The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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The influence of sports on Jacques Lecoq's actor training

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PART II

Inspirations and evolutions
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The authoritative guide to Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy is, of course, his own book *Le Corps Poétique* (1997, translated as *The Moving Body*, 2001). Given the dynamic, corporeal and continually evolving nature of Lecoq’s teaching, it is unsurprising that he himself had doubts about ‘fixing’ it in words. One of the school’s current teachers, Jos Houben, who also works internationally as an actor and director, says,

Lecoq was very suspicious about it because he treated the book as a sort of written document about the school. From the book you really cannot get the idea how the school works on a day after day basis. . . . As in many good pedagogical traditions, in the Lecoq training teachers provoke you, teachers make you stumble, teachers make you start over and over again. Little by little you realize it is up to you to decide what to do with your life but at the same time you receive some guidance, you know that you have a hand to help you.

(Houben in Wisniewski, 2013: 102)

Recognizing that Lecoq’s pedagogy was an organic and living process during his lifetime, we sought to discover if this was still the case after his death. To do this, we invited graduates of his school who have a passion for teaching to write chapters for this section. Several of these graduates have also taught at the school, and we found that each has developed aspects of the original training in their own way. In these chapters, they reflect on what inspired them and how Lecoq’s pedagogy has evolved in their practice. Some teach exclusively; others do so within busy lives as movement directors, performers or directors, or a combination of all three. A quality that they have in common is a continuing hunger for exploration, and an awareness of the multiplying possibilities offered by Lecoq’s pedagogy as it encounters new situations. To follow Houben’s way of putting it, they have all decided what to do with their lives, and they continue to receive guidance from Lecoq’s training.

The development of Lecoq’s pedagogy is reflected in the way that the name of the school has changed through its life. Currently it is L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq (The Jacques Lecoq International School of Theatre); its original name was L’École Internationale de Théâtre et de Mime (The International School of Theatre and Mime).
The word ‘mime’ has often misled people about the nature of the teaching at the school. In this section, it becomes apparent that Lecoq’s conception of mime is not the white-face mime of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, or that of Marcel Marceau’s Bip. It is a profound understanding of a mimetic learning of the world through movement. Scientific knowledge is beginning to endorse Lecoq’s phenomenological approach. Neuroscientist Merlin Donald has demonstrated that mimesis was a crucial phase of human evolution that preceded language (1991). There has also been a significant recent development in the understanding of Broca’s area in the brain, which was previously thought of as an area for speech production. Now it is recognized for its engagement in the production of language as a multi-modal activity involving face, voice and hands. Indeed, some cognitive scientists are proposing that language evolved from a system of gesture. These proposals stem from a key finding of cognitive science: that mental concepts are shaped by physical experience in the world and use the same neuronal pathways.

This knowledge gives some explanation of the degree to which Lecoq’s movement-based approach has been able to support and sustain the wide range of pedagogical practices described in Part II. As his pedagogy begins with the sensorial and kinesthetic experience of the body in the physical world, it parallels human cognitive development while giving performers ways in which to define otherwise unconscious activities. Lecoq’s focus on the body and movement grew from his early involvement in sport, and in the first chapter in this section, Mark Evans describes how Lecoq engaged with sport as a perspective on the human body in movement. This engagement not only encouraged agility and physical awareness in his students, but it also provided a form of training vocabulary through the ‘Twenty Movements’ that students learn in their first year at the school. The analysis of actions and movement sequences becomes a foundation for the exploration of the physical dynamics of different dramatic genres.

Equally important as movement for Lecoq was ‘le jeu’ – play. In his view, technical precision of movement needs to be enlivened with the vitality of play to be dramatically interesting. Paola Coletto, one of the few students to become a pedagogical assistant at the school during Lecoq’s lifetime, talks about the value of play in a conversation with scholar Jennifer Buckley. Buckley’s insightful questions prompt Coletto to identify the different qualities of play with which she engages in the school that she has established in Chicago. For Coletto, the concept of play is so fundamental in her teaching that she uses the word to replace the idea of ‘acting’, a formulation that echoes one of the senses of the French word ‘jouer’.

The integration of physical precision with a sense of play is essential in working with masks, one of the core modes of exploration at Lecoq’s school. Three chapters in this section each deal with different forms of mask play. Dody DiSanto, like Coletto, also trained as a pedagogical assistant with Lecoq and is now the director of The Center for Movement Theatre in Washington, DC. Her chapter evaluates the enduring appeal of the neutral mask as an instrument of theatre training, identifying ways in which it anchors actors to the primacy of direct experience. The neutral mask highlights space, force and rhythm as key essentials of performance, enhancing students’ abilities to observe and recreate the movements of the natural world and of human activity. DiSanto’s passionate writing reveals how Lecoq’s approach continues to fuel both her own and her students’ learning after decades of teaching experience.

Identifying the play of space, force and rhythm in different art forms also feeds the physical creativity of mask play. Jennie Gilrain vividly describes the experience of working on the...
'mimodynamiques' of music, poetry and short story with Lecoq, drawing on her notes from classes at the School, and retrospectively identifying principles that have informed her own work with Touchstone Theatre and as a teacher.

Lecoq's principles have informed many artists – in many modes of expression. Numerous former students have formed companies of their own. One such was the Moving Picture Mime Show (MPMS) formed by David Gaines, Paul Filipiak and Toby Sedgwick in 1977. Seeing a performance of theirs in the late 1970s (as I’ve recounted in Embodied Acting) was a form of theatrical epiphany for me about the communicative power of movement and gesture. David Gaines’ eloquent and witty chapter on full-face masks, pantomime blanche and cartoon mime gives us an insight into the principles and articulation of mask practice that informed the work of MPMS. These principles continue to inform company members in their practice as performers, directors and teachers following the disbanding of the company. Gaines taught at the Lecoq School for a number of years, and both his chapter and his life’s work demonstrate how Lecoq’s use of historical styles in his teaching was designed to provoke the student actor’s creativity, rather than offer them a series of stylistic templates.

The focus on masks continues in Giovanni Fusetti’s chapter on Commedia dell’arte. Fusetti, like Gaines, also taught at the Lecoq school and grew to realize the extent to which the operating principles of Commedia are embedded in Lecoq’s pedagogic process. In writing about this, he traces the influence of Jacques Copeau, whose quest to ‘renew theatre’ at the École du Vieux-Colombier was very much inspired by Commedia dell’arte. As well as looking back at history, Fusetti looks forward in describing the ways in which his own teaching of Commedia combines with his interest in archetypal psychology, Gestalt Therapy and his practice as a process facilitator, linked by the principle of playing from the body through actions.

The sense of contemporary exploration rooted in historical style is continued in the chapter on Chorus by Shona Morris, Movement Director at Canada’s Stratford Festival and Head of Movement at London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Morris describes ways in which Lecoq’s practical investigations revived, if not reinvented, the use of the chorus in Greek tragedy, and how Lecoq’s teaching of the movement of the chorus has profoundly influenced her work as Movement Director, leading her into a ‘metaphorical’ realm. The choice of word is significant and relates to a fundamental concept in cognitive science that helps to explain both the power and versatility of Lecoq’s approach. The concept is that of ‘metaphorical thinking’ – a process whereby we unconsciously define abstract concepts in terms of physical experience. This is not a matter of choice or conscious selection – it is how human brains operate. A frequently used example in the literature of cognitive science is ‘grasp.’ The neural network that is active when one physically ‘grasps’ a cup also fires when one uses the word ‘grasp’ to describe comprehending an idea. Metaphorical thinking underlies the way that Morris shapes the play of bodies moving in space – an activity that both expresses and is prompted by the implicit dynamics of a drama.

Like Morris, Bim Mason is a Lecoq graduate with a long and varied career that incorporates both professional performance and teaching. He is also the co-founder and co-director of the UK’s Circomedia, a Centre for Contemporary Circus and Physical Performance. The two practitioners’ respective positions (one at RADA, the long-established school of classical acting, the other leading an innovative school that combines circus and theatre) demonstrate the wide range of applications of Lecoq’s training. In his chapter on bouffons and the grotesque, Mason outlines the key features of the bouffons style developed by Lecoq at his school.
in the final three decades of the twentieth century. As well as reflecting on the various ways the style has influenced his own work, he looks at the wider implications of its emergence within contemporary culture.

In addition to innovations of theatrical style, Lecoq developed three unique features of pedagogy: *auto-cours, enquêtes and commandes* (self-taught courses, ‘investigations’ and commissions for students’ final presentations). Carlos García Estévez, an associate artist at the Lecoq school’s Laboratory of Movement Study (LEM) programme and internationally active as a performer and director, gives his perspective on these aspects of the school’s training. His chapter demonstrates how the principles embedded in these activities continue to inform his professional practice, enabling him to create non-text-based work with a variety of artists from multiple disciplines and a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Sara Romersberger studied at Lecoq’s school from 1984–86 and has since worked at applying his training to text-based work in her teaching at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. In her chapter on clown, she investigates the roots of personal clown creation and describes how she applies this process to character discovery in the playing of Shakespeare’s clowns.

The final chapter in the section is by Ismael Scheffler, who is an actor, director and Professor of Theatre and Scenography at the Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná in Brazil. Scheffler followed the LEM programme at the Lecoq school from 2010–11; he traces the development of this unique programme from Jacques Lecoq’s one-day experiment with architecture students at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1968 to the present day. Architect Krikor Belekian was instrumental in developing the concepts and pedagogy of the LEM in subsequent decades, and the programme is now led by Lecoq’s daughter Pascale Lecoq, who is also an architect.

Lecoq’s choice of architecture as a companion discipline to theatre in his school might surprise those who are used to the typical curriculum of Western theatre conservatoires, and the choice is significant. ‘Architecture removes every one of our illusions, those that could not be linked with the real. To build ignoring the laws of the resistance of materials and the equilibrium of forces is ultimately to see one’s house collapse’ (Lecoq, 2006: 72). Lecoq’s desire to ‘remove illusion’ may seem paradoxical in the world of theatre, but it is an expression of a coherent rationale based on investigations of physically discernible principles of force, direction and spatial organization. These principles are as important in the architectural understanding of space as they are in the movement of the expressive body:

> The dynamics underlying my teaching are those of the relationship between rhythm, space and force. The laws of movement have to be understood on the basis of the human body in motion: balance, disequilibrium, opposition, alternation, compensation, action, reaction. [. . .] The laws of movement govern all theatrical situations.

(Lecoq, 2006: 32)

No matter how sophisticated or nuanced an actor’s imagination of a character’s psyche may be, it means nothing if it is not communicated to an audience — and this happens through the body of the actor. By rooting the actor’s work in the reality of physical forces and environments, Lecoq’s training lays the foundation for the many organic evolutions described in this section, paradoxically stimulating the creation of dramatic illusion.
References


11
THE INFLUENCE OF SPORTS ON JACQUES LECOQ’S ACTOR TRAINING

Mark Evans

Introduction

The fiftieth anniversary brochure for the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq (2006) opens with an image of Le Central, the school’s base since 1976. The photograph shows the main hall of the school in its previous existence as a boxing venue.1 Historically, this former gymnasium was also the place where the gymnastic method of Francisco Amoros2 (1767–1848), the pioneer of physical education in France, was practised. For Lecoq, therefore, relocating his school to Le Central brought rich associations with his own early career in sports. Lecoq’s work demonstrates a life-long fascination with sport as a perspective on the human body in movement and a commitment to investigating and encouraging the athleticism, agility and physical awareness of the creative actor.

As a teenager, Lecoq took part in a number of sports at school as well as furthering his gymnastic education at the Paris club En Avant. At En Avant, he discovered, through work on the parallel and horizontal bars, the abstraction of movement through space involved in sports activity. In his book The Moving Body (2000), he describes how the physical poetry of sports movement had a profound effect on him, an effect that was emotional as well as intellectual or physical. In his other book, Theatre of Movement and Gesture (2006), he writes of the significance his early sports experiences had for his later development as a theatre movement teacher:

I have always loved movement. My first introduction to it was in stadiums and swimming pools, where I could enjoy the simple act of moving: the body’s extension in throwing the discus, pacing my breath and stride in running races, that moment of suspension just above the bar in the high jump. These actions expanded my mind, and I could feel myself jumping high, swimming fast with the river’s current. Going around the track in the evenings, I would see my shadow grow larger or smaller depending on the sun’s position.

My body remembers all of this. [...] These physical sensations were so powerful that they still flow through me today and they have undeniably influenced my teaching of movement.

(Lecoq, 2006: 96)
In 1937, Lecoq began formal studies in physical education and sport. He attended a physical education college at Bagatelle in the Paris suburbs, where he gained teaching diplomas from the French athletics and swimming federations. From 1941 to 1945, he taught physical education and undertook rehabilitation work for people with disabilities. It was during his time at Bagatelle that he met Jean-Marie Conty, an international basketball player and the person in charge of French physical education. Conty had developed, through his friendship with Antonin Artaud and Jean-Louis Barrault, an interest in the link between sport and theatre. Artaud had written that ‘An actor is like a physical athlete. . . . The actor is a heart athlete’ (Artaud, 1970: 88); he believed that the movements of the boxer, the sprinter and the high jumper shared a similar anatomical basis with the movements of the emotions, and that the relationship between the athlete and actor was based on a shared experience of action and breath. These personal associations and connections had a lasting impact on Lecoq.

Although Lecoq was never drawn into the science of measurement and labour efficiency with their attendant political agendas, he was aware of the pioneering work of Etienne Marey (1830–1904) and Georges Demeny (1850–1917) on efficient movement (Demeny, 1905; Marey, 1873). As the drive for efficiency began to affect notions of aesthetic quality, so efficient movement became a culturally required element of effective expression through movement. Sport training was thus a valuable background against which the young Lecoq could develop his work towards creative performance. In a similar way, Lecoq’s abiding interest in physiotherapy also places his movement work within the wider cultural history of the body in the twentieth century and the increasing emphasis on healthy and efficient movement.

Figure 11.1  Lecoq teaching physical exercise during his early career as a sports therapist and instructor. Photo © DR.ÉcoleJacquesLecoq.
After Marey and Demeny, another key figure in the history of French physical education is George Hébert (1875–1957) (see Evans, 2006: 27), the inventor of ‘natural gymnastics’. Hébert’s use of ‘natural’ physical activities – ‘pull, push, climb, walk, run, jump, lift, carry, attack, defend, swim’ (Kusler in Hodge, 2010: 54) – led to the development of what we would now recognise as the obstacle course. As well as using some of Hébert’s actions within his movement classes, Lecoq employs something very like the conceptual notion of the obstacle course in the ‘fundamental journey’ (Lecoq, 2000: 41–42), an exercise undertaken during the first year as part of the neutral mask work. The engagement of the physical body of the student with the natural environment is a central part of the student’s work with the mask, and it is revisited repeatedly during that period of the training. This sense of a series of obstacles against which the students test their creativity is something that pervades the very ethos of the school: ‘I am only there to place obstacles in your path, so that you can better find your way around them’ (Lecoq in Murray, 2003: 16).

Enthused by his sports experiences and by his time with the post-war cooperative societies, Éducation par le Jeu Dramatique (EPJD) and the Association Travail et Culture (TEC), Lecoq joined Jean Dasté’s company in Grenoble in 1948. From Dasté he gained a rich understanding of Hébert’s natural gymnastics, something Dasté had learnt while he was a student with Jacques Copeau (Evans, 2012: 167). By 1948, Lecoq had left Grenoble to continue his study and practice in Italy, where he worked and taught until returning to Paris in the early months of 1956. By the time he started his school in December 1956, he had accumulated an extensive knowledge of dramatic movement – a knowledge based on his understanding of sports as well as of theatre techniques and forms. His continued interest in sports can be seen in the films he made during the 1960s, including one entitled The Swimming Pool (1965).

**Sport, pedagogy and play**

Lecoq was quite clear that, ‘Purely athletic exercises are . . . insufficient for actor training’ (Lecoq, 2000: 69), because, as with fixed dramatic forms, the student’s body can become locked into an external form that is no longer justified. Lecoq’s pedagogy rejects rigid and formal physical training; he is quite clear that athleticism that focuses on competition and that ignores the roots of sport in play is of no use for the actor. Throughout his teaching, Lecoq exploits the overlap of meanings within the word ‘play’ (or le jeu), allowing it to draw together associations with children’s play, games and sports, as well as with acting and performance, all of which he allows to resonate within his pedagogy. Within Lecoq’s construction of play, it is clear that, as for the sportsperson, technique alone is not enough. The qualities of complicité (complicity) and disponibilité (availability or openness) transform movement training from a simple process of skills acquisition towards something more profound. Lecoq was undoubtedly also aware that both sports and movement training deal with the basic movement efforts of pushing and pulling, of balance and imbalance; again, these are aspects of movement practice that have profound resonances beyond the purely physiological. It is in this respect that sport, for Lecoq, provides a vital basis for understanding how the body works in space. The sports exercises he uses are therefore taught not just as stand-alone exercises, but also as tools with which to interrogate the laws of movement as they operate in a variety of contexts and the effects of movement in respect of our wider engagement with our world. Sports activities provide a meeting place between abstract movement, everyday movement and movement in performance.
The pedagogy of the school is shaped around the potential such a meeting place can provide. Theatre can become a world governed by its own logic, where imagination is freed because the logic of the body takes over from the logic of the mind. The student confronts his or her personal experience of movement, learning to acknowledge his or her preconceived ideas, images and opinions of the student’s own physicality: ‘At the outset we must unlearn what we know, in order to put ourselves in a state of not-knowing and thereby be available to rediscover what is elemental’ (Lecoq in Rolfe, 1979: 152). Through this process, the student can arrive at a point where, as in sport, the body transcends its everyday limitations through the performer’s exploration of its possibilities. For the actor trainer and the sports coach, the challenge is to train the body so that it can be open to such possibilities, to be what Lecoq calls ‘disponible’: ‘I have known actors who were extremely stiff in the gym who nevertheless moved with wonderful suppleness on stage, and others, who were very supple in training, but who were incapable of creating an illusion’ (Lecoq, 2000: 69).

The ‘Twenty Movements’: movement analysis and sports

In their first year at the school, all students undertake classes in Analyse du Mouvement (or Movement Analysis). During these classes, students analyse a number of actions and movement sequences which, over time, develop into a form of training vocabulary. At the end of the first year, all students are set a task to perform a selection of twenty of these movements in a sequence of their own choosing. The Twenty Movements include: éclosion (opening and closing of the whole body), Indian club swinging, an action of moving towards and grasping and then releasing an object (je vais prendre, je prends), rotating a baton in the hands, climbing a wall, a sequence of nine movements articulated at the hips, skating on ice, a rapid turn first on one leg and then on the other, sculling from the stern of a boat with a single oar (la grande godille), the ferryman or le passeur (the action of punting a shallow hulled boat with a long pole), throwing a disc, moving the trunk and torso horizontally to left and right, undulation of the body (forward and reverse), somersault, handstand, maintaining a fixed point with the hands, weight-lifting, swimming, and a cartwheel. Almost all of these refer to or are representations of sporting activities; however, although the student is required to perform his or her sequence with a level of technical precision, this is not the main focus for the tutors’ comments. When the sequences are performed, it becomes evident that it is through the play of technique and sequencing that the student reveals him/herself, demonstrating an ability to create through movement a sense of rhythm, space, weight and ultimately emotion and meaning. The student is encouraged to perform the movements economically, avoiding psychological explanations (Lecoq, 2000: 79), so that the movements can serve as a form of reference point around which the student can play imaginatively. The movements engage the body in a variety of planes – horizontal (sculling), vertical (discus) and diagonal (ferryman), and as the student plays with the effects of these movements through space, the student begins a journey into the physical foundations of key dramatic territories (comedy, tragedy and melodrama). Manipulating the actions and exploring their dynamic possibilities enables the students to expand their expressive field; as they expand and shrink actions, and explore the relationship of (im)balance, breathing, fixed points, rhythm and movement through space, they also explore how the dynamics of different feelings and passions function in space and through movement.3

In Movement Training for the Modern Actor (Evans, 2009: 60–63), I discuss how Lecoq used the action of the ferryman as a starting point from which to analyse the geometry and
rhythms of movement – the relationship of movement and breath, and between movement and dramatic style. Similarly, an action such as disc throwing can be seen as operating on a number of levels. As with the ferryman exercise, the student is encouraged to explore the action of throwing the discus by varying the scale and speed, tasting the effects on the body. Though nothing is actually thrown, the student senses the physical implications of preparing to throw and then projecting his/her intention through space. The movement of the disc along the vertical axis in the preparation to throw opens and closes the body, preparing for the launch into imbalance that allows the throw to be effective. This movement also operates as an association with an important part of the dynamics of Greek Tragedy: ‘Tragedy is always vertical’ (Lecoq, 2000: 83). Giovanni Fusetti explains how, in Greek Tragedy,

this notion of verticality [...] can be applied: in the style of acting, in the way the performer uses vocal work, the way the text will be delivered and can also be applied to the way the space will be designed.

(Fusetti & Willson 2000: 3–4)

Lecoq makes use of movement activities, such as the throwing of the disc, as part of the exploration of dramatic genre, of the relationship between inner and external space, and of the relationship with emotion – a process that once again mirrors the development of his own understanding of movement and theatre.4

In addition to the dramatic significances discussed above, the act of throwing has a socio-cultural operation. Iris Young (1990) argues that this kind of projection of the self is traditionally more culturally acceptable for men than for women. Throwing as an action embodies the intention to project the will through space; this action thus functions to enable the female student to view herself as an active subject, confident in projecting herself within space. Sports practice can, in this way, challenge cultural boundaries that have become embedded in the body. Both sport and dance have played a significant role over the last century in providing spaces for the bodies of women, people with disabilities, and the elderly to engage with space and movement in ways that challenge their historical objectification.

The exploration of the dramatic territories in the second year at the school is underpinned by continuing work on physical preparation, together with what Lecoq refers to as ‘dramatic acrobatics’. In the first year, students learn the basics of acrobatics as well as developing suppleness, strength, balance and physical decisiveness. This is augmented with sessions on juggling and unarmed stage combat. By the second year, students are able to take this acrobatic ability into performance; at this stage, ‘every gesture, every attitude or movement is justified’ (Lecoq, 2000: 67). Lecoq talks about how the start and end of these kinds of action carry ‘a strong dramatic charge’ (Lecoq, 2000: 67). When he writes about the relationship between movement and immobility at these moments of transition, he reveals the sensibility of a man who remembers vividly the sensations of jumping, diving, and preparing to launch into action:

The state of suspension just before the beginning is part of the dynamics of risk (risk of falling) and includes the sense of anguish which emerges clearly. Conversely, the concluding suspension is one of landing, returning to a state of calm, coming gradually closer to immobility and serenity.

(Lecoq, 2000: 67)
The influence of sports on Lecoq’s training

There is also a more general association between sports training and theatre training that runs throughout the structure of the teaching day, and of each year of study as a whole. The students go through physical preparation, classes in technique (including acrobatics), finishing with sessions where the students ‘play’ either individually or in groups, or rehearse and present in groups/teams for their *auto-cours*, all of which results in group performance projects. Whilst the majority of the exercises focus on the development of the individual’s abilities, the team ethic is developed and built throughout the two years of the school through the use of the *auto-cours*, in which groups of students learn how to work/play closely together to respond to set challenges. As with sport, there is a recurrent connection between the preparation and training of the individual, the development of the ensemble or team, and the final goal of effective performance.

The team activity of the *auto-cours* also provides another dimension within which the students can develop and enrich their understanding of play, complicité and disponibilité. Lecoq invites the student, through the experience of the *auto-cours*, to play with an association with the collective effort of the sports team. Awareness, openness and intuitive responsiveness are skills that the sports team member often develops to such an extent that these attributes are deeply embedded into the psychology and the physiology of the athlete, as well as into the ethos of the team. However, although Lecoq seemed to value the dynamics of the team and the ways in which the team experience enhances the development of the performer’s core skills, ultimately he is interested in this only to the extent that it contributes to the development of the students’ theatrical abilities. What he did appear to take from his sports experience was a sense in which the collaborative process of theatre making is driven as much by notions of play, openness and responsiveness as it is by intention, ideas and concepts.

Sports and the classroom ethos

Although Lecoq never openly encouraged competition, he did not discourage the competitive atmosphere that would build up within the improvisation classes. He considered the tension, anticipation, energy and focus that it generated as beneficial for the quality of the students’ work. Likewise, Lecoq did not agree with physical preparation or gymnastic methods that he called ‘comforting’. He did not believe that relaxation methods ultimately dealt with the challenges facing the actor in a useful way: ‘For an actor, the only internal harmony that matters is that of play’ (Lecoq, 2000: 69). Lecoq believed that exercises in group dynamics (i.e. holding hands before performances) are nice for social groups, but not for professional actors. For him, the meaningfulness of movement was not achieved through somatic healing, but through a deep, hard-earned and finely tuned kinesthetic sense. Lecoq’s teaching demonstrated a deep respect for the movement practices of the sportsperson; his analysis of their actions and gestures, and the corresponding attention he demanded from his students, bears testament to this respect. Though he explored the aesthetic potential of the sportsperson’s actions and movements, he was not interested in a superficial aestheticisation of their actions.

At its most superficial, mime, like sport, abstracts particular actions from their everyday locations; in this context, the mime and the athlete both go nowhere special for no particular purpose – their actions have been separated from their original functional purpose. Whereas Dario Fo, who is also fascinated by the dynamics of such actions, identifies importance in their socio-economic histories and the ways such actions are socially and politically regulated (Fo 1991: 31–33), Lecoq was not directly concerned with such aspects. Abstraction and
theorisation were not developed to the point where they extracted student actors from the world that they sought to engage with.

The body that performs, whether it be through theatre or through sport, is a body produced by a cultural process that is shaped by sets of practices. The performing of abstracted skills participates in the transformation of functional actions into expert knowledge and professional practice. Performance and sport in this sense are both representations and imitations of acts of labour. Such abstraction, as is argued elsewhere (Evans, 2009: 60–63), attempts to erase the discursive inscription of class on actions such as throwing, lifting and rowing whilst at the same time culturally ennobling the actions of the working or sporting man and woman. Dario Fo ultimately rejected Lecoq’s neutral stance on this process. For Lecoq, however, actions, gestures and movements left unfilled with intention (psychologically or politically) are then ready to participate in an exploration of theatrical and emotional dynamics in space in a manner that maximises the creative choices for the student and minimises the limitations on creative and imaginative play. As with Lecoq’s early experiences when engaged in sporting activity, ‘the outer space of the physical actions is mapped onto the inner psychic space of the student performer’ (Evans, 2009: 63). The student in class is thus required not only to be ready to commit himself or herself physically, but also to remain open, available and responsive, a condition not unlike that required by the athlete or sportsperson.

Conclusion

Like sport, theatre was an important part of the process of cultural renewal that took place across Europe after the Second World War. Lecoq’s school was part of a wider European movement to rethink the nature of actor training, to question the primacy of text in theatre, to create actors and theatre makers for the future, and to explore new collaborative ways of making theatre. Lecoq’s search was for a basis for movement teaching that would be as culturally neutral and open as possible, and that would provide student actors with the widest range of possible destinations for their journey. He would be the first to acknowledge that such neutrality is never fully possible, but in returning to the sports and gymnastic activities of his youth, he found exercises that enabled the students to interrogate and develop their own physical expressivity and that were also dramatically resonant. His exercises are essentially patterns of movement, but they also work on a poetic level as a web of possible meanings into which the student can insert him/herself.

Sport constantly challenges the athlete with the question: what am I searching for through this physical activity; is it perfect execution of the activity or is it something more? For Lecoq, the answer is always something more than perfect execution. Sport and movement are not ends in themselves but an expression of a physical need to move and to engage with the environment in a manner that brings the body into interesting play with the fullness of its environment. As a teacher, Lecoq’s sports background is deeply embedded within his teaching and the teaching at the school that still bears his name, representing a unique foundational practice that underpins much of the pedagogy.

Notes

1 On a visit to the school in February 2012, Fay Lecoq showed me an old boxing glove that had been discovered lodged in the rafters of the school building.

2 Francisco Amoros was born in Valencia in Spain, where he lived for the first half of his life. After siding with the French during the Napoleonic occupation of Spain, he was effectively exiled to
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France after the collapse of that regime. He quickly became well established as an expert in physical education. His work was influenced by the ideas of the Swiss educationalist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). He published his ideas in a two-volume book: Manuel d’Éducation physique, gymnastique et morale (Paris, 1830), an original copy of which was acquired by Jacques Lecoq.

3 Norman Taylor, a former teacher at the school (1982–2000), eloquently expresses this relationship when he describes the action of the sculler (le grande godille):

It is the simplest of the movements. It is the most fluid. And the most difficult. The rhythm and timing of the action are the Fundamentals. The bending of the oar under pressure is vital to feel on the part of the actor. It is the most psychological of movements, giving and receiving forever and . . . The vast majority of Lecoquians would consider the ferryman (passeur) to be the movement that talks of life. But the ferryman has a contact with the earth in the riverbed. The grande godille man or woman is on the river of life. The only contact with the earth is the bystander watching it all. Way beyond the passeur who goes from one bank to the other, knowing full well the return is already assured. Like the vicar who cannot celebrate communion without congregation, but who always does because the locals are always there, the ferryman can only cross the river if someone asks and pays the toll. He can exist only if someone asks him to. The easy way out! But the grande godille is an eternal existence. There is always trade; the boat can be full and therefore empty. You see barges beating their way downstream completely empty.

(Taylor, 2015)

4 See the section on ‘pulling-pushing’ in Les deux voyages de Jacques Lecoq (Roy & Carasso, 2006).

5 This was a point of disagreement between Fo and Lecoq. Fo’s objection was that a neutral approach such as Lecoq’s could be applied equally by the oppressor and the oppressed (Fo, 1991: 148–149). Similar arguments have circulated around sport and politics over the last century.

References


Young, I. (1990), Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.