Jacques Lecoq developed the neutral mask as a training tool, leading performers to develop presence through increased physical awareness. Arriving in the turbulent 21st century, the neutral mask has endured over 50 years as a vehicle in theater training. Actors, immersed in a fast-paced culture that allows little time for experiential learning, can rely on this mask to anchor them to the primacy of direct experience.

A full-face mask, normally made of leather, the neutral mask cultivates and relays a sense of calm. Under the neutral mask, students explore the principles of their artistry by researching life and resonating with patterns of the natural world.

They engage in a series of exercises appealing to the inherent dynamic wisdom of the body. The mask encourages clarity of movement and a greater command of stillness. It moves the wearer toward a clear slate upon which, elsewhere in our acting work, we inscribe character. Neutral does not mean blank or void of sensation, but refers to the performer’s state of readiness to share the action with the audience and the generosity with which they are able to do so.

In Lecoq’s pedagogic schema, this ‘mask of reference’ highlights space, force and rhythm as key essentials of performance. The neutral mask is the fundamental mask underneath all masks, all character. His teachings form an approach rather than a methodology, urging students to observe life’s movements. Situating the body as a comprehensive resource, students work in a laboratory environment searching to ‘harness the rhythms and spirit of life to the task of acting’ (Murray, 2003: 85). Lecoq’s school emerged amidst changing cultural currents during a generation of revolution and liberation (i.e. the 1960s). There, students found an arena in which they could discover their bodies as physical instruments of freedom, awareness and expression – a conduit to the heart and belly of the audience. ‘The audience is always right!’ Lecoq would say, ‘The audience knows the truth.’
Carrying the mask

The neutral mask training begins by situating the actor at ‘alert,’ the fourth of seven levels of tension established by Lecoq: super loose, loose, economy of movement, alert, decision, action, hypertension. These levels of tension refer to a rapport of force within the body and also on the space. In stage four, the individual stance is slightly wider than our own footing and the arms are released from the sides of the torso. As if asking ‘where?’ stage four calls us beyond the limits of our bodies and prompts a relationship with the space. The mask symbolically lifts wearers off themselves. An overall lightness prevails. ‘I realized that the mask could not be neutral if it was not curious, open to something, ready for the event without any past behind it, without any conflict’ (Lecoq in Roy, 1999). Carried by the mask from one present moment to the next, always poised to move forward, we must be available, open to both following and driving where the mask leads. The appetite for play is essential.

Stripped of our facial expressions, we must use our bodies alone to express ourselves. The neutral mask does not interact effectively using literal or anecdotal illustration. It demands organic shape in order to capture the qualities of the themes we are asked to embody, such as the elements, materials, color, light, the seasons, sunrise to sunset. To carry the mask successfully, we must hold it in a state of balance while conveying the force and rhythm of the themes issued. Lecoq employed the term force to signify the properties of push and pull in a spatial context, both internally and externally. Through this tangible process of identification, we inevitably negotiate our own fields of effort and restraint. Mining to unearth the internal dynamics of action while supporting the calm of the mask, we stretch and grow. Suitable exercises act to rewire us, setting up new physical circuits that reveal presence as a space-based encounter.

A trustworthy guide, the mask situates us behind a new lens. ‘The crude matter of life assumes significance from the shaping hand of the artist’ (Gassner in Aristotle’s Poetics, 1951: xli), what Lecoq referred to as the universal poetic sense. ‘It brings us into contact with the essence of life [. . .] which can be found in all of us’ (Lecoq, 2000: 46). He opened abstract dimensions laid down [. . .] by our various experiences and sensations, by everything that we have seen, heard, touched, tasted. All these things are there inside us, and constitute the common heritage, out of which will spring dynamic vigor and the desire to create.

(Lecoq, 2000: 46)

By first investing in the action, we liberate ourselves from the constraints that accompany direct emotional engagement with the significance of a particular gesture (e.g., a hand raised in farewell). We need not aim for perfect execution, but instead seek the full embodiment of the action in the space between mechanics and symbolism. Our efforts to replicate ‘what is shared in common but invisible’ (Lecoq in Roy, 1999) help us to register and respond to our impulses with new freedom. Applying knowledge derived from the data of sense experience, we naturally prioritize our commonality in ensemble, using this formative language assigned at birth.

Moving beyond habit

The mask directs attention toward the telling of a story rather than the presentation of self in performance. For actors, it can work as a purgative. It releases us from the noise of our personal issues, which otherwise seep so easily into our work in the form of habitual movement.
Neutral mask – a life’s journey

patterns. Confronting these patterns via experience and feedback is a sobering but useful by-product of working under the neutral mask. Through this physical portal, we find the freedom to set aside encumbrances and move toward a form of representation where openness and generosity find traction. Little by little, the strength of the mask draws the impulse to initiate from the root of our foundations where the center of gravity resides in our bodies, from our viscera. Our gut instincts take charge.

In the coming and going, setting forth on journeys alone, in pairs, or in groups, observed by our thoughtful, unmasked peers, we refine our ability to be clear and specific. Without the manipulations of the face, the body has nowhere to hide. When we replicate behaviour beyond our habitual repertoire, we expand the range of possibilities accessible to us. Each student can become a kind of gourmet of behaviour. A mask amplifies action, motivating us to reach beyond ourselves outside our comfort zones. Given significant practice time, the lessons of the neutral mask remain long after the training period has concluded.

From noble to neutral

It is interesting to consider the socio-historical corollaries between the initial period of mask development and its contemporary use, specifically the impact of industrialization upon the human organism at the turn of the 20th century and the current climate and effects of technological acceleration in the 21st century. In both eras, we see a renewed interest in the body. Lecoq envisioned these major cultural shifts as fulcrum moments, when we return to the corporeal home in the effort to renew, regenerate and reinvent.

Influenced by theater innovator Jacques Copeau’s mask work in the early 1900s, Jacques Lecoq, together with sculptor Amleto Sartori, fabricated the neutral mask with an educational purpose in mind. Copeau had pursued a mission to bring dignity back to the actor. He wanted to save theater from *cabotinage* (ham acting) and the gimmickry of mechanized stage productions. ‘His philosophy was predicated upon a wider belief that in contemporary industrial society the modern ‘body’ was atrophied and dulled of its sensations’ (Murray, 2003: 29). The ideal of the *noble savage* (the 18th-century notion of a humanity free from the corruption of civilization) shaped his pioneer vision of seeking expression through the body. He began by covering the face with hoods and fabric, eventually constructing a mask he called the *noble mask*.

Jacques Lecoq never worked directly with Copeau, although the two met in Grenoble in 1948. Lecoq was exposed to this mask through Copeau’s son-in-law Jean Dasté, in whose company *Les Comédiens de Grenoble* Lecoq made his professional début in theater. The research conducted by Copeau and the group of actors associated with his school and Theatre du Vieux-Colombier led Copeau to connect with many prominent artists of his time (see Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume). The lasting effects of Copeau’s explorations into the various methods and practices, allowing the actor to achieve embodiment through an expanded inquiry into movement and play, are well delineated in Lecoq’s enduring school and his book *The Moving Body*.

In his collaboration with sculptor Amleto Sartori, Lecoq summoned a masterwork. Capable of engaging space to a remarkable degree, the lines and planes of their mask were sculpted in accord with the rhythms of nature. A direct descendant of the *noble mask*, the neutral mask ‘when placed on the face, should enable one to experience the state of neutrality prior to action, a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict’ (Lecoq, 2000: 36). A poorly constructed neutral mask will unjustifiably elicit character or remain inert. When properly constructed, the mask will convey vital information about the wearer. Such a well-crafted vessel attunes the operator to the rhythms of its voyage.
Even as it covers the face, the mask unmasks the wearer. In this opening and exposure, we behold the vulnerability of the person wearing the mask. To experience this state of openness illuminates how much we may release and surrender without giving up. This moment both connects and separates us – in this context, onlookers to the training exercise and performers wearing the mask. The neutral mask exhibits how, when we attempt to be alike, our differences become more visible. 'Universality is not the same as uniformity' (Lecoq, 2000: 40). Jon Sherman eloquently articulates this idea in his doctoral thesis:

Our different perspectives are part of the flesh of the world and their crossings are what inaugurate our sense of presence. What begins as an assertion of commonality resolves as an engine of difference. [. . .] The neutral mask expresses the world by taking on aspects of its contours and rhythms. [. . .] Attempting to enact pure movement we encounter our own history of bodily formation as well as our failure to erase our own ability. [. . .] In reaching for this alterity we are invited into the freedom of the mask, which has no sedimentation of habits.

(Sherman, 2010: 210–214)

We seize upon the true significance of the quest for neutrality when we have silenced our distractions long enough to inhabit the moment, finding solace in the ability to 'just be' on stage in front of others. Asking us to soften our socialized armor, the mask summons unencumbered effort, a state conversant with the source of our beauty and mystery as human organisms. When we step onto a stage, we act as representatives of the universe.

This work takes time and offers no mastery. Rather, it is a place where we can come to calibrate and re-calibrate, noting both our recurring habits and our growth. It is impossible to make such transformations in a weekend workshop. It is optimal to immerse oneself in the study of neutral mask for a period of time, allowing ample opportunity for gestation. Once we have awakened these traces of wisdom living in us like ancient springs, continuously carried forth by the body, they support our progress as we develop our craft.

My journey with the mask

The neutral mask greatly influenced the trajectory of my life. When I read about ‘The Mime of Jacques Lecoq’ in The Drama Review (Rolfe, 1972), I knew I would go to Paris to study with this mask man. Completing Lecoq’s two-year program in 1977 and a pedagogic apprenticeship a decade later, I have now taught this form for nearly 30 years.

It really began with secondary school sports. My experience playing on varsity teams turned out to be an important foundation for my training at Lecoq’s school. (He referred to me as ‘la sportive.’) The athlete engages with collective space in pushing toward a finish line or goal, a vital basis for understanding how the body moves in space and how it expresses itself. The drilled execution of a sport also develops the muscularity and logic of body wisdom. Both sports training and the practice of corporeal development at the school require the fusion of the internal motor with increasing external facility.

The movement work immediately spoke to me. In addition to the kinesthetic domain of my sports training, it tapped my childhood years, nurturing a companionship with nature. The neutral mask in particular seized my attention, with its tangible way of speaking to the primal territories of silence, balance and calm. It opened a deep and continuously expanding well of information.
Neutral mask – a life’s journey

With the neutral mask, Lecoq forged a means to place students in a state of perpetual discovery by following a path to dynamic expressivity and creation that encompasses the range of possibilities emerging from the triangulation of space, force and rhythm. Drawing upon his own background in sports and physical therapy, he brought a blend of physicality, imagination and poetry to bear upon the fundamental order found in nature. Exercises undertaken either with the mask, or in the spirit of the mask, direct students to identify the underlying codes, values and motors necessary to produce devised theater. This is not work that can be accomplished alone. An important part of the lessons are assimilated watching others, as we come to understand that listening is a whole-body activity. We are invited to climb on the scaffolding of shared experience and to reach individual sensations by a collective route. As Lecoq himself wrote in *The Moving Body*, ‘When one has experienced this neutral starting point, their body will be freed like a blank page upon which drama can be inscribed’ (Lecoq, 2000: 36). In 1976, Lecoq gave me this theme, ‘la feuille blanche’ (loosely translated as ‘the blank page’) for my final project. I am still working on it.

Balance and triangulation

In parallel with Lecoq, my own second career in therapeutic bodywork has complemented my theatrical work, serving to strengthen my connection with and understanding of the neutral mask. Since the early 1990s, I have conducted a thriving practice in cross-fiber manipulation and connective tissue mobilization alongside my teaching. In cross-fiber work, the linear physiology of muscle fibers responds effectively to perpendicular action by clearing adhesions and re-aligning fibers for optimum movement efficiency. I administered from the premise that form follows function, connective tissue mobilization works on fascia to address whole-body patterning and the interplay of movement and stability in posture and function. As the saying goes, the issues are in the tissues.

Working individually with people to restructure postural inequities and release tension has fostered a stimulating dialogue between my two métiers. Practicing before the temple of the body anchors my belief in the micro-macro schema of order, where the human summarizes the magnitude of the cosmos. The laws of motion and balance are innate to the human organism. We are born knowing so much. As we adapt to societal conventions, this knowledge gets buried. We need to mine for it. Lecoq guides us toward this information through exploration of space, gesture and structure.

My studies of anatomy and physiology helped me to realize how portable structures built in the Laboratory of the Study of Movement (LEM) class at the school (see Chapter 21) echo the relationship between the bones and fascia in the human body, forming a tensional integrity. Tensegrity, a portmanteau of tension and integrity, was coined by Buckminster Fuller (inventor of the geodesic dome) to indicate that the integrity of a structure derives from the balance of tension members, not the compression struts. In a living body, the bones actually float in a sea of soft tissue. Our bodies are a continuous tension, discontinuous compression structure.

As Plato suggested, the book of nature may be written in the characters of geometry. Nature builds in triangles. The body is a basic triangular structure, two legs and a spine. Pictured as such, the pelvis becomes a basin to distribute force and facilitate movement. The human walk – in which we pass a fulcrum point and absorb downward pressure through the joints as we push forward through a balance point – exemplifies the tensegrous quality of our structure, designed to hold us aloft in harmony with gravity. With each step, we set ourselves
off-balance and then recuperate, only to set forth once again, repeating the cycle. We are on a life’s journey to find a state of equilibrium.

Moving together

A series of Twenty Movements assembled by Lecoq (eclosion, undulation, and so on; see Chapter 11) form a scaffold for the mask work. In concert with the mask, they constitute a physical literacy promoting the somatic means to grasp and replicate the forces within nature’s great movements. Deep engagement with these movements builds kinesthetic awareness, balance, coordination, fitness, a comprehension of spatial vectors and the significance of our joints as hinge points. The practice of the movements helps to strengthen the legs, which transfer the distribution of forces in the pelvic basin from the body to directional vectors in the space. Such essential kinesthetic command generates all the possibilities of dynamic variation for an actor.

According to Lecoq, ‘The fundamental reality of creation is solitude’ (Lecoq, 2000: 153). His school has maintained an ongoing hotbed of collaboratories in which students are invited to experience the essence of life’s expansion and contraction in ensemble, in a way that ultimately leads them back to themselves. He trained us to seek our own expression within the struggle to communicate as a group. Creating work in ensemble can be crushing and debilitating. It pits us against ourselves in perpetual discovery and becomes a powerful and lasting engagement carried forward beyond the training, no matter where our own life journeys take us.

A beguiling undertaking, the process of devising creates difficulties that can seem insurmountable. There are lessons to learn about ourselves: our most suitable role in an ensemble; our ability to be heard, to listen and to follow; and our tenacity in working through the process toward a common goal when the goal is not yet known. In this game, there are no rules. The theme is merely a point of departure, a place of lift-off. How to follow where it wants to go? How to speak individually and also as a group? Ensemble work demands trust. Collaborators quickly learn that frustration merely wastes time. And now our earlier research and observation come into play. We can use the information we have gathered from developing our ability to see and replicate in resonance with form and behavior. We can embark from what has been realized through our studies in the neutral mask. The foundational work in the neutral mask increases our ability to play through a renewed commitment to articulation. Meeting information on a plane wider than oneself ultimately leads to clarity and specificity of expression.

Teaching the mask

Today, practitioners carrying on the teachings of Jacques Lecoq are tasked with great responsibility. As communication has accelerated, reducing the time it takes to receive information, we have shifted from an experience of the space in-between things and increasingly live in a time of immediacy. In doing this, we forfeit a sense of the natural traveling arc of suspension. Placing a high value upon instant information, we now remain unnaturally still, yet life is movement and movement is health. Lecoq discerned the fixed point as fluid, a moment of stillness filled with the essence of what precedes it, uniting with the potential of what follows.

The 24-hour day neglects the importance of natural rhythm. As the speed of information increases, the dis-ease of attention deficit advances, slowly eroding the realm of contemplation and the mystique of quietude. Swept along by the surface current of daily life,
making connections that are more often digital than tactile, we are losing our ability to access depth through actual physical contact with others. Withstanding the tide, holding true to an imparted understanding and compass of knowledge passed on for centuries, crystallized so sharply in Lecoq’s pedagogy, we teachers must act as conduits and beacons.

We, too, live under this compression, under demand for high output in little time, yet we must continue to emphasize that the structure and function of the human body represents a fluid matrix, always ready to regenerate, striving for balance. The neutral mask acts as a fundamental link by permitting us to return to our nascent impulses and the innocence of discovery within. All these advances have not changed the essential human condition; we still find our footing on the horizontal plane as we strive toward the vertical ascent of possibility. Lecoq’s neologism *geodramatic territories* speaks to this directional effort within human passions, according spatial credence to the emotional landscape.

**The need for neutrality**

The mass connectivity of today’s world has fostered a new isolation. As we embrace this alternate sensation of closeness, we are perhaps unknowingly in retreat from direct contact. With such rapid expansion, we cannot yet understand the world we are living in. Yet, the actor’s work has not changed, and we can still rely upon this valuable and productive tool galvanized by Lecoq before the turn into the 21st century. From earliest recorded accounts, our view of reality continually shifts as we seek to balance ourselves within the universe of the unknown. No matter the currency of the future, the covenants of the horizontal plane upon which we reside and the vertical axis of our fragile journey persist. Lecoq trained bodies to be instruments of poetry by supporting physical aptitude, cellular wisdom and muscular creativity. These beliefs bind the knowledge in our sinews with the urges in our hearts, manifesting traction through the age-old desire to play.

These phenomena land differently across cultures. I would be remiss not to acknowledge that I am based in the United States, where the student can be viewed as the consumer and market values speak volumes. Scrambling to keep up with the times, venerable institutions must reorganize to survive. Yet how can students identified as consumers avoid seeking results at the expense of process? This emphasis places more and more of the burden on the individual, slowly disintegrating the voice of the wider community. As each person commands life from a small device, we find ourselves living in a time of ‘me.’ The neutral mask provides a welcome relief from this exhausting overexposure – a more peaceful anonymity linking us to a non-social understanding of how things work.

A guiding maxim of Lecoq’s was ‘tempo is geometrical’, rhythm is organic. Tempo can be defined, while rhythm is difficult to grasp. [. . .] To enter into the rhythm is, precisely, to enter into the great driving force of life itself. Rhythm is at the root of everything, like a mystery.

*(Lecoq, 2000: 32)*

The circadian rhythms of our planet are part of a large support system designed to cradle and nurture us; the rise and fall of light, the expansion and contraction of the seasons, the push and pull of the tide. Our bodies are designed to live in harmony with these rhythms of restoration and balance. Scientific emergences have brought us out of dualism, into the mechanical model, through systems and network view to finally arrive at the web of life, in which we understand the form as reflection of the whole. Jacques Lecoq equipped us as poets of the body.
with supportive tools to live forward in the floating compression and fluid understanding of our journey as humans.

Who was this mask man whose vision projected beyond the confines of his time? Lecoq was a visionary, an innovator and a forward-thinking primitivist, building his pedagogy on the might of the manifold laws of the natural world. The myriad ways in which this man and his work have fueled my life continue to unfold, revealing my own body’s reflection of life and learning in patterns of consistent and nourishing growth. I can almost hear his voice: ‘C’est jolie, c’est une boucle.’ How lovely, it entwines.

References


