Jacques Lecoq understood the comforts of certitude. That is why he refused to provide them, both in his school and in his late-career writing about it (Lecoq, 1987, 1997). He knew how satisfying it would feel to ‘build the perfect system’ of actor training, and how gratifying it would feel for students – and readers – to consume a system reducible to ‘fifteen lessons in a manual’ (Lecoq, 2006: 78). In the published books Lecoq did not want to write, he describes all forms of fixity, including absolute definitions of crucial terms like play (le jeu), as ‘temptations’ (Lecoq, 2002: 21) to be resisted by both teachers and artists (Murray, 2003: 51–54). Tempted to conclusively define le jeu in an academic essay – a genre not globally renowned for its playfulness – we chose instead to conduct our inquiry as a conversation.

Discussing play

Buckley: As a spectator and a critic, I can see and feel when a theatre production has, or lacks, the kind of dynamism that resembles Lecoq’s descriptions of play. As a theatre artist who trained with Lecoq and who now directs your own school, you don’t just detect play: you do it, and you create the conditions in which other performers can learn to do it better. Without forgetting that a thorough understanding of play can only be gained through experience, let’s begin by talking about how you explain the term.

Coletto: First: ‘to play’ is innate in human beings, but there is a moment in life from which play is considered a child’s thing; it is not allowed anymore, and then we need to create programs that teach play. That said, there is a play that is related to the actor’s self with the character, and then there is a play that the actor has onstage with the other players. The concept of play is so fundamental in my own teaching that I don’t even use the word ‘acting’ at my school, but just the word ‘play.’ These words evoke completely different energies. In ‘acting,’ there is something that is external, a required ‘imitation’ but an external one, closer to approaching parody. When we say play, we mean that we are in it – we are completely engaged in what we are doing, so it is truthful. Again, think of the play of children – or of sport.

Buckley: Yes, Lecoq draws heavily on his sport background in his written descriptions of his practice.

Coletto: I too have a sport background, and so this concept is easy for me to understand. I also consider actors to be athletes on the field of creation, with an equal need for consistent
On play: what works, what doesn’t work

training and exercise of their tools: body and mind. Both actors and athletes must be prepared for their game. They both know what they have to do when they go out there; they trained for it. Still, athletes are well aware that nobody knows what game they are going to have, or who is going to win or lose. The only thing they know is that they have to play as hard as they can with what they've prepared; that is all they can do. That puts them in a state of high alert and profound engagement in what they are doing. In my opinion, this is what many actors are missing, and this is what they need to bring to their game to make it compelling and alive while playing it over and over again. This is the ability to play.

Buckley: So play is enabled by this kind of complete engagement, but as Lecoq explained it, play is also a function of distance (Lecoq, 2002: 38, 55). You mentioned this a moment ago, and I’d like to return to it. First, with actor-character relations: how can a performer be in it, as you say, but also apart from it?

Coletto: Engagement enables play, and play enables engagement: it is a circular process, and it doesn’t matter which comes first – what matters is the circulation. Actors must give themselves completely to the characters they are playing in order to bring them alive on stage, but it is important to keep distance between the character and the actor. A character is always a 'mask,' a 'structure' that the actor is moving. She brings the structure alive, like a puppeteer with a puppet, but here the two coincide in the same person, and it is the distance between the two that will allow for play. If the actor collapses into a character so that you can’t distinguish the two anymore, then we’ve lost the play, and all we see is the actor – his real feelings, his real thoughts, his real body. In other words, we see the puppeteer and we lose the puppet. Even worse, we see reality, but we don’t see truth. The great ability of an actor is to give himself in such a way that he disappears so that the character can appear.

Buckley: So the actor cannot ‘become’ the character and still be in a state of play (Lecoq, 2002: 63). How does learning to wear masks on the face help the actor to understand Lecoq's concept that all characters are 'masks'?

Coletto: Mask training is really important. It creates awareness for the actors. They learn how to efficiently project the body in space and create play. What the mask work produces is exactly this: when the actor first puts the mask on, what you have is just a body with a mask on top of it. To make that mask become alive, he needs to be able to create a bigger mask, born from the union of his body and the mask – a revelation of a body that is other than the body of the performer. Only at that point do we witness the birth of a character as a third product. In this relationship, we see how the concept of distance functions.

Even before that important process of character creation, there’s the work with the neutral mask, in which the actor is guided back to her own powerful presence as a sign of neutrality. In fact, a neutral state is not the absence of anything, but the presence of everything.

Buckley: Your description of this neutral state – the state from which play becomes possible – emphasizes its plenitude. In his book, Lecoq first stresses the ways in which neutral mask work eliminates what he calls ‘les formes parasitaires’ (Lecoq, 1997: 39). (The English translation of ‘learned behavior patterns’ (trans. Bradby, 2002: 27) doesn’t quite deliver the metaphor.) Once the actor has shed these energy-consuming parasites, she can enter that fully charged state of vigilance.

Coletto: Again, sport can help us explain this. Imagine a goalie waiting for a penalty kick – that’s pure neutrality! That state of extreme alertness and engagement, with no ‘thinking,’ is a state that must be present in the actor at all times. The character may have a very different energy – tired, or bored – but the energy of the actor must be engaged at all times.

It is very easy to witness what we are talking about in practice, in the classroom. But these things are quite inexplicable if you don’t experience it. This is why Lecoq never, until
the years before he died, wanted to write a book about his teaching. It’s about the priority of experience versus theory.

**Buckley:** I want to return to Lecoq’s reluctance to write a book, but first I want to focus briefly on the concept of space in relation to play.

**Coletto:** This is a very important concept: the body in space. An actor must be able to create space around him, meaning that he creates the relationship between the space and his body. It is like an invisible structure, but actually we all perceive it: there is in fact a sort of vibrational reality that precedes the physical reality just slightly in timing. When the actor walks onstage, we immediately see that vibrational reality, and the challenge is to be able to recognize and match that reality through play. Otherwise we will perceive a disconnect between the actor and what he is doing or saying. A big portion of the training is to make the students start to see, hear, and feel the spatial reality they have to match.

**Buckley:** This space is also occupied by an audience. How should they experience this playful state?

**Coletto:** The audience is in the theatre scene – part of the play – and I consider them as players. I’m not saying actors need to be physically touching them, but we have to reach their guts, not just talk to them intellectually. The audience does recognize life, and the absence of it. If they see life onstage, they are engaged; if not, they may be listening and watching, but they are not engaged.

### Teaching play and playful teaching

**Buckley:** Can you say more about how Lecoq taught his students to play? The École training as some have described it sounds like an intermittently frustrating, even maddening, process (Fusetti & Willson, 2002: 100).

**Coletto:** I think we need to distinguish something. When I moved to the United States and started teaching, I realized that in Europe, we have a very different way of approaching feedback. I’ve learned that being direct and honest as a teacher is part of the journey of learning. I do not pay too much attention to what I say and how I say it; I am more focused on the work that needs to be done with students. My responsibility is to make them progress in their craft. They don’t have to like me, and I don’t have to be ‘nice,’ but I must tell them what is going on, what they need to do, and where they need to focus their work.

During improvisation or general exercises, Lecoq would say, ‘Oh, c’est pas bon,’ and then ‘un autre’ (that was no good, next!). So, yes, his way of working was far from soft, but his instigation would challenge the student to eagerly fight through to a solution. Was that frustrating? Absolutely. Frustrating and priceless.

**Buckley:** As a teacher who works primarily in the US, and who is one of the few trained in pedagogy under his direction at Lecoq’s school, how do you guide your own students through the frustrations that arise?

**Coletto:** The students can have a hard time understanding that failure is important. The problem is with the word failure. You wouldn’t say to a child who is learning to walk, and falls down, that he is failing, would you? I tell my students from day one: let’s assume that you are going to fall, many times. What’s important is not the fall; it’s that you try to understand what happens in the fall. You want to be looking forward to experiencing the fall until you start enjoying it, since the solution lies inside that fall. When we stop caring about success and results, and focus instead on the journey, we get so much more work done. In our mistakes, we find our solutions. You have to accept the mistakes, and even enjoy them!
Buckley: I can imagine that is hard for many students, especially Americans, to accept this. As an American teacher, I recognize many aspects of our institutions in the explanation you just gave. Our education system, which is becoming ever more quantitatively oriented, encourages students to seek right answers, to win – but not necessarily to accept failure as part of the pursuit of knowledge. What you are describing is a very different approach to education, focused on process and development – one that welcomes failure as part of playing.

Coletto: To give you an example: I had a student at school who was dealing with specific issues. She came to school every day and battled with them, until there was a point when she recognized that her approach – ‘I am going to win this!’ – was the root of the problem. As long as she experienced ‘failing’ as ‘not succeeding,’ she would remain stuck in that condition. That recognition eventually freed her to play. It was frustrating at times, but the result was worth every moment.

Buckley: How relevant is the concept of play for teachers themselves?

Coletto: Teaching is play, a constant improvisation. It, too, is a performance. I have a journey that I plan to take with the students, but what the students bring to me, and what’s created in the space, is completely unknown. I have to be in that constant state of alertness, to respond in such a way that I can serve them in the journey. What makes the class is what’s happening in the class, and that’s what makes it exciting. In that moment, you play, as a teacher.

Buckley: This is a challenge with which many of us teachers struggle. We all have to resist the impulse to do too much, to manage the learning process too completely, to shut down play.

Coletto: My job as a teacher is to provide students with tools, to instigate them to create their own artistic path. Play is the freedom a teacher experiences in not having to own her students’ journey or their outcomes. Learning to play in the classroom is a process; it is an act of faith.

Buckley: It seems, then, like Lecoq trained theatre teachers in much the same way he did actors. The objective was to enable you to create your own pedagogy.

Coletto: Lecoq trained all theatre makers and teachers in the same way. As for me, I began my first school in Italy with the format that I knew, the format of Lecoq’s school. But I used it as a trampoline, to conceive my own creation. My school in Chicago now is a nine-month journey, divided into three terms: the first and the third term are in Chicago, the second is in Italy, with a professional production at the end. I want this to be a specialization program for professionals who want to advance and develop their skills, or explore new tools. The school reflects who I am, and many experiences contribute to who I am. So it would be very limiting to say that it is a Lecoq school. What Lecoq intended was for you to become the actor you are, the director you are, the writer you are, the teacher you are, and ultimately the artist you are. It’s an ethical position.

Lecoq’s teaching cannot be made into a fixed method or a product. You must use it to flourish as who you are as an artist. This kills the idea of a legacy. I believe that he wanted it this way: he did not want disciples, and it would be so sad for me if I was still doing his work as I learned it.

Playing with texts

Buckley: To reinforce the argument that Lecoq’s training did not aim to produce a group of artists and teachers who use a single method or create in a single genre, it’s worth emphasizing
the variety of styles and forms in which his former students work. The scholar-practitioners
who have written on Lecoq have already said this, but we should repeat it: Lecoq was not
anti-textual (Bradby, 2002: 91). On the contrary, he taught students to play with texts. That
much is clear even in his writing. Perhaps it is the initial emphasis on mime in Lecoq’s school
that confuses some people? They could be conflating him with Étienne Decroux, whom Lecoq
said he ‘respected,’ but whose wordless work he found ‘mechanical’ (Lecoq, 2006: 97) and
un-playful. Or perhaps it is a misunderstanding of ‘physical theatre,’ a contested term (Cham-
berlain, 2007: 117–121) which has often been used to describe the work created by Lecoq’s
former students.

Coletto: Lecoq’s training didn’t want to create a non-verbal, anti-textual and only ‘physical
theatre.’ What does that even mean? Lecoq insisted upon the fact that a text is a dynamic event
before it is a literary event. It has its own body, its own texture, color, music, weight, material;
it has its own life. As a theatre maker, I must be able to listen and connect with the dynamic of
the text in order to find its roots, before any intellectual interpretation. He wasn’t against text;
he was protecting text from being murdered by ideas at the service of egos!

As for mime, he was referring to the basic human action of ‘miming’ life as a way of learn-
ing. You watch something, and then you try to reproduce it by embodying it. Babies learn
how to be in the world through miming. That’s a very popular Lecoq concept: that every-
thing – animate or inanimate – has a dynamic, which can be observed and put in motion by
embodying it. In doing so, we create a journey that goes from outside to inside, instead of the
opposite, as some other actor training methods propose. Again, this approach creates distance
between the actor and the character, ensuring play.

As for the ‘physical theatre’ terminology, we’ve heard a million times by now that all theatre
is a physical event, and we can’t ever separate theatre from physicality. Yet I’ve unfortunately
witnessed, especially in the US, a restriction of the term physical theatre to movement-theatre,
dance-theatre, acrobatics, circus and clowning, spectacles – to work that involves a lot of
movement and gestures. In reality, we should go back to Lecoq’s idea of dynamics: stillness
is movement, just as much as acrobatics. Words are movement, text is movement, ideas are
movement – ‘everything moves,’ everything has a dynamic. So again, movement is not the
focus; the focus is the body in space, and its relationship with the theatre space.

Buckley: Given that this outside-in, dynamics-focused method is equally applicable when
approaching character and text, how does play manifest in spoken language, whether it has
been devised by an ensemble or written by a playwright?

Coletto: The training is based on the understanding of the voice of silence and space.
When the silence is bloated enough that it is ready to explode, then words come into play.
That is very different from covering up the silence with words. The silence speaks as much
as the words. When the words come, they need to be able to carry on what that silence has
already been speaking about. Again, most of the time we discard the silence and cover it
up with words. It is an exact parallel to what we were saying about movement and stillness.

So if you are creating original work, the work is understanding what the silence is saying,
and then figuring out what comes next. If you have a text, it is exactly the same process, but
reversed in order. You have the words, but you have to ask yourself, ‘What is the silence that
these words come out of?’ Text or no text, you have to develop a very specific sensibility that
brings you into connection with that. And again, for this purpose, mask training is a funda-
mental form of practice.

Buckley: And this play with text, which begins in silence, can happen when actors work
with any kind of theatre text? Lecoq briefly mentions that some texts are less open to play
than others (Lecoq, 2002: 150–151), but you suggest otherwise.
Coletto: At the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, I saw an Italian company from Naples perform a text-based play: basically seven actors sitting around a kitchen table, very little action. But the play of the actors was so engaging that within twenty minutes I wanted to tell them what I thought about what they were discussing. The space of the theatre clearly extended to the audience, the actors played in relation to each other and the space; they were committed to the game. So text or no text, movement or no movement, this is just very good theatre and there is a need to understand how to make that happen. The style of the text is irrelevant.

Texts about play

Buckley: Speaking of texts, let's return to those Lecoq wrote. As an academic accustomed to arguments in which the author makes claims and justifies them in a performance of intellectual mastery, I find *The Moving Body* fascinating. There are points at which Lecoq seems to be delivering maxims, either about a principle of actor training or about 'universal laws' of movement or of theatre. But he often pulls back from those statements, following them up with sentences like this: 'Of course there is no such thing as absolute and universal neutrality, it is merely a temptation' (Lecoq, 2002: 21). More frequently, he states a principle and then immediately translates it into practical terms – what 'we' do at the school – while always acknowledging that in no sense can reading substitute for experience. The writing itself is playful, in the sense that it places the distance of an unwritable experience between the claims and any truth they might deliver.

Coletto: Reading about Lecoq's work is like reading about how to ride a bike. If you have been riding a bike, and learning about balance, what you're reading makes sense to your body. If you have never touched a bike, and you have no idea what balancing a bike is, you read the book and filter its statements through some ideal that you have about bike-riding or balance. In other words, you're having an intellectual experience. Lecoq was everything but academic! The only way to understand his work is to experience it.

Buckley: This is perhaps one reason why Lecoq resisted explaining his ideas in book form for so long.

Coletto: The other reason is that he was protecting his work from being intellectualized and explained into a formula, a system, a method, a recipe. That would have taken the life out of it. No recipe can help you play, nor create through play. In class and in a show, play is evident. It's really evident what works and what doesn't work. When talking about play, the words 'right' and 'wrong' are very dangerous; the French word *juste* is much better than right (Wright, 2002: 73). It's not my particular right or wrong; what is *juste* is felt by everyone, in a general silent (or not) agreement. That is a moment that works.

Buckley: What you are describing is an affective response – it is felt, but felt in and by the body.

Coletto: Yes, it is felt before being understood. There is no recipe for that. I can't teach that as steps, and it can't be described that way. Once an actor is trained in all of her body to hear and feel this, the rest is nothing. Easy. The most important work is creating the poetic body – the body that understands, knows, feels, plays.

References


