The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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The Chorus

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Jacques Lecoq’s teaching of the collective movement of Chorus in Greek Tragedy has profoundly influenced my practice as a Movement Director. I use Chorus to contextualise and layer the written text or to enhance the drama. My starting point is always the play, but the results go beyond a linear and descriptive narrative towards something more metaphorical. The Chorus is poetic for me – I see it as an animated conceit, which though abstract, is alive in the theatre space. I work with rhythm, dynamics, identification and qualities of movement whilst always conscious of the need to place the play in a social context. Movement Directors often animate the playing space by using the principles of Chorus: ‘... a ripple of movement [will] spread across the stage and lead to the next speaker. I see how it creates life on stage simply because you are aware of the group without having to be psychologically motivated’ (Morris, 2014).

This chapter will consider how Lecoq reinvented the Tragic Chorus and how I have adapted my understanding of this along with the separate exercises of Balancing the Space, the Crowd and the Chorus and the Hero for texts other than Tragedy, thus contributing to his undertaking of the need to ‘renew’ Tragedy (Lecoq, 2000).

While teaching at his school, Lecoq took time out to direct Greek Drama in Syracuse, where he experimented with how to develop the Chorus for a modern-day audience (Lecoq, 2000). In the original Greek Tragedy, the Chorus sang and danced the Choral Odes in rhythms and step formations derived from their different verse forms.1 Their role was a serious one: to bear witness to the fall of the Hero2 and reflect on how it affected them (Goldhill, 1986; 2012). The Chorus was rehearsed by a Chorus Master over a year to participate in the five-day Festival of Dionysus. They were selected citizens of Athens. The Chorus entered the theatre through the auditorium and took its place in the orchestra pit, from where it witnessed the exposition and made its first entrance (Parados). This first entrance was ritualistic as the Chorus paraded onto the stage and spoke directly to the Gods. It is this duality of celebrant and citizen that Lecoq’s Chorus expresses.

For Lecoq, the Chorus was both poetic and quotidian. The signature of the Neutral Mask is to express the rhythms of the natural world with a sparse economy and a dynamic use of space. The Chorus plays as if they were ‘masked’ (Morris, 1978). Collective expression is democratic and can be witty, discursive and anarchic as well as serious and uniform.
The importance of the collective to Lecoq, and its connection to the playing space and the protagonists, was triggered by his work after the Second World War. After the Liberation, Lecoq was part of a troupe organizing pageant dramas to celebrate the end of the Nazis’ occupation of France. This national process of cultural renewal was the culmination of much of the work put in place by Jacques Copeau before the Second World War (Bradby, 1986). Post-war French cultural policy was heavily influenced by Copeau’s ideas on popular theatre, mask work and commitment to decentralization. Poetic expression or the use of physical metaphor on stage and in the streets was part of an emerging populist theatrical tradition (Bradby, 1991). Informed by this aesthetic, Lecoq would go on to reinvent the Chorus for his productions of Greek Tragedy in Syracuse. There, his Chorus were dancers from Rosalia Chladek’s school in Vienna, giving the work formalism and style. However, what was important to Lecoq was the need ‘to invent new gestures if I was to renew chorus movements whose form had atrophied over time’ (Lecoq, 2000: 7).

Lecoq’s approach to tragedy, as with the Neutral Mask, is physical and ludic. For him, the tragic dimension is a vertical arc from the heaven to the earth (Morris, 1978) to be played out in the theatre space. The Gods and Fate are above, and below are the depths to which the Hero sinks. The dynamic between the Chorus and the Hero is horizontally placed across the space. The movement of Tragedy uses all the spatial planes: high to low, forwards to backwards, sideways and the diagonals. With a Chorus of fifteen on stage, an actor playing the Hero takes their presence into account, even when he is most alone. The number fifteen was significant to Lecoq as it can divide into two groups of seven with a chorus leader, or create a dynamic pyramid of fifteen, with the chorus leader at the apex. It can also break up into even smaller groupings, creating a myriad of fractals to reflect different viewpoints. Tragedy is momentum and the Chorus, still or moving, contributes to this dynamic.

Fate is implacable. The laws of the Gods prevail. Heroes respect the laws, but passion, revenge or misadventure intervene, causing these laws to be broken. The Chorus keep to the laws of the Gods and accept Fate. These are the dynamics of Tragedy: Fate vs. Hero vs. Chorus. Lecoq’s contribution to the collective movement of Greek Chorus was to discover principles that reflected the changing relationships of the Chorus to the Hero and the presence of Fate. These principles also ‘create’ the space for the Hero by keeping the stage alive for him or her. For example, the dramatic weight of the Hero equals the collective presence of the Chorus (Lecoq, 2000). If the Hero is on one side of the stage, the Chorus will be on the other to balance the space. As the Chorus and the Hero discourse, there will be a constant shifting of balance to reflect their arguments. The movement between them is alive, and the space is always ‘in play.’ The relationship between the Chorus and the Hero runs the gamut from humorous to challenging, reflecting the irony and arguments and poetic imagery present in Greek Tragedy. The key is for both actors and director to embrace the physical presence of the Chorus on stage.

The identity of the Chorus varies depending on their role in the drama: Elders, Slaves, Furies. In all cases, there is a need for heightened ‘masked’ playing styles, accentuated by a still point at the end of each phrase of movement. This is not to take ‘a historical view’ of Tragedy, whose ‘codes of communication’ we can only imagine (Lecoq, 2000), but rather to solve the staging problem of collective movement by punctuating the end of arguments cleanly. These still points and the notion of Balancing the Space are some of the principles and games that keep the Chorus connected to one another, to the playing space and to the meta-text. This is something actors always respond to when I work with them on the Chorus: ‘You feel liberated by being many but at the same time know that you are one’ (Morris, 2014).
For the Chorus to move from a shared impulse, its centre of gravity is the person in front whom everyone can see. If the Chorus shifts sideways, left or right, a new leader emerges. If the Chorus responds to the Hero, the centre of gravity will shift to them. As the Chorus travels across the stage, the actors at the tail end of the journey must travel further and faster, creating a gathering momentum of emotion. Thus, the balance of power and physical pathways continually shift to match the relationship between the Hero and the Chorus. Alone, the Chorus moves rhythmically to music or percussion, or to a shared rhythm, its presence flooding the stage.

While the Chorus moves as one organism, the Chorus groupings can shift from organic ones of staggered rows to more structured ones of triangles or squares. The movement qualities reflect the narrative: a group of animals (a shoal of fish or a flock of birds), elements (a wave or a cloud), matter that changes (glass shatters, paper crumples, mercury roils). The metaphor is agreed upon within the group and can create counter rhythms. A flock of birds stays as one organism by changing rhythms and dynamics within the flock to keep its shape. The use of dynamics as an approach to dramaturgy also influenced Simon McBurney (Roy & Carasso, 2006). This is not dissimilar to different perspectives in a discussion; it can also be used metaphorically. These movement patterns will generate sensations in the actors. Lecoq stated in all his classes: ‘movement changes you’ (Morris, 1976); actors often refer to this as ‘outside in,’ but if the movement is executed well, the feelings will follow.

I use all these principles in my own work, which I combine with observations taken from real life. When studying at Lecoq in the 1970s, the streets of Paris, the markets, dogs, transvestites in Pigalle, small dramas (and great), Gare du Nord, and Pere Lachaise were my reference library. Lecoq’s emphasis on everyday gestures and action as a starting point for theatre appealed to my fiercely anti-establishment heart. Life, not books, became my raw material. I first witnessed the theatrical potential inherent in this when researching ‘a day in the life’ of a French village. This five-minute theatre piece was derived from a field trip to a village outside Paris. The class showed different parts of the day through different rhythms: early morning, slow; the busy time before lunch, hectic; siesta time, a gradual winding down to drowsy midday calm. Stories emerged from these observations: an actor ‘transformed’ into an old man wending his way implacably across the empty square, another became a patron briskly taking the chairs out to open the cafe, others became children running through the square after school. We created a physical text using rhythm and dynamics. It was full of life. From this I understood that replaying observations can produce profound transformations in both actors and staging. Technically, these observations were delivered with an inherent musicality.

I have embraced this in my own work. I might craft this by showing two events overlapping simultaneously, the outside world continuing in real time while an actor is caught in reflection. In Scene V11 of The Glass Menagerie, the Gentleman Caller offers Laura a stick of gum, and in the pause that follows, a voice off-stage sings a sailor’s song (Williams, 2009). In my production (Platform Theatre, 2013), I extended this pause to show Laura and Jim lost in their private thoughts: Laura shy and withdrawn but discovering the gum, Jim lighting a cigarette to watch Laura, while at the same time two sailors stumble past the apartment singing the sailor’s song. In Love Me Do (Watford Palace Theatre, 2014), I took this even further. The play is set in London during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Two Americans find themselves in London, unable to return home. As they leave the embassy, they get caught up in a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) demonstration in Trafalgar Square. We had five actors, so only three could be the ‘demonstration.’ Research on the original footage revealed an iconic moment where students with placards turned to each other and shouted ‘sit down’ whilst
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miming the command. A gathering wave of students then linked arms and sat as the police charged them on horseback: a powerful moment of protest. We crafted this by using Chorus principles of changing direction in the space like a wave, while the placards created different images in the still points like shattered glass. The lovers ‘balanced’ the space against these movements. When the protagonists spoke, we slowed the action down to shift the focus, then ‘cut back’ to the demonstration by increasing the movement dynamic. For the last image, the Chorus mouthed ‘sit down’ in slow motion with the same gestures in the footage, and then replayed the crowd linking arms and sitting, but changing their orientation to give the sense of the whole square sitting. This was all done to Bob Dylan’s *The Times They are A Changing*. The actors in the demonstration were very affected by their story – a good example of Lecoq’s ‘let the movement change you’ ethos. When we first showed this, the writers and co-director were moved to tears by the power of this scene. My understanding of how to apply observation informed by collective movement, dynamics and musicality came from that exercise on the village all those years ago.

Lecoq transposed the principles of the Chorus to dramatize the physical life of Crowds. A group listening to political speeches or to fairground barkers can grow into a Crowd with conflicting responses. Though the reactions are driven by outside events, there is more scope for conflict within the collective rhythms and dynamics. The Tribune in *Julius Caesar* is a good example of this. There are many theatrical possibilities of how to use the principles of the Crowd to develop dramatic action. Sometimes I take the idea of going to the cinema. I ask the actors to craft a sequence of audience reactions that mirrors the action of a film. I then ask them to add some ‘double images.’ A ‘double image’ is a smaller movement that one actor might do to reflect the bigger image. An audience member might drop a handkerchief at the moment someone gets shot on screen. Another audience member might slurp their drink at a particularly erotic moment. It is a shadow reflection of the action. The motifs can create Comedy, Pathos or Tragedy, though these will only ‘land’ if the actors respond together to the imagined events. I then ask the actors to transpose the audience in the cinema into the drama on-screen. The audience members ‘enter’ the world of a war film by becoming tourists caught up in a war zone. My work on the Crowd can create portals through which to enter other times and places: the potential for metaphor or political comment is more sophisticated than a linear narrative can offer.

The Chorus and the Crowd provide me with effective rehearsal techniques to create a playground for actors to explore ideas and playing styles. In all cases, there is a shared understanding of how to use the space collectively. This understanding comes in essence from The Plateau exercise, whose influence appears to be very widespread. At the Stratford Festival Theatre, senior actors term their connection to the space and each other as ‘ectoplasm.’9 The Festival Stage, a thrust stage designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsh in the shape of an octagon, 10 requires actors to work with their whole body to fill the space. Shared knowledge holds that they counter one another to help the sight lines and keep the space balanced. When I first saw this, I was struck by how similar these staging ideas were to The Plateau and the Chorus. At an event celebrating Michel Saint-Denis’ legacy11 run by Struan Leslie at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC),12 Mark Evans led a session on Lecoq’s Plateau. Clifford Rose recalled how The Plateau had been taught by Michel Saint-Denis when he ran classes for the RSC Studio13 in the 1960s. In *Les Deux Voyages de Lecoq* (Roy & Carasso, 2006), Mnouchkine14 also comments on how the rules inherent in The Plateau are some of the essential rules of staging. From this evidence it seems possible that The Plateau hales from Copeau’s legacy and his original explorations of the body in the space (Rudlin, 1986). All the practitioners
mentioned (including Lecoq) have a connection with Michel Saint-Denis, and so with Copeau. The Plateau is a beautiful exercise, but it is perhaps too pure for rehearsal. I use it to teach students how to play in the space. When an actor in training recognises the moment when the space is ‘out of balance’ and how it creates the opportunity for a new player to enter, it introduces them to the dynamics of performance. I will describe briefly how Lecoq’s Plateau works. Let us imagine Moliere’s description of theatre as ‘two planks and a passion’ where all you need to create dramatic tension is actors playing in space. Lecoq suggests that we make a rectangle by seating the participants round the sides to delineate the space. The first person to enter balances the space by entering centre stage and warming this central point up by connecting to the audience. The first person unbalances the space by going to one of the corners, which calls in his or her partner, who immediately rebalances the space by taking a position in the opposite corner. The drama begins. The new participant starts the game by choosing different pathways in The Plateau, which the first person will answer by balancing them. The balancing is like a dynamic mirror. If the first person fails to respond to the second participant, a third person enters. The two then rebalance in answer to this third person, forming an equidistant triangle inside the rectangle, and the game is led by the third person. Each person in the space has equal dramatic weight, so the space is balanced among all participants. The game continues until there are seven in the space – an inherently unstable number, as this makes a three and a four (Lecoq, 2000). As the eighth person enters, the narrative changes and we have a Chorus of seven forming in one corner opposite the Hero in another. The eighth participant creates a new narrative – a Hero and a Chorus.

I use the principles of The Plateau for scene changes, which I call transformations. Transformations have their own rhythms, which are played by the actors in clear lighting to launch the next scene. In Jefferson’s Garden (Watford Palace Theatre, 2015), there were nine actors playing both the Chorus and thirteen characters on a bare stage. For one change, two actors needed to travel from Virginia to Maryland. By using the idea of The Plateau, the space changed seamlessly. The two actors moved upstage, changing costume as part of the story; a chair was whisked away from right to left, and one actor sang upstage left while the family in Maryland balanced the space stage right by entering in counter-rhythm to form a semi-circle showing the Quaker family at prayer. The acting space was always balanced, the actors finding the flow and rhythms through playing off each other. We had created a collage of events and attitudes that led us from one world to another with physical clarity and truthful acting. This is just one example of many transformations I have worked on (and which are possible).

The principles of the game of The Plateau can serve as a heightened way to change the narrative, when the entry of the eighth player creates a Chorus and a Hero (Morris, 1978). I used this idea in Nicholas Nickleby when Ralph Nickleby was followed by a dark cloud (‘his conscience’) (Chichester Festival Theatre, 2006–2008). Ralph Nickleby tried to escape the cloud, which he sensed following him, by countering it or moving through it to take its place. This is a beautiful choral movement, as the Chorus has to separate to allow this whilst rebalancing the space on the opposite side of the stage, thus requiring them to move across each other laterally to reconfigure. This haunting movement showed that even if Ralph tried to ignore the dark cloud, it would always swarm back into being. The idea of the Chorus reflecting the inner attitude of another player can develop into physical conversations, attitudes, accusations, or any number of playing possibilities. If the actor in the position of the Hero is confidently expressive, it can evolve into extremely interesting explorations of status and character. In a rehearsal of Jefferson’s Garden, the actor playing Nelly Rose15 explored her social status (which was high) by playing with the Chorus with a series of actions to express...
her character: she worked with a parasol, she flashed a fan at them, she beetled through them. They responded within the confines of the game (mirroring her physically, and so in effect commenting on her attitude), which gave the director ideas of how to stage the outdoor scenes and how to craft the inner attitudes of the other people around her.

Adding the need for the Chorus to be seen by the audience creates another theatrical twist. With faces peering round one another seeking affirmation, these faces can be petitioners in the doorway of The Government Inspector by Gogol, for instance. By expressing the inner pain or hopes or fears of the main character, they can become his Nemesis.

These are some of the principles which have shaped my practice of how to create an ensemble. None of this physicality has any life unless the actors are engaged. Getting actors to communicate through the space using their physical imaginations requires their trust and commitment. This may sound obvious, but at Lecoq we moved every day; movement was our way in to making theatre and reflected our observations of the ‘real world.’ I have a whole practice of movement to enable this which, if given the time, I will use. In rehearsals, of course, there is not always the time, so paring the work down to breath work, or partner work as a warm-up for the work on Chorus, can allow the actors to trust their physicality when working with them on staging choral moments.

... there was something profound after the (movement) ... that moment when we suddenly scattered then slowed down; that felt alive ... that something was about to occur ... the SPACE therefore became CHARGED (without doing anything imperceptibly); in fact both us and the space felt dynamic.

(Morris, 2014)

Movement creates meaning. It is through the prism of text and movement that actors communicate their imaginative connection to a part. Ensemble-based work can only enhance this. When actors rehearse scenes using the principles of the Chorus, they feel connected to one another. The principles of dynamic and rhythm taken from the observation of time and place also “allows” them to build the world of the play, aware of the codes and meanings they create. For the practitioner, Lecoq’s Chorus work can also open up possibilities of how to approach Tragedy. By synchronising the ‘world’ of the play with the perspective of the protagonist, a ‘democratic’ space is created where every actor has equal importance and in which a dramatic narrative can be played. The Chorus responds to the actions of others. Their presence is important. They must have their place in the drama. In Greek Tragedy, the search continues to make this relevant, physical and alive.

Notes
1 This is the origin of the term a ‘foot’ of verse.
2 Hero is a generic term and does not denote gender.
3 Rosalia Chladek studied Eurythmy with Dalcroze and developed her own dance technique. Dalcroze taught movement at Les Vieux-Colombier under Jacques Copeau, who developed the ‘Noble Mask’ as part of his training technique for actors.
4 The antiphonal dirge of Oedipus ‘I ... I’ to the Chorus, ‘Horror horror,’ line 1680 in Oedipus The King (Sophocles, 1988).
5 In Les Deux Voyages de Lecoq, students rushed through the space, balancing it, then exploded to the side on a drum beat, emptying the space, into which Lecoq strolled, creating the Hero.
7 Famous Parisian cemetery where Oscar Wilde, Moliere, Bizet, Collette, Chopin, and many others are buried.
8 This was an ‘Enquette’; see The Moving Body (Lecoq, 2000).
9 Originally attributed to Douglas Campbell, invited by Tyrone Guthrie to join The Stratford Festival company in 1953.
10 Pioneering designer of The Festival Stage.
12 Struan Leslie, Head of Movement, RSC.
13 Michel Saint-Denis was invited to RSC by Peter Hall and Peter Brook in 1962 when Rose was a company member.
14 Ariane Mnouchkine, founder and Director of Le Theatre Du Soleil.
15 Julia St. John.
16 As Head of Movement at The Stratford Festival in Canada, I often teach movement classes to the company.

References