cultural
phenomenon, the picture she paints is a partial one. If we consider the range of theatrical forms
which privilege the visual and movement dimensions of the language of performance, we dis-
cover a rather wider diversity of practice than she suggests. In addition to the legacies of modern
dance and the theatrical avant-garde we should recognise other traditions that have also fed and
shaped the contemporary phenomena of physical or movement theatres. To dance and the avant-
garde we should add performance or live art, *popular theatre*, which includes circus, vaudeville
and street performance, Eastern dance theatre and, of course, the French mime tradition. The
conventions of the latter divide, in the two decades following the end of the Second World War,
into the tightly codified movement ‘grammar’ of Étienne Decroux, and Lecoq’s own physical
preparation for a ‘new theatre’ or modern mime.

A superficial interpretation of this ‘explosion’ of physical theatres across Europe and North
America since the early 1980s is to regard these simplistically as a direct expression – or outcome –
of cultural formations which have increasingly demoted the value of the spoken word. Consequently –
so the rhetoric goes – contemporary Western cultures seem to have downgraded the *literary*, and thus
the cannon of great European playwriting has been usurped in favour of a visual, sensual and muscular
form of new theatre. Seductive as such a reading might be to the aficionados of *physical theatre*, it is an
unhistorical interpretation and inflates the supremacy of this mode of theatre production over more
traditional writer-dominated forms. In his introduction to replace with his book of essays – *Jacques
Lecoq and the British Theatre* – Franc Chamberlain reminds the reader that, notwithstanding the sig-
ificance of Lecoq’s teaching for contemporary Western theatre, and the rise of other forms of physical
performance, *devised* theatre practice is still largely ignored and marginalised in most accounts of
modern drama. Chamberlain’s point is reinforced by the 2001 edition of *The New Penguin Dictionary
of Theatre* which succeeds in omitting any reference to Lecoq at all.

Thus, the picture is inevitably more complex than a cursory glance might suggest. While
since the early 1980s in Britain there has certainly been a significant increase in work that one
might wish to label ‘physical theatre’, to suggest that before this period text-based literary theatre was monolithic in its domination is to ignore historical evidence. Although working from the play-text has been the overriding paradigm for British and – to a lesser extent – European theatre, other forms that challenge this hegemony have consistently intervened and nagged away throughout the twentieth century. Within the traditions of popular theatre, mime, performance art and the numerous, but sporadic, incursions of the avant-garde, the visual and physical languages of theatre have been in the ascendant.

In conclusion, although we are forced to note the increasing popularity of theatre forms that privilege movement and performer physicality, particularly in Britain, but also in Europe and North America, empirical evidence alone does not answer to the question of ‘why such an increase at this historical juncture?’ Lecoq, however, offers one kind of explanation:

Mime becomes popular in a transitional period when theatre is in decline and is moving towards renewal. Theatre needs a heightened sense of movement because when the spoken word cannot express itself fully, it returns to the language of the body.

(Vidal 1988)

Here, Lecoq is suggesting the presence of a cyclical pattern where, at certain historical junctures, ‘speaking theatre’ exhausts itself and can only be replenished by returning to the ‘language of the body’. This kind of explanation has perhaps a particular appeal in Britain, where one is bound to note the weight on mainstream theatre practice – and on drama training – of a literary dramatic tradition going back at least to Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson. That an upsurge of physical theatres is particularly evident in the UK is sometimes explained as a long overdue reaction to the dominance of text based theatre – a much needed ‘catching up’ with the practices of continental Europe and beyond. The problem, however, remains of explaining why such a significant increase should occur at this particular historical moment. There is, too, a concern that all-embracing explanations which rest upon the notion of ‘cycles’ of cultural behaviour ignore the specifics of historical circumstances in different countries. Below, I consider another factor: the almost obsessive concern with the body in popular culture and as an object of scrutiny in a wide number of academic disciplines.

**The rise – and rise – of the body in contemporary culture**

Often, developments in drama are analysed as if theatre as an art form stood outside – and independent of – society: a model that speaks of theatre and society rather than theatre in society. In fact, theatre – like any artistic practice – has an intimate, though complex, relationship with wider socio-historical, political and cultural circumstances. Maria Shevtsova, writing about the sociology of drama, likens theatre to a seismograph: ‘it picks up tremors below the social surface, alerting audiences to dangers which may remain latent or actually erupt’ (Shevtsova 1989: 184). Cultural theorist Raymond Williams argues that trends and movements in theatre cannot simply be explained by individual choices and decisions, but that they are also an expression of wider cultural shifts in feeling and thinking. The essence of Williams’ cultural materialist analysis of theatre is neatly summarised by Stephen Regan:

The methods or conventions of drama are not just technical preferences; they are, at the same time, ideas of reality and ways of seeing life that have been shaped by the interests and assumptions of a particular culture.

(Regan 2000: 50)
So, in fact, theatre is not merely a ‘seismograph picking up tremors . . .’, but at the same time is actually one of those tremors. It follows, therefore, that if we are to try to understand why, for example, there has been a dramatic increase in forms of physical theatre in certain countries of the West over the last two decades, at least part of that account will take us into territories outside theatre itself. It is an inadequate explanation to suggest that the physical theatre phenomenon is simply the coincidental consequence of all the autonomous choices of performers and theatre-makers predisposed – for whatever reasons – to give pre-eminence to performers’ physical and movement qualities.

What distinguishes this particular period is that – outside the arena of theatre and drama – the human body has become central to the enquiries of other disciplines, many apparently quite unconnected to theatre practice. Since the 1970s, the body has become pre-eminent in social thought, and often remorselessly examined in subjects such as sociology, economics, cultural studies, psychology, health studies and sports science. Beyond purely academic concerns, within the territory of ‘popular culture’, interest in personal health, beauty, diet, sexual attraction, fitness and ageing has reached near obsessive proportions. As early as 1970, cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard was observing that:

> At the present time everything would seem to indicate that the body has become an object of salvation. It has literally replaced the soul in this moral and ideological function.

*(cited in Featherstone et al. 1991: 393)*

Why, then, this interest in the body? Broadly, there are two kinds of argument put forward to explain the trend. One concerns human identity, and the other capitalism’s need to turn the body into a marketable commodity so that money – profits – can be made from it. In his introduction to *The Body and Social Theory* (1993) Chris Shilling argues that the pre-eminence of the body within contemporary thought and popular culture is rooted in the elusive quest to discover the nature of personal identity. Here, it is argued that, in contemporary Western societies, declining religious and political beliefs have encouraged people to look elsewhere for those meanings that help to define personal identity and selfhood. In these societies – variously described as ‘late capitalist’, ‘post-industrial’ or postmodern – it is the body in consumer culture which becomes the main bearer of symbolic value for our identity and, therefore, needs to be engaged in all manner of ways. Working on the body, dressing the body, decorating it, altering its shape, keeping it fit and in good health, disguising it or reinventing it where necessary – all these become activities for people concerned with defining and sustaining a sense of self and personal identity in late capitalist societies. If this hypothesis is even broadly correct, then a large variety of contemporary cultural activities – from keep-fit to fashion, from sports science to plastic surgery, from the club scene to physical theatre – can be given an overall explanatory context. The rise of various types of physical theatre, it might be argued, reflects and shadows this wider trend.

Concern with identity is, of course, but one explanatory proposition among others that claims to help clarify reasons for the pre-eminence of the body within contemporary social thought and popular culture. However, for cultural theorist, Fredric Jameson (1991), any explanation of late capitalism’s love affair with the body has to be rooted in ideas concerning commodification. Here the argument is that capitalism, in its unquenchable thirst to make profits, is driven to find more and more things to sell, to make money from. If, therefore, we can be persuaded that our identity is bound up with the way our bodies are perceived in society, then there is money to be made – there is a market – out of altering those bodies and/or the perceptions
that surround them. From this perspective, concern for the body and how it looks becomes less of an innocent and harmless preoccupation, and rather more tainted by the potentially murky world of markets and finance capital.

What connections are there – if any – between these social and cultural theories, Jacques Lecoq’s school in Paris and the phenomenon of physical theatres? The reason for this short diversion into cultural theory is to suggest that we need to look both within and outside the structures of theatre-making in order to understand why a particular trend establishes itself at any given moment. Is it merely coincidence that, at a time of considerable growth in what has popularly been labelled physical theatre, there has also been a startling increase in our preoccupations with the body? To propose that this is more than mere coincidence is not to suggest that all those involved in the cultural practices of physical theatre are simple dupes, driven by forces they are neither conscious of, nor understand. Rather, it is to propose the notion that at least part of the reason for the growth of physical theatres – and associated institutions like Lecoq’s school in Paris – is that they resonate with the ‘temper of the times’. To put it slightly differently: the phenomenon of physical theatre articulates and expresses in all sorts of complex ways a wider interest in the human body and its significance in the world.

A presupposition that these various cultural theories share – and one which is particularly relevant to all forms of artistic activity – is that the human body is not a fixed biological, anatomical or ‘god-given’ entity. Rather, the body carries the traces of its own history – it ‘speaks’ of who we are. When we look at bodies – including our own – we see more than just flesh, hair, blood, muscles and so on. We see personal biography, the marks of suffering or happiness, and the imprint of class, gender, race and all those other characteristics and dispositions that make us who we are. This is an insight – an understanding – that lies at the heart of any theatre which chooses to foreground bodies, gestures and movement in its practice. Here, perhaps, a connection between the growth of physical theatre and those wider cultural forces identified above is most transparent. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the body has become a focus of attention in the work of, for example, certain black, gay or female theatre practitioners as a way of exploding and critiquing cultural preconceptions and prejudices. In live art and certain types of physical theatre, the body is regularly used to investigate the unspoken, the forgotten and the silenced, thus bringing marginalised or hitherto excluded experience to the foreground of the performance arena.

This section of the chapter has invited the reader to speculate momentarily upon theatre in society, and to consider some of the possible relationships between wider social forces at work in the contemporary world and physical theatre as one form of cultural production. The intention here has been temporarily to divert our focus away from the figure of Jacques Lecoq and to dwell briefly on a bigger picture in the hope that, by so doing, we have a clearer sense of the context into which his work needs to be located. To venture briefly down this avenue is not to diminish Lecoq’s status within modern theatre, but to place his contribution upon a broader canvas so as to understand it better.

**Summary and conclusion**

In this section I have attempted to map out the defining features of Jacques Lecoq’s life and work in theatre, and to place it historically and culturally within a larger context. I have suggested that, while his research and teaching into actor training and the role of movement within theatre have made a radical and particular contribution to twentieth-century Western performance, his practice can only be fully understood by locating it historically within other significant developments, and laterally in contemporary cultural thinking on the body.
Without proposing that there is an uncomplicated relationship between broader cultural thinking and specific artistic practices, I have argued that it is helpful to locate the physical theatre phenomenon, and hence Lecoq’s contribution to these innovations in form and style, within that matrix of social and cultural thinking which has given pre-eminence to the body. Following Raymond Williams, I have indicated that a cultural materialist approach to understanding the phenomenon of body-based theatres is an essential accompaniment to a close ‘textual’ investigation of the forms themselves.

I have argued that Lecoq – sometimes explicitly, often implicitly – was responding to many of the same sorts of questions that other key figures engaged in twentieth-century actor training were also tackling. I have suggested, too, that, while Lecoq was clearly influenced by the practice of Copeau and Artaud, it is ultimately unhelpful to search for a ‘definitive’ legacy inherited from other earlier theatre practitioners. It is always important to recall Lecoq’s background in sporting activities, and as a physiotherapist, when struggling to understand how he perceived the human body and its movement. His defining and abiding curiosity was always anchored in these two issues.

13.2 Traces of Jacques Lecoq: Théâtre de Complicité’s *Street of Crocodiles* and the work of Mummenschanz

For most of the titles that figure in the Performance Practitioners series, . . . Most of the titles . . . in the Performance Practitioners series . . . focus on one production directed by the theatre practitioner in question. Although Lecoq certainly directed professionally when working in Italy between 1948 and 1956, and did so again sporadically in Europe for television, film and the stage up until the 1980s, there is little documented evidence from which to study such work. More importantly, however, it would seem strange to focus on Lecoq as director when the overwhelming thrust of this account has been to consider his contribution to world theatre as teacher and theorist of actor training.

Here, I direct my attention towards tracing Lecoq’s influence through the work of two very different companies, most of whose founder members trained at his Paris School. As Franc Chamberlain explains in *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre*, detecting his influence upon the theatre of Britain, or indeed any country, is a difficult and risk-laden task. Chamberlain observes:

There is no ensemble with whom Lecoq is uniquely associated, no performer who is the Lecoq disciple par excellence. Lecoq offers a method of working, what the students do with it is up to them. He does not direct them. He does not tell them what to say. . . . Lecoq’s work cannot be ‘diluted’ or ‘polluted’ by graduates developing it in their own way; there is no pure Lecoq form.

(Chamberlain and Yarrow 2002: 4)

The risks in examining the work of two companies in order to identify the traces of Lecoq’s teaching are several. First, there is the danger of reducing a complex relationship to a crudely mechanical and deterministic one. Second, the possibility exists of rendering a disservice to such companies by ignoring other influences that have shaped their work, and the extent to which participants have forged their own collective creative identity over the course of time. Finally, there is the hazard of imposing a stifling post-hoc academic framework on to a relationship that is, in fact, fluid, organic and endlessly under negotiation.

In public statements, interviews, programme notes and film credits, both companies are ready to acknowledge Lecoq’s influence and what follows takes such willingness at its face value.
The choice of Théâtre de Complicité’s director, Simon McBurney, to write a foreword to the English translation of Lecoq’s book speaks of a warm relationship between the two men, and of a debt the former is happy to acknowledge to his old teacher. Similarly, Bernie Schürch, one of the founders of Mummenschanz, is featured in the 1999 profile of Lecoq, *Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq*, shown on French television. Here, Schürch talks of Lecoq opening up their preconceptions of mask work, and of his encouragement ‘to go towards the unreasonable, to go beyond the conceivable’ (Roy and Carasso 1999).

However, it is twenty years since the founder members of Complicité trained with Lecoq and over thirty since Bernie Schürch and Andres Bossard of Mummenschanz left the Paris school. During the intervening period, the possibilities for these artists to revise, reject, forget, embellish, distort and reconstruct the principles and practices of what they learned with Lecoq are considerable. Moreover, the desirability of any mature artist seeking renewal and change through alternative sources of influence and inspiration over such a time can neither be denied nor disparaged. The purpose, therefore, of this account is not to construct a rigid framework which identifies in the work of Mummenschanz and Complicité a Lecoq injunction here, or a specific teaching exercise there – a checklist of Lecoq precepts which when found to be present in the work of these two companies ‘proves the case’ of his influence and legacy. To frame the task in this way would be to diminish and fundamentally misunderstand what his teaching represented. Rather, it is to scan this work, so as to trace where the spirit of Lecoq – his principles, passions, preoccupations, discoveries, insights, prejudices and idiosyncrasies – apparently live on and are being reinvented or discovered afresh by those who once trained with him.

**The case of Théâtre de Complicité**

Théâtre de Complicité was launched in 1982 by Simon McBurney, Marcello Magni and Anna-bel Arden. Magni and McBurney had met at Lecoq’s school in 1980 and McBurney and Arden had been students together at Cambridge. For much of the 1980s, Complicité made comic-devised work and, like many young companies, toured extensively on the small-scale theatre circuit, initially in Britain, but increasingly throughout Europe. While the founding trio had imagined they might locate themselves in France, it was, in fact, London where the company established its base. Complicité has always operated as a loose international ensemble of performers, designers, administrators and musicians. However, what unites most of the actors who have performed with the company is that they have either trained with Lecoq, or undertaken a variety of workshops with Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux. Hence, most Complicité performers have been exposed – with varying degrees of immersion – to a common lexicon of precepts and practices from these three renowned teachers of theatre, movement and acting. Complicité actors can therefore draw upon a shared basic *vocabulary* when tackling any new theatre project. At the centre of this lies, one imagines, a rooted belief and confidence that the actor’s job is a creative one in the plural authorship of the piece in question, and not merely one of interpretation.

Throughout much of the 1980s Théâtre de Complicité’s work was devised from the ideas, preoccupations and passions of the ensemble. Confidence bred from Lecoq’s weekly *auto-cours* fed the company’s founder members with a belief that, rather than having to rely on existing play scripts, they could collectively create their own texts for theatre – a tendency shared with many other small companies emerging from the Paris school. Almost all of Complicité’s early work was comic, though often bleakly and mordantly so. Preoccupation with the tragic has rarely been far from the narratives constructed by the company.
A Minute Too Late (1984) was inspired by funeral parlours, a cemetery and the death of McBurney’s father; More Bigger Snacks Now (1985) featured four men on a grimy sofa fantasising about friendship and consumerism; Please, Please, Please (1986) revealed the wreckage of a family Christmas; and Anything for a Quiet Life (1988) chillingly explored the banalities and submerged hysteria of office life. It is less well known that, during this period, the company not only created a number of solo shows with Tim Barlow, Linda Kerr Scott and Celia Gore Booth, but also experimented in music theatre with Miss Donnithorne’s Maggot, Escape for Tuba and The Phantom Violin.

Conventional wisdom sometimes suggests that, after six or seven years, Complicité finally ‘grew up and got serious’, abandoned devising comedy and started doing ‘significant’ plays. This change of direction was either to be deplored or celebrated according to one’s disposition. Reality, of course, was more complex and such accounts gloss over the tragic dimension of much of the company’s early work, and ignore the inventive devising qualities that were later applied to plays (The Winter’s Tale, The Visit and The Caucasian Chalk Circle) and stories adapted for the stage (Out of a House Walked a Man . . ., Street of Crocodiles and The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol). With Mnemonic (1999) the company has apparently returned again to the devising process. However, to suggest that the categories of devised work, play script and adapted story are each mutually exclusive, demanding totally different approaches to theatre making, is fundamentally to misunderstand the way Complicité works. Regardless of a project’s starting point, the company harnesses the same commitment to the visual and corporeal dimensions of performance, and an inventive and collaborative approach to authorship. This much remains constant.

The Street of Crocodiles

Having seen many of Complicité’s productions since the mid-1980s, I had – in theory – a wide range of choices upon which to construct this case study. I have chosen The Street of Crocodiles (hereafter merely Crocodiles), because it seemed the best exemplar of Complicité’s work from the late 1980s through the 1990s for this particular purpose. Rehearsed and premiered in partnership with London’s National Theatre in 1991, and based upon the short stories of Polish writer, Bruno Schulz (1892–1942), Crocodiles was relatively early in the company’s exploration of the theatrical large-scale, following critical affirmation it had received for the production of Durrenmatt’s play, The Visit. Writing in the preface to the script for Crocodiles published in 1999, Simon McBurney and Mark Wheatley noted that ‘eight years after the journey began, it is still migrating, developing and changing’ (Théâtre de Complicité 1999).

On and off for over eight years Crocodiles toured the world, receiving awards and accolades. I saw the production early in its history at Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre and, by chance, on a day that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi’s destruction of the Warsaw ghetto. This coincidence added an extra degree of poignancy to what was already a highly emotionally charged piece of theatre. In the account that follows, I shall devote relatively little space to describing or analysing Crocodiles as such. Rather, my concern here is to identify those qualities within the piece that seem to articulate and resonate with some of the key principles embodied in Lecoq’s teaching. As well as considering the company’s strategies in rehearsal, I shall look at a number of the dramaturgical devices employed in the piece – for example, the life of material objects, the physicalising of text and the harnessing of individual performers into an ensemble. In addition, I want to propose that there is an intriguing congruence between some of Lecoq’s own preoccupations and Complicité’s choice of Schulz’s stories as the driving impulse behind this particular production.
Pretty much born for each other: Schulz and Complicité

Complicité’s production draws upon two collections of Schulz’s stories: *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937). The stories, although fantastical and dreamlike – or nightmarish – seem to capture an extraordinary level of detail about human foibles in small town Poland between the wars. Often peopled by members of his own family, Schulz’s fictions are at times closely biographical, although never in a literal manner. Madness, ill health and eroticism thread their way through the narratives, coexisting with bizarrely sumptuous descriptions of matter and animal life. The writing is deeply sensual; at one moment conveying the scents of a hazy summer’s afternoon, at another, the emotional anguish of loneliness born from an inability to make real contact with other human beings, especially women. Schulz writes of a material world constantly in a state of flux and instability, where boredom is the main driving force of curiosity, and where joy of the erotic is to be derived from punishment and guilt. Schulz’s writing has been compared to Proust (‘inflation of the past and ecstatic reaches of simile’) and Kafka (‘father obsession and metamorphic fantasies’) (Updike 1988: 118).

Schulz and Complicité

- Schulz and Théâtre de Complicité are pretty much born for each other, because there is a complete inter-connectedness of character, object, music, sound, image . . . it’s completely illogical and it’s desperately searching for some sort of poetry.
  *(Théâtre de Complicité [Annabel Arden] 1992)*

- The Complicité players are natural Schulz interpreters. Like him they transmogrify life, grotesquely changing forms and appearances . . . they see visual reality as unstable, the way Schulz sees narrative reality.
  *(Fulford 1988)*

- [Théâtre de Complicité] is attracted to the marginalized and the dispossessed, and takes them into the centre: the writings of the Polish Jew, Bruno Schulz, snuffed out by the Holocaust, in *The Street of Crocodiles*, say.
  *(Gardner 1997)*

- Schulz’s writing provides no obvious key to dramatisation. It embodies the elastic, unmanageable and adhesive qualities of time. . . . There is little dialogue, no enticing narrative in the ordinary sense and not a hint of the conventional satisfactions of dramatic structure.
  *(McBurney 1992)*

Like all Complicité’s work, *Crocodiles* was never ‘finished’ and, perhaps, experienced more revisions over eight years than many of the company’s other productions. The piece of theatre I witnessed in Edinburgh in the early 1990s would have looked different in significant ways to a performance of *Crocodiles* I might have seen at London’s Queen’s Theatre during January 1999. Making little attempt either to communicate Schulz’s life in any chronological sequence, or to retell his tales, Complicité’s *Crocodiles* jettisons the normal rules of linear narrative, placing elements, themes and curious details from the stories within a larger personal and historical
frame. Through selected fragments of Schulz’s fiction, we begin to construct a picture of his life and the times in which he lived. The outer frame of the drama exposes the personal tragedy of Schulz’s life – shot by a Gestapo officer in the Drohobycz ghetto in November 1942. But this in turn is placed within the larger picture of central European history during the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in the rise of Nazi Germany and the ensuing Holocaust and World War. In notes at the beginning of the script’s 1999 publication, McBurney and Wheatley convey something of how the company worked in creating Crocodiles:

Our process involved not only the writing of original dialogue (as with any play) but also the lifting of text direct from the stories (and from Schulz’s letters and essays). We used descriptions of him given to us by Jacob. We worked on improvisations in which the actors played out the process of memory which lies at the heart of all his stories. We created the atmosphere of his times and the mechanism of his dreams. We investigated the rhythm of his nightmares and his intense engagement with his beloved and despised solitude.

(Théâtre de Complicité 1999)

Jacob Schulz was Bruno’s nephew. He worked closely with the company throughout the devising process and as the work began to tour. Jacob died in 1997 and both text and the final performances of Crocodiles were dedicated to him.

Preparation, devising and rehearsal

One of the defining features of Lecoq’s teaching was a refusal to separate physical preparation – or training – from dramatic creation. . . . From the BBC2 Late Show profile of Complicité in rehearsal for Crocodiles, we catch glimpses of how stuff – theatrical material – was created. Early in the process we watch members of the cast working in pairs, sitting back-to-back on the floor. Here, as one slowly leans backwards the other curls forward, so, like Siamese twins, their backs appear joined from pelvis to neck. Exploring their backs they stretch and push: no great physical exertion, rather a gentle discovery of each other’s spines, leading into imbalances and sometimes to a position of standing – bodies opening and preparing. Now, we have a brief glimpse of actors trying out simple lifts and carries. ‘We’re looking for that little moment’, says McBurney, ‘which might get into the show’ (The Late Show 1992). A little later, we watch director McBurney inviting the pairs to roll together ‘just a couple of yards across the floor’. Developing the exercise further, two actors gently engaged in a rolling embrace are helped on their way by a third. ‘Tu le pousse’ (‘you push him’), says the director. So far there is no obvious sense of any dramatic business in the making, but several things are happening: bodies are preparing themselves, Lecoq’s basic motors of dramatic creation – pushing and pulling – are being explored, although at this stage without context or specific theatrical purpose, and all the while a slow and hidden nurturing of complicité and ensemble is being physically constructed among the performers.

In a moment, the camera pans across the rehearsal studio to reveal what we later recognise as the opening sequence of the show. From the clever editing of a television documentary it is impossible to know how many actual days or weeks have elapsed since the first back-to-back exercise, or indeed how close to opening night is this point in rehearsal. Nonetheless, we watch:

• Annabel Arden (The Mother) shuffling forward on her knees, carrying a huge book on her left shoulder;
• Cesar Sarachu (Joseph – the fictional representation of Schulz himself) sensually smelling and stroking a book;
• Clive Mendus (Uncle Charles) and Hayley Carmichael (Maria) locked together, rolling slowly and lyrically across the floor;
• Matthew Scurfield (The Father) walking deliberately, but lightly, across the space with Lilo Baur (The Maid) draped over his shoulders;
• Antonio Gill Martinez (Cousin Emil) searching through the pages of a book, and crossing the space with Joyce Carmichael (Agatha), similarly draped over his shoulders;
• Stefan Metz (Leon) bent double, slowly ‘stepping’ a pair of heavy boots, which he is holding by their heels; and
• the legs of Eric Mallett (Theodore) descending a ladder. In performance he will ‘walk’ down the back wall, suspended by a (concealed) rope.

As the documentary reaches its conclusion, we watch the opening few minutes of Crocodiles on its first night, and here the fruits of this journey from first movement exercise to fully realised dramatic material are made explicit. Of course, from the scenario detailed above there have been further revisions. Notably, actor Scurfield has replaced Mendus in the rolling sequence with Carmichael, and now, holding a book, he reads: ‘once early in the morning towards the end of winter I visited such a forgotten chamber. From all the crevices in the floor, from all the mouldings, from every recess there grew slim shoots’ (Théâtre de Complicité 1999: 7).

I have traced this progression of events in some detail, as in a graphic way it fleshes out a central principle of Lecoq’s teaching. Apart from the precept identified above of not isolating physical preparation from dramatic creation, the sequence also illustrates another fundamental dimension of Lecoq’s thinking, namely that motion provokes emotion. To put it another way, one can begin to construct characters – and the meanings for which they are a vehicle – by working physically rather than through psychological motivation. While this is not an insight unique to Lecoq (cf. Meyerhold, Grotowski and Barba), it is a critical element in his approach to theatre dramaturgy. McBurney encapsulates the devising and creative process deconstructed above:

The structure is much more one of a cross between a sculptor and a football team where I will simply be trying to lead people from a game into an exercise – a physical exercise to build up their strength – into another game, which leads into a scene, and from out of the scene . . . so they hardly know when they are in a scene or not in a scene,

(The Late Show 1992)

For Lecoq the term preparation – rather than notions of training, skills, techniques, etc. – captured the essence of his project. Of course, students acquired new skills during their time at the school, but this was almost as a by-product of something more important, namely a confidence to play imaginatively and creatively. It was also, I suggest, a confidence to be open to all creative possibilities and the corollary of this: enough personal and collective strength to admit to not knowing answers and solutions. While Lecoq’s pedagogy, as we have seen, was built upon some unyielding principles, within this framework he firmly believed in the notion that uncertainty leads to discovery. For any artist, too much certainty closes shut the possibility of creative discovery. I have reiterated these points because they seem to capture the spirit of Complicité’s journey through a typical rehearsal process, and particularly as they approached Crocodiles.
In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq writes about the ‘ricochet effect’, that is to say, an approach that welcomes the unexpected and the unanticipated as triggers for creative discovery. McBurney acknowledges something similar when tackling a new show:

I often ask myself what the origin is for doing a piece and I have to conclude that there is no origin: if you start looking for a single point of departure you will never find it. . . . I’ll have an impulse and during rehearsals I’ll go miles and miles away from it only to return to it, to revisit and refind the point of departure.

*(McBurney 1999b: 67)*

However, the crucial point here is that a director can only really have confidence to ride with so much uncertainty and fluidity in a rehearsal period if the ground has been prepared in advance. For Complicité, part of this ‘ground preparation’ has already been achieved, because almost all the actors have experienced the teaching of Lecoq, Gaulier and Pagneux at one time or another, and hence arrive at the first day of rehearsals with a ‘common language’. This, says McBurney, means a ‘physical, vocal, musical and architectural language: all those elements which make up a theatre language’ (1999b: 75). The preparation, however, continues into rehearsal and becomes contextualised by the ‘collective imagining’ of the cast around the impulse or theme of the project. It is important to stress again that this preparation does not isolate the purely physical or technical from the creative. It is a linked preparation for a state of mind and for the musculature, of the individual actor and of the ensemble – none separated from the other. An approach, it is salutary to note, that is peculiar neither to Lecoq’s teaching nor to McBurney’s directing, but one which links them laterally both to Peter Brook, on the one hand, and Joan Littlewood, on the other, and historically back to Meyerhold and Copeau. McBurney encapsulates the process of preparation like this:

The value in preparation, other than facilitating greater communication between people, is again to do with the unexpected. I do not prepare people so that they know about where they are going. I prepare them so that they are ready: ready to change, ready to be surprised, ready to seize any opportunity that comes their way.

*(1999b: 71)*

The life of material objects

In these stories, Schulz’s vision – his obsessive preoccupation – is with the existence of matter. From the stultifying boredom of daily life in Drohobycz and from the loneliness he managed to both cherish and loathe, Schulz constructed an imaginative world ‘in which human beings, objects, spaces take on temporary unstable shapes and forms before metamorphosing into new ones. The accent is always on *transformation*’ (Croft 1992). In an interview with his friend, Polish playwright Stanislaw Witkiewicz, Schulz writes that matter is:

In a state of perpetual fermentation, germination, potential life. There are no dead, hard limited objects. Everything spreads beyond its own boundaries, remains but a moment in its given shape, only to abandon it at the first opportunity.

*(Schulz 1980)*

Earlier I quoted Annabel Arden as saying that Schulz and Complicité were ‘born for each other’, and to this one might take the liberty of adding Lecoq’s name as well. Throughout his
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working life, Lecoq was preoccupied not only with the human body and its movement, but also with matter – its texture, its movement and its relationship to the surrounding space. Both with the neutral mask and through LEM, Lecoq invited his students to explore the properties of life and matter. In the case of neutral mask teaching, this was as a tool of transformation towards dramatic character, while in LEM, however, his attention was focused upon the relationship between objects or bodies and the space they create and disrupt. Lecoq himself might well have spoken The Father’s words when he says to Charles: ‘I am concerned with this section of space which you are filling’ (Théâtre de Complicité 1999: 32). Lecoq brings both the aesthetic concern of a visual artist and the pragmatic interest of the theatre-maker to this preoccupation with space, objects and materials – their form, movement and texture. On a number of occasions he talked of his Paris establishment as more of an art than a theatre school. We must remember, too, that, until the Nazis banned him from teaching, Schulz had taught art at the local high school in Drohobycz.

At one level, Crocodiles seems a celebration of the mysteriously unstable and ever-changing nature of matter. While Schulz’s writing invites this, it is clear that Lecoq’s legacy provided both McBurney as director and the Complicité actors with a theatre language that gave them the wherewithal to render Schulz’s imagery into dramatic form. ‘I am fascinated by the movement of things. The whole nature of the way that you integrate the movement of everyday life with action on stage I find obsessively interesting’, says McBurney in the Late Show documentary. Here, the connection between Lecoq, Schulz and Complicité becomes manifest. These Schulz stories are an obvious, but nonetheless challenging, vehicle in which a company such as Complicité could test Lecoq’s ideas and extend some of his teaching principles into the practice of constructing a piece of theatre. I am not suggesting that this was ever a conscious strategy on the part of McBurney and his colleagues when working on Crocodiles, but it does not seem too fanciful to propose that, de facto, this is what was happening as they collectively created the work.

Notions of transformation, metamorphosis and mutation are the currency of acting, but Lecoq’s interest, as we have seen, extends well beyond the representation of role: the actor’s metamorphosis into character. For Lecoq, and for those who choose to embrace his principles, the scope of the actor’s job is much wider and extends into the imaginative – rather than purely mimetic – representation of life. Here, actors must have the skill, confidence and imagination to transform themselves into objects, materials and any non-human life form that the texts of the piece require. Complicité’s work has long been associated with this quality and in Crocodiles the scope for such mutation is considerable. The following represent some examples of script and action from the production:

- As school chairs are raised above the actors’ heads a classroom becomes a forest.
- In a scene recalling Joseph’s early days as a teacher of carpentry, blocks of wood become alive, taking on a life of their own as these stage instructions reveal: ‘Emil’s wood which he has dropped on to the floor, leaps back into his hands. Everyone wants to try this out. Wood and tools and chairs fall everywhere’ (Théâtre de Complicité 1999: 15).
- A scene entitled Father’s Beautiful Shop physically engages the performers in the textural qualities of the cloth to be found in this draper’s business. Two staging instructions make the point: ‘The cloth begins to move. Emil, Charles, Agatha and Maria move with it, apparently knocked off balance by its beauty. This rapidly leads to a dance.’ And: ‘He passes his hand over the cloth. It makes a ringing sound’ and the Father says: ‘If you fold the cloth according to the principles it will emit a sound like a descending scale’ (Théâtre de Complicité 1999: 25).
Lecoq (1921–1999)

- Books apparently being read by the characters, undulating from their spines, become flapping birds.
- At a dinner table, spoons, forks and plates begin to vibrate and jump, animated playfully by the actors, but as if they had suddenly acquired a life-force of their own.

My argument here is that we can detect overlapping preoccupations between Schulz, Lecoq and Complicité in relation to objects and bodies and their movement in space. Notwithstanding McBurney’s protestations about how ‘utterly ridiculous’ (Late Show) it was to make theatre from Schulz’s stories, there is something strongly theatrical in Schulz’s ideas and their articulation through his fictions. Writer, Jonathan Romney, offers a link to Artaud and the avant-garde:

The reason Schulz’s stories lend themselves so brilliantly to the stage is because they offer . . . [a] manifesto of theatre practice – take his key passages about objects, append them to everything Artaud has to say about human actors, and you have the heart of 20th century avant-garde in a nutshell.

(Romney 1999)

Sharing a politics of the imagination: Lecoq and Complicité

In the inextricable journey from the physical to the creative; in considering how Complicité prepares for work; and in the piece’s preoccupation with objects and matter, we have identified clear links with Lecoq’s thinking and teaching practice. There are other connections, too, which suggest themselves from looking closely at Crocodiles. Here, we are investigating an imaginative landscape and theatrical territory where, one supposes, there would have been a strong empathy between Lecoq and Complicité over what the latter was trying to achieve. As analysis of his writing reveals, Lecoq believed unambiguously that a theatre school should have a ‘visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself’ (Lecoq 2000: 162). More specifically, the ‘new theatre of tomorrow’ was for him a theatre that did not try to ape the realism of cinema and television. Lecoq was not interested in a theatre which aspired to reproduce – mimetically and literally – the actual conditions of life, rather that, by studying ‘life’, theatre-makers are in a position to transform it creatively for the stage. A vital clue to this ‘visionary aspect’ is revealed when he writes about his approach to improvisation:

We always try to push the situation beyond the limits of reality. We aim for a level of aesthetic reality which would not be recognisable in real life, in order to demonstrate how theatre prolongs life by transposing it. This is a vital discovery for the students.

(Lecoq 2000: 34)

Schulz’s writing ‘transposes reality’ for the page and in turn Complicité has transposed this reality a second time for the stage. I believe Lecoq saw Crocodiles, but I have no knowledge of his reaction to the piece. I imagine he would have affirmed what he witnessed. For Lecoq and McBurney, the business of transposing reality for theatrical purposes is a celebration of ‘collective imagining’ and a process of harnessing some very elemental human desires and needs. The ‘collective imagining’, which transposed the very particular reality of Schulz’s world, produced books transformed into birds, school desks as trees, a character who becomes a fly with two forks as antennae, and cloth – ‘pure white calaphony from Malabar’ – which dances with mysterious power and beauty. And behind these transformations and the words from Schulz’s text are the bodies of the performers. The potential for imaginative transformation of these bodies has been
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prepared – directly or indirectly – by the creative pedagogy of Lecoq and his teachers. McBurney links this to the latent power of theatre:

If theatre is to have power it is when it manages to touch on what is a primal and universal human need. Words emanate from a physical act in the body, and for me the body is where you begin in the rehearsal room.

(McBurney 1999b: 70)

Complicité shares with Lecoq a willingness to invoke a spirit of universality. When Lecoq talks of a ‘universal poetic sense’ (2000: 46) and McBurney of a ‘universal human need’ and ‘unifying people through a common language’ (1999b: 75), we sense that they may inhabit the same territory. This is a dramatic landscape constructed upon common principles – or in Lecoq’s words ‘driving motors’ – and which has an ethical preoccupation with the power of theatre to break down barriers, to act as a unifying force. While one senses that neither Lecoq nor McBurney are disposed to employ the language of universality with the same fervour as, for example, Peter Brook, they all broadly share the same humanist concerns. . . .

Regardless of the debate around universalism, what Crocodiles embodies in particular, and what Complicité’s work seems to represent more generally, is a fusion between the politics of internationalism and the politics of the imagination. Thematically, much of Complicité’s recent work seems – at one level – to have explored different elements of the European experience. Crocodiles, The Visit, Out of a House Walked a Man, The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol and – most recently – Mnemonic, in varying degrees, have all used the mechanics of memory to explore how the imagination can be harnessed to explore this history. Lecoq is not particularly interested either in the veracity of memory or in his students using memory to dredge up personal histories. However, where memory plays a crucial part in his teaching is as a trigger for the imagination – a spur towards improvisation and as an impulse for play. It is here that there is evidently common ground between his pedagogy and the strategies Complicité used to create Crocodiles. Crocodiles, The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol and Mnemonic are very different pieces of theatre, but, apart from the same rigorous attention to the physical language(s) of performance, they also share a concern with the particularities of ‘ordinary’ lives. Perhaps one consistent concern with most of Complicité’s work from the early 1980s to the present has been to play with the internal imaginations of apparently mundane lives.

Crocodiles seems particularly to delight in rendering the ordinary, extraordinary and the extraordinary, ordinary. Probably, Lecoq never used the phrase ‘the politics of the imagination’, but that seems as good a way as any of identifying the spirit of much of what he aspired to let loose in the lives of his students.

In an interview for a book of essays investigating the ‘spirit of innovation’ within British theatre in the 1990s, McBurney identified the particular things he learned from Lecoq:

There are two things really. One is an analysis through the use of movement of how a piece of theatre works: how it actually functions in terms of space, in terms of rhythm, almost like music in terms of counter point, harmony: image and action, movement and stillness, words and silence. And having clarified the scaffolding of the building of theatre, he was a wonderful teacher in the stimulation of his pupils’ imaginations and the celebration of their individual different imaginations within the context of theatre.

(McBurney 1994: 18)

Crocodiles seems to have been constructed in a manner which harnesses many of these qualities.
The case of Mummenschanz

Mummenschanz – meaning literally ‘a play with masks, a play with coincidence’ – was established in 1972, becoming publicly visible with its first show at the Avignon Festival. Mummenschanz’s founder members were Bernie Schürch, Floriana Frassetto and Andres Bossard. Confronted with the tragedy of Bossard’s early death in March 1992, the other two had serious doubts about whether the work should continue. However, after considerable turmoil, Schürch and Frassetto decided to rebuild the company, and in due course recruited John Charles Murphy and Rafaella Mattioli as additional performers.

Bernie Schürch and Andres Bossard met at Lecoq’s school in 1967 and until 1972 performed together, initially as clowns and then with a show entitled ‘Masks and Buffooneries’. Performing in Rome in 1971, they met Floriana Frassetto, who soon joined them to create Mummenschanz. Frassetto had trained at an acting academy and with the Roy Besier mime school in Rome between 1968 and 1970. While from 1978 until the early 1990s Mummenschanz consisted of several touring troupes, the permanent creative centre of the company was always Bossard, Frassetto and Schürch.

Mummenschanz is now over thirty years old. Remarkably, during this period the basic dramatic structure and frame of their work – using everyday materials as ‘masks’ – have remained unchanged. A Mummenschanz show in 2003 is as instantly recognisable – in terms of its form and style – as the work produced in the early 1970s. This is not to suggest that there are no changes, but clearly the company’s core members believe that they have yet to exhaust the creative and theatrical potential of the form they first chose to explore in 1972. What exactly this form is and how it works dramatically will be investigated later in this section.

In terms of dramaturgical choices, subjects explored and the theatrical languages employed, Théâtre de Complicité and Mummenschanz could hardly be more different. That both companies can trace an inheritance to Lecoq’s school graphically illustrates the argument proposed throughout this account, namely that Lecoq never taught a style of theatre, rather that he offered a basic lexicon of dramatic possibilities for would-be actors on the one hand, and, on the other, a set of dispositions – or attitudes – that he believed were essential for successful theatre making. Moreover, like the founder members of Complicité, Bossard, Schürch and Frassetto were always ready to acknowledge a debt to Lecoq and talk of his influence. Schürch neatly summarises Lecoq’s powers of observation:

He could somehow scan the students by looking at them, seeing them for a short while and already knowing which way they would react best. Often, his criticisms were just two words and you went home to figure out what you did wrong. . . . He would never show you how things were to be done, and he always addressed ‘your work’. He never said ‘you’ as a person. . . . He never came close. He never praised you: just gave you a push in the right direction. That was his genius as a teacher.

(Schürch and Frassetto 2002)

Bossard and Schürch were in Paris during the tumultuous years of 1968 and 1969: a time when, for a fleeting moment, one could dream – or dread – that an anti-capitalist revolution was on the verge of taking place in some leading Western countries. In France there was a general strike and students occupied the Sorbonne and other universities in Paris. As we have seen, this was the period when, as a response to the demands of his own students, Lecoq introduced the auto-cours. It was evidently a measure of the affection and respect his students held for him that Lecoq’s school continued to function throughout the upheavals. Schürch recalls the atmosphere:

The spring of ’68 had a great impact on the school. We were questioning everything. . . . Why do you teach this? What does it mean? Why do you think we should learn this? We took
advantage of the situation to look for new ways of addressing problems. . . . We were engaged in many activities during that time – also pushed and supported by Lecoq – like going to entertain factory pickets. We supported them morally with entertainment.

(Bührich and Frassetto 2002)

Bossard and Schürch had entered the school already with an interest in mask work, but the experience there allowed them to leave not only with enhanced skills, but with confidence to feel that they must continue to develop this practice: ‘What mask has not yet been seen? What mask can we propose?’ (Roy and Carasso 1999). Comments like those above hint at that unde-monstrative radicalism which Lecoq occasionally allows us to glimpse. In Roy and Carasso’s film, Schürch suggests that Lecoq was happy to allow his politics to speak through the work of the school:

We wanted to abolish the monopolies, the statutes, the institutions. We wanted to take them down from their pedestal, and say, now this is another world. Now it’s us! I strongly believe that this was due to Lecoq’s influence: to go towards the unreasonable, to go beyond the conceivable.

(Roy and Carasso 1999)

I will consider below some of the more specific influences on Mummenschanz’s work which may be identified from Lecoq’s teaching. However, the relationship between the two is well encapsulated by Schürch’s observation in conversation with me: ‘my impression is that Lecoq has greatly influenced not what we do, but how we go about it. What you do, you find out on your own’ (Schürch and Frassetto 2002).

Sculptors of the imagination: the work of Mummenschanz

Essentially, Mummenschanz has made three shows in three decades: one new piece of work every ten years. While this is a very misleading statistic, because it does not account for teaching, extensive worldwide touring, collaborative theatre or opera projects and work for television and film, it does reveal the company’s refusal to be forced into the normal commercial cycles of theatre production. It also indicates Mummenschanz’s demand for a lengthy period of gestation – research and development – for each new major project.

Sometimes – unsatisfactorily – labelled mime or pantomime, Mummenschanz’s work is difficult to define within the normal terminology of performance. Moreover, it fits very uneasily into the fashionable idioms of physical or visual theatre. It is masked work, but unrecognisable from the traditional forms of expressive, commedia or Greek chorus masks. What its more recent work certainly provokes is a redrafting of the boundaries between masked performance and puppetry. Prosaically, one might choose to say that all its productions are an investigation – and subsequent animation – of the properties and performative qualities of everyday materials and objects. Such a dry description, however, offers little sense of what is actually happening on stage during a Mummenschanz performance.

The starting point for all their live performance work is the material world – no desire to tell a story, engage with a topical issue or theme, no play script, poem or novel as first impulse, and no apparent interest in displaying that kind of muscular physical theatre for which some contemporary companies are renowned. One writer summarised elements from the company’s first production thus: ‘it is a curious blend of masks and body-disguising costumes, anthropomorphic creatures, human abstractions and symbolic confrontations’
For each new project there is a lengthy and unhurried period of preparation, during which materials are gathered from markets, skips, department stores and industrial suppliers, their properties explored and potential for dramatic expression considered. Lycra, foam rubber, styrofoam, plastic tubes and membranes, putty and dough have all regularly been used to create malleable masks, huge balloon-like objects, grotesque body suits and silhouetted body shapes held in front of the performer. Materials and objects are played with endlessly until a theatrical idea begins to take shape. If this pleases the company a prototype is then constructed, so that the feasibility and logistics of the idea can be tested on stage. At this point it may be found that the object or material is in fact impossible to control with any confidence or clarity, and it is consequently rejected. If, however, it passes this ‘test’, then the Mummenschanz performers will start to play again with their creation and slowly map out a sequence of moves and emotional states or relationships which they feel have theatrical potential.

Each Mummenschanz show contains a number of scenes or sequences lasting up to seven or eight minutes. These are self-contained and could – apparently – be presented in any order. Although each sequence may contain a simple narrative structure, there is no thematic connection between them. In terms of formal structure, one can begin to identify patterns and dramatic shapes common to a number of the sequences. While every subsequent Mummenschanz show presents unseen materials and fresh configurations of objects, some have been performed before and now are simply modified and taken further for the latest project. The giant ‘slinky’ tube, for example, has gone through various stages in its life history and remains one of the company’s most powerful creations. Similarly, the soft masks made of dough or putty that are reconfigured by the actors in performance first appeared in the early 1970s. The first major show contained many constructions which masked the face, or head and shoulders. The second programme, first performed around 1984, was characterised by larger masks or disguises in which the human frame could hardly be identified at all. Sometimes these were enormous baggy balloons propelled around the stage by the performer inside, but unrecognisable as masks in the conventional sense. Some sequences were content to be pure abstractions with no attempt to convey meaning or story line, while others played with emotional content and offered very simple narrative structures. Even here, however, the dramatic structure was deliberately open to interpretation and reading. The company’s latest project, which has been performed for over two years, contains recognisable elements from previous work, but with new departures – for example, into rubber or foam whole-body masks which are held by the performers in front of their bodies.

These then are some of the contours of a Mummenschanz performance. In terms of audience relationships and theatrical purpose, what is the company hoping to achieve? At the centre of their practice lies the belief that this wordless play with objects and materials is infinitely communicable, and their continuing popularity around the world gives some credence to such a claim. While Schürch and Frassetto are clearly fascinated by the form and texture of materials, they are not content simply to construct work that communicates itself purely on an aesthetic level. On one hand, they aspire to identify and reveal certain ‘universal truths’ through their manipulation and animation of the objects and, on the other, they strive to inject an emotional charge into the space created between performers, materials and their audience. Threading through all this is the potential the performers hope they have created for humorous and comic recognition among spectators. In Kamal Musale’s film, The Musicians of Silence, Schürch comments that the ‘secret of Mummenschanz is that we open up the total truth of the moment’. Later he adds: ‘we want to entertain people and make them happy. It’s the joy of playing’ (Musale...
2001). These claims and aspirations will be considered in more detail, and in relation to Lecoq’s influence, in the sections that follow.

There are at least four areas of Mummenschanz’s practice, where either a Lecoq imprint is still visible, or where connections in terms of disposition and stance can be identified. As with the case of Théâtre de Complicité, these links are not reducible to ‘cause and effect’ relationships, but must be regarded as either a degree of shared orientation, or where a particular Lecoq attitude can be traced within the practice:

1. A consistent preoccupation with creating a theatre vocabulary based upon movement, masks and the manipulation of objects.
2. A commitment to play as the motor of creativity.
3. An unapologetic affirmation of popular theatre forms.
4. A willingness to invoke a belief in the possibility of creating universal theatre languages that transcend differences of class, culture and race.

**MASKS AND MOVEMENT**

Bossard and Schürch had already started to explore mask work before joining Lecoq’s school in 1967, but as the latter recorded in an interview for the *Mime Journal* in 1974, ‘the real flip’ happened there. Clearly, whatever else they achieved at the school, the experience of being taught by Lecoq gave both men the confidence and passion to commit themselves to decades of working only with masks. Although they will have learned the principles of different forms of mask work from Lecoq, it is the larval mask that seems to offer the most obvious connections with a style of performance we associate with Mummenschanz. Unlike the neutral mask, the larval mask is a performance tool which – coincidentally – was invented for the carnival of Basel in Switzerland during the mid-1960s. John Wright succinctly identifies the properties and dispositions of the larval mask and considers how Lecoq used it:

> The larval mask discovers the world but does not necessarily make any sense of it. . . . [It] can be mercurial and potentially anarchic in a most endearing way, but the outstanding characteristic of this mask is its insatiable appetite for play. With the larval mask Lecoq confronts his students with the task of finding the corporeal impression from a shape. . . . The larval masks require sensitivity rather than precision, and games rather than accuracy.

> (Wright 2002: 79)

Although many of the masks and disguises used by the company over three decades look nothing like the larval masks pictured in *The Moving Body*, many of the properties ascribed to it by John Wright seem perfectly to fit the behaviour of the objects and materials in a typical Mummenschanz show. Mummenschanz has taken the spirit of Lecoq’s original larval mask and invested it in the eclectic range of materials and constructions created since 1972. The questions Lecoq asked of these larval masks in the Paris school concerning movement, space, rhythm, speed and direction are of the same order as those posed by Bossard, Frassetto and Schürch to the tubes, beanbag balloons, cardboard boxes, foam rubber full-body masks, putty masks and toilet rolls, which have formed just part of the Mummenschanz repertoire over thirty years. Clearly, too, the company’s process of research and devising has always paid heed to Lecoq’s dictum that ‘masked performance requires an indispensable distance between the mask and the actor’s face. For that reason the mask must be larger (or smaller) than the actor’s face’ (Lecoq 2000: 55).
The starting – and often finishing – point for a sequence with, say, a very large bag with a mischievous propensity to float is a controlled exploration of its movement properties. These scenes seem to be at their most effective when the performers inject as little narrative as possible on the apparently abstract movement dynamics of the material in question. Where the performers impose a self-conscious personality – or romantic narrative – on the business, there is a danger that the spectator’s interpretative options are closed down, and the anthropomorphism becomes unduly sentimental.

The movement and rhythmic dynamic imposed by each of these various masks makes considerable physical demands on the performers, involving their whole bodies. Members of the company organise their own physical preparation – there is no attempt to impose a Mummenschanz movement ‘technique’ class, although in the early 1980s, at the behest of Frassetto, a dance choreographer was brought in to tackle what the performers admitted was a ‘nonchalant’ approach towards physical preparation. Today, although in their fifties, the performers keep in good shape, but largely follow their own routines of movement preparation. Bossard echoes Lecoq’s insistence that movement preparation remain linked to creative work in a comment: ‘when I exercise, I find plenty of inspiration. Movement is a source of ideas. I learned that from Lecoq’ (Bührer 1984: 65).

Arguably, the Mummenschanz project for thirty years has been an undeviating exploration and application of the principles of Lecoq’s larval masks – disguises that offer almost unlimited possibilities for fantasy and imaginative reveries. Lecoq writes about two dimensions of research into larval masks. Following work on characters and situations, the dimensions of animality and fantasy are investigated: ‘this research leads to the discovery of a strange, undefined and unknown population. This exploration of the incomplete body, inevitably different, opens up the imaginary realm’ (Lecoq 2000: 59.) Just such ‘a strange, undefined and unknown population’ seems to have colonised every Mummenschanz show.

**PLAY**

Like Théâtre de Complicité and numerous performers who trained with either Lecoq or Gaulier, Mummenschanz invokes the crucial importance of play. For Frassetto and Schürch, play or playfulness not only drives their creative journey in the devising and rehearsal process, but also defines the actors’ relationship to their masks in performance. It signals, too, the kind of relationship the company hopes to achieve with its audience:

The playfulness of human beings seems to be inherent. We always like to be playful – it is the common denominator around the world. We often say that the stage is our playground. We play with these shapes and objects, and the audience is invited to join us on stage and play with these figures too, adding their own stories and associations.

(Schürch and Frassetto 2002)

While Schürch is usually speaking metaphorically about the audience joining them on stage, that spirit of collusion between artists and spectators is clearly very important to the company. Despite the strangeness of the objects, the often abstract nature of dramatic material, and that this work is far removed from the conventions of naturalism and realism, Mummenschanz is seeking a sense of empathy and identification from its audiences. This – they hope – will happen partly through humorous recognition, and partly through a loose emotional correspondence between spectator and the circumstances in which the masks find themselves. Clearly, for Frassetto and Schürch, if their work is to attain a universal level of communication, then it must possess the
quality of play and playfulness. Play therefore is a necessary – almost a sufficient – condition for the achievement of such a state. One senses that, for Mummenschanz, play assumes a greater importance than for many companies influenced by the teaching of Lecoq. Given, at one level, the simplicity of its work – no complex narratives, no subtle psychological characterisation and no intricate sound or lighting technology – one might wish to summarise its form as: play + masks = Mummenschanz. While this understates the level of skill and research that is invested in each project, such a formula perhaps encapsulates the essential qualities of how they work, and what we see during a Mummenschanz performance.

**POPULAR THEATRE**

Although Lecoq never explicitly made it his political mission to advocate ‘popular theatre’, any close reading of what he said suggests sympathy in this direction. He was impatient with what he called ‘intellectual theatre’, and it is hard to know how he might have reacted to what might be described as postmodern deconstruction in contemporary performance practice. . . . [Such a stance should not be read as anti-intellectualism, but more a manifestation of his lifelong commitment to rediscovering, and placing in a contemporary context, the essential corporeal motors of theatrical expression and exchange.

In some ways Mummenschanz’s work provides a curious paradigm for ‘popular theatre’. It would be possible – and not entirely inappropriate – to locate the company’s practice historically in the high modernist tradition of the visual arts avant-garde. One could look at a Mummenschanz performance and identify the play of abstract shapes and sounds with the forms one associates with Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and the Bauhaus. Perhaps, too, in its yearning for a simpler, more emotionally truthful and less complicated world, the fantastical imagery conjured up by the Mummenschanz performers speaks of aspirations similar to those articulated by the *enfants terribles* of early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. However, if Mummenschanz has a mission to subvert, it is as a result of liberating the imagination of its audiences through play and the pleasures to be derived from visual stimulation. Tom Leabhart neatly maps the transition of imagery from modernist avant-garde to popular visual theatre on Broadway or in Zurich during the final decades of the twentieth century: ‘it is as if, suddenly, fifty years of rather difficult material, research that had a dangerous edge, had been rendered respectable, amusing and even appropriate for children . . . . Most audiences recognise and respond to the anecdotal dynamism beneath the abstracted forms’ (Leabhart 1989: 105). Whatever politically agitational ideas the founder members of the company harboured in the late 1960s and early 1970s, today their ambitions are simpler. Schürch and Frassetto summarise what their current hopes are in terms of audience response:

> You start off by wanting to change the world, but then slowly you come down to saying if we can give the audience something that they can feel – whether it is happiness or sadness – that’s good enough.

> Laughter is the reason to go on. To hear children laughing. I am not going to change anyone’s life and point my finger and say ‘think this or that’. Just trying to awaken the pureness of those emotions is enough.

*(Schürch and Frassetto 2002)*

Although children figure significantly within their audiences, the Mummenschanz performers believe that their work communicates itself effectively to any adult who is open enough to embrace its playful spirit. A Mummenschanz show is not ‘popular theatre’ in the particular
sense of being both popular and possessing a sharp political perspective. However, the longevity of the company, and its ability still to play to capacity audiences in middle- or large-scale theatres in Europe and North America attest to another kind of popularity – a popularity which acknowledges the entertainment value of the work and its ability to spark and liberate the imagination.

**Universal communication**

- You present the truth of movement,
  
  *(Rolfe 1974: 3)*

- The interesting work is always to find this basic language – really to get down to the essence so that it is understandable.
  
  *(Schürch and Frassetto 2002)*

- When you play you work on a communication level that is common to all human beings.
  
  *(ibid.)*

- It all comes down to basic feelings and emotions which are understood worldwide so they don’t need the word.
  
  *(Musale 2001)*

- The language of Mummenschanz is universal: the unique language of gesture.
  
  *(ibid.)*

**UNIVERSAL COMMUNICATION**

The observations quoted in the box below represent a range of claims made by the Mummenschanz founders, or – as in the case of the comment by Bari Rolfe – a quality ascribed to them. If one attempts to distil these various statements, it seems that the company’s ability to reach a universal level of communication through its work rests on a number of propositions (listed below).

- Human movement has the potential to communicate itself universally.
- It is possible to find – or create – a fundamental language of theatre that can be understood anywhere.
- Certain emotions and gestures have the power to be understood universally.
- An instinct – or a disposition – for play is a phenomenon that exists across different cultures.

Some or all of these claims have been common currency for a significant number of artists or theatre-makers throughout the twentieth century. While such issues have particularly been on the agenda for disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and cultural studies, they have – by and large – been ignored within theatre studies and drama until relatively recently. It is beyond the scope of this account to investigate the validity of these ideas.
in any depth. . . . As summarised above, they seem to embody a more extensive and unambiguous series of beliefs than those articulated by Lecoq in his writing. The extent to which Lecoq might put his name – without qualification – to these ideas is debatable. Here, the point is to signal these claims, both as questions for reflection and further discussion, and as markers that situate Mummenschanz’s work in relation to that of other companies in time and place.

Lecoq and Mummenschanz: afterthoughts

The relationship between Mummenschanz and Lecoq continued to be a significant one until his death. He is invoked regularly throughout Bührer’s book on the company, and at one point is quoted at length. Characteristically, he mixes praise for the originality of their work with an honest and sharp observation about the dangers of their considerable success at the end of their first major project:

With them, there are no set characters; it’s something else, a silent poetry, with humour besides . . . a very personal sense of humour. When those two grey putty heads join and become one, it says so much, the impossibility to break off after coming together. It’s extraordinary poetically speaking. . . . Their success is quite unique. To succeed on Broadway can be dangerous. They were almost too successful; they didn’t know what to do about it. I often advised the Mummenschanz: do another show, a different one; don’t be scared, even if it’s not as good as the first one. . . . It’s very hard to stop and question oneself when things are working well.

(Bührer 1984: 40)

Quoted at some length, this comment illustrates Lecoq’s continuing concern for his ex-pupils, affirming some particularly effective dimensions of the work, but then jolting them with a warning about complacency. There is no record of how Lecoq responded to Mummenschanz’s second major project, and whether indeed he thought it was ‘different’ and ‘as good as the first one’. Regardless of his actual feelings, that he chose to identify Mummenschanz with only a few other companies in ‘New perspectives’, the final chapter of The Moving Body evidences his high regard for the innovative quality of its work. He writes that ‘looking back, I recall especially the work of the Mummenschanz whose research into masks and forms has been far-reaching’ (Lecoq 2000: 161).

Further reading

Books, journals and interviews

Lecoq (1921–1999)

Simon Murray


Lecoq (1921–1999)


Williams, Raymond (1976) *Keywords*, London: Fontana.


**Videos and DVDS**


