Bouffons were described by Jacques Lecoq as ‘people who believe in nothing and make fun of everything’ (2000: 124). They do so from the perspective of outsiders, rejects or eccentrics, fearful of physical persecution but with no respect for established authority, ideology or the divine. Lecoq emphasized that they operate on the ‘vertical’ line between Heaven and Hell, rather than on the ‘horizontal’ line of human drama. Their bodies are deformed, swollen or distorted, and although they can be comic, they are not clowns. Their humour is dark or diabolic, targeted at the ‘normal’ society from which they have been ejected: ‘while we make fun of the clown, the bouffon makes fun of us’ (Lecoq, 2006: 118). Lecoq had found that making fun of a person or of society was ‘insufferable’ if it was performed by those of an equal or superior status, so the deformation set them apart: their suffering gave them the ‘right’ to ridicule.

I noticed it became quite unbearable seeing someone dressed in a suit making fun of someone dressed the same way: it rapidly turned very spiteful and so difficult to handle that I decided that the person making fun had necessarily to be distinct from his victim. He had to be different . . . In a bouffonesque body, the person who mocks can say the unsayable, going so far as to mock what ‘cannot’ be mocked: war, famine, God . . . Their function was not to make fun of a particular individual, but more generally of everyone, of society as a whole.

(Lecoq, 2006: 125–126)

As a theatrical style, bouffon can be said to have developed in Paris in three phases roughly corresponding to the final three decades of the twentieth century. In the first phase, early experiments led to a definition of a distinctive genre and the development of pedagogic approaches. This was done in collaboration with teachers, particularly Philippe Gaulier, from 1975. In the second phase, after Gaulier had left (1980), Lecoq continued to explore and to widen the subject into a ‘dramatic territory’ that was distinct from Gaulier’s conception. In the final phase, although experiments never ceased, the pedagogy crystallised into three areas: the mysterious, the grotesque and the fantastic. I was lucky enough to experience bouffon at Lecoq’s school right in the middle of these three decades, and therefore
had contact with what had occurred before (through former students) and after, following later developments. This chapter begins by reflecting on exercises and the creative process, using my notes from 1985. I will then outline the key features of the style in order to define it, using references provided at the time and other source material, as well as the different approaches of Lecoq and Gaulier. This leads into the student experience and an outline of the various ways it has influenced my own work. Finally, I allude to the wider ripples in culture created by the emergence of this style and its place within the contemporary context.

In 1985, the teachers were Norman Taylor, Sandra Mladenovitch, Claude Evrard, Alain Gautre, Christophe Marchand and Jacques Lecoq himself. The primary approach, as with all the stylistic forms studied in the second year, was through body movement linked to image and thence to meaning. So, for example, taking the set movement phrase of discus throwing learned in the Movement Analysis classes, the extended, upward-reaching position was linked to notions of seriousness and heaven, whereas the twisted, crouching position was linked to concealed, diabolic laughter; thus, students made a physical association with the conceptual extremes and experienced transition along the ‘vertical’ line. Similarly, advancing and retreating was linked to the repetitive child’s game of dare and running away, tension and release, finding the pleasure in fear. Body distortion was approached first through incapacitating movement (e.g. by trying to walk whilst holding different body parts or by adopting positions that inhibit whole sections of the body), and second, by disassociation (e.g. by manipulating a leg with arms and hands as if it were a weapon). New bodies were developed with the aid of padding and extensions. These were explored through leading with these different parts, seeing how they affected symmetrical balance and using the tilt and corrective movements to germinate a repetitive movement sequence. Through variations of speed and size, these repetitive movements were developed into individual rhythms, which were then fitted into those of another and finally woven into group rhythms. Working with others was explored physically through seeing how one could animate another’s movements (e.g. by whipping a tail), or through greeting sequences (e.g. by distorting the size and timing of shaking hands), and by seeing how one’s body shape could ‘fit’ with another’s or ‘stick’ together.

In parallel with developing these ‘body masks’ was the development of the notion of ‘making fun’. Initially this was in terms of a bouffonesque character exaggerating the manner of a solo speaker or the content of the speaker’s speech, from behind the speaker, using direct contact and complicity with the audience. Subsequently, the bouffon identities that were being established through physical exploration participated in group improvisations around themes of courtrooms, faith-healing and serious rituals so that the roles, such as judge, prosecutor and prisoner, were temporarily assumed by these ‘base’ bouffon identities. They entered into the enactment in the spirit of an elaborate game until it came to an end, and then reverted to the ‘base’ bouffon. We were encouraged to engage fully with the emotions within the play, to ‘believe’, rather than keeping a critical distance, rather like children whose imaginative play is ‘real’ to them while they are within it. The hierarchical systems inherent to the subject of these improvisations were inverted so that a king/judge might behave like a capricious toddler, or a healing gesture was converted into a painful slap.

The later stages of the bouffon exploration continued on two parallel directions: the treatment of themes and a further definition of an individual’s bouffon identity and position in the hierarchy. The latter was approached through many opportunities to see who was happy to make decisions or to give orders or slap others, and who was happy to be on the receiving end.
In combination with a gradual costuming of the padded bodies, certain groupings were identified: the diabolic, the chic/aristocracy, the naïf/young and the ragged/‘odd-bods’. Beyond these groupings, individual roles emerged: a king and queen, heads of government, a scientist, an engineer, bureaucrats, a sacrificial victim, a Lazarus oracle who spoke in riddles, cooks, slaves and wildmen. Content was approached through devising around ritualistic sequences (such as encouraging the sun to rise) but also through exaggerating and inverting real-world fears: themes that everyone participates in but nobody wants to talk about, such as death (specifically hypothermia of the homeless and body-disposal methods) or sex (contraceptive methods). These teacher-led examples prepared the way for independent group devising (‘auto-cours’) on the general theme of ‘The Sick Society’ (‘La Ville Malade’). It was suggested that we focus on wide sub-themes that could contain multiple images, such as ‘Knowledge’, ‘Luxury/Sophistication’ or ‘Overpopulation’, but also specific activities, such as ‘Departure for the Holidays’. Each group worked on their own section, and these were interwoven with rituals into a larger, non-linear sequence within an over-arching framework: the descent of the high and the elevation of the low, specifically the deposition of a king and the crowning of a slave. This complex process involved the entire heterogeneous ensemble under the direction of Lecoq.

Although this description of the sequence of teaching is painfully brief, it outlines the key features of the style which defined it at that particular period. These features were ‘making fun’, a hierarchy, inversions, and being both connected to the ‘real world’ but also being otherworldly. Lecoq clearly stated that bouffon could not be ‘defined’, that it was a vast area, and that he, with us, was always looking for new elements to emerge. Different teachers gave different emphases or interpretations that sometimes appeared to contradict each other. For example, some emphasised the playful and comic, others emphasised the seriousness with which bouffons engaged in their own rituals. However, given that the bouffon is ‘a tragic clown’, as Claude Ivry put it, the style appropriately contains many paradoxes that the student must navigate without arriving at a definitive conclusion. Bouffons speak nonsense, but they say the truth. They are simple, but they have insight and knowledge. They play games, but they are not merely childish. They are deformed, but they are not ‘ill’; they are illogical and act crazy, but they are not mad. They are both cruel and tender with each other. They can be funny, but this is within a framework of deadly seriousness. They enjoy the lower bodily functions but avoid facile scatology. Although there is parody, it is not satire, there is no interpretation; the bouffons are not caricatures or ‘types’. Neither are they just ‘characters’ (Lecoq: ‘Go further!’): the bouffon believes in the game rather than ‘acting’ (Lecoq: “Be afraid but also, at the same time, play at being afraid”). But whilst bouffons may play with being fearful, fundamentally they are not easily intimidated, certainly not by a theatre audience. Even in terms of creation, students were encouraged not to think too much about understanding this complexity but to act instinctually, on impulse, drawing on the corporeal experience of the physical approach, taking an image and quickly turning it into a game or some craziness, developing it as far as it would go.

A student’s navigation of these paradoxes was heightened by the almost total absence of any reference to sources, theory or contemporary reference points. Lecoq steered away from an intellectual approach.

Although I have sometimes felt that a performance reminded me of Hieronymous Bosch, or of a medieval mystery play, or of carnival, I had no such references in mind at the outset. My knowledge of bouffons was gained through practical
movement work, through improvisation, and not from books or from a tradition dictating any special technique.

(Lecoq, 2000: 134)

I was lucky enough to have had a prior glimpse of the subject by having worked as a jester and through my interest in the English Mummers’ plays, with their residual traces of ancient death-and-resurrection and fertility rituals. At the time of my training, an ex-student friend lent me Enid Welsford’s *The Fool* (1935), which proved immensely useful. In her history of the subject, Welsford outlines the different kinds of court entertainer in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, from witty after-dinner speakers, through jesters and tricksters, to those with mental deficiencies or mental illness, to those with physical abnormalities, such as dwarfs, right through to monkeys and other animal pets. Some of these would make fun of courtiers or conventions by design, others through a failure of comprehension. Lecoq frequently referred to Rabelais and the ‘festival of fools’, so it is likely that he drew on Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* (translated into French 1984). Bakhtin uses the writings of Rabelais to unpick the large themes that Medieval carnivalesque culture brought to Renaissance thinking – the use of laughter as a release from fear, seriousness and control, the elevation of the lower-body functions and the multiple perspectives of the crowd over the dominating single voice, the upward-downward movement and the ambivalence of opposites – wisdom and folly, death and birth, beauty and ugliness, mouth and anus.

From the wearing of clothes turned inside out and trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and popes the same topographical logic is put to work: shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material lower stratum for death and rebirth. . . . The element of relativity and of becoming was emphasized, in opposition to the immovable and extra-temporal stability of the medieval hierarchy.

(Bakhtin, 1984: 81–82)

Lecoq also referred to the contemporary of Rabelais, Shakespeare, in particular the epicurean qualities of Falstaff, which have links to the figure of the carnival king. *King Lear* also contains strong elements of *bouffon*: his descent from autocrat to a childlike innocence, the play with blindness and sight, and the courtroom parody (Act 3, Scene 6), which includes a person pretending to be mad, a jester/fool who uses ‘nonsense’ rhymes to make acute observations and a ‘foolish’ king who is beginning to have a nervous breakdown, all set within a storm-blasted wasteland distant from everyday society.

In European theatre history, one can see expressions of the *bouffonesque* through the surreal parodies of Grimaldi, to the joyful cruelty of the Mr Punch puppet play, to the one text that Lecoq did propose as a *bouffon* reference: Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. Originally written as a schoolboy marionette show to make fun of his obese physics teacher, it caused a riot when first performed in 1896. It influenced the Dada movement and thus the surrealists, such as Artaud. In turn, Artaud influenced the Absurdist dramatists of the 1950s. In the UK at that period, there was a crossover between this style and comedians – for example, with Spike Milligan being invited to direct *Ubu Roi*. His playful irreverence and nonsense influenced Monty Python’s *Flying Circus* (1969–74) in its non-linear collage of scenes, surprising juxtapositions, distortion of conventions and sacrilegious laughter, especially in *The Life of Brian* (1979). Beyond these
formal theatrical expressions, there is clearly a universal fascination with darkness, the half-seen underworld, and the demonic smile – widely manifested, for example, at Halloween and within zombie movies. However, Lecoq points out that the exploration of bouffon, more than any other style, brought to light the cultural differences of the students:

The Spanish experience the tragedy of the fiesta. The Italians bring song and dance and music. The Northerners are more mysterious, halfway between day and night in the madness of twilight. Germany contributed her great mythological fantasies. The Asians brought dragons and devils to life.

(Lecoq, 2006: 119)

Lecoq developed the bouffons while Philippe Gaulier was one of the school’s teachers. Gaulier had studied with Lecoq from 1968, and when he set up his own school (1980), he took bouffon in a separate direction. Gaulier draws the analogy with those who were forced to live outside the city walls in the Middle Ages: ‘The outcasts were hunchbacks, the legless, freaks, queers, prostitutes, Jews, witches, heretical priests, madmen, depressives, Down’s Syndrome sufferers, cripples and so on’ (Gaulier, 2007: 215). Relating this world to the present day, he cites the victims of racism, prejudice and xenophobia. He also cites an apparently real example of Amazonian Indians performing their rage at the murder of one of their group by ‘skinheads’ (presumably loggers/settlers). The different directions taken by these two teachers reflect their different emphases. Gaulier is more interested in an individual’s direct relationship with the audience and the harsh realities of the modern world, whereas Lecoq was more interested in group creation of theatrical images, by means of movement exploration, in order to create a theatre that was not restricted to present-day realities. So, although Gaulier’s bouffons are distinctly individual, they all exist in the same world, whereas Lecoq’s bouffons were increasingly diversifying into different worlds. Gaulier has refined his pedagogic strategies through countless repetition over many years, working mainly on his own, whereas Lecoq was constantly exploring with others, creating and defining new territories. Of course, there are many other differences of emphasis, perhaps reflecting the two personalities: Gaulier’s bouffons tend to be darker, more acerbic, more vulnerable, profoundly abused, firmly located in an underclass, and displaying a psychological release through speaking what is forbidden. Lecoq’s bouffons display physical release through well-developed movement and various forms of folly: magical, fantastical, or with the glee of naughty children.

Of all the dramatic territories studied in the second year at Lecoq’s, bouffon was the least known to the students. Tragedy, Clown, Melodrama and Commedia dell’arte were all familiar forms that aimed at a recognisable goal. However, with bouffon, apart from viewing the previous year’s group, there were hardly any examples to guide or influence students, and Ubu Roi bore little resemblance to the student work. The lack of models meant that we felt rather lost, but also that the territory was more open to discovery, both within and beyond the school. The other styles aim to move the audience emotionally but confirm their expectations of form, whereas in bouffon, they are challenged by the lack of logical sense in the form. A random juxtaposition of highly disassociated physical actions accompanying the main action can create an atmosphere of bedlam that is extremely disconcerting. It activates observers in a different way, because they must pick their way through fun for its own sake, fun for a purpose, purposes that lead nowhere, nowheres that lead to the recognisable, which may then be flipped into its counterpart.
When I was a student of *bouffon*, one of the most profound lessons that I learned was to ‘follow my folly’ and to be less concerned with how this would be received in the wider world. This lesson helped me in the moment of performance: recognizing that an audience’s perspective was potentially limited to its own expectations and conventions, and also recognizing the attraction of those (both theatrical characters and actors themselves) who are more free of constraints. In some ways this was similar to my experience of clown training with both Lecoq and Gaulier: by recognizing and accepting my imperfections and stupidity, I could forgive myself, share in the enjoyment and avoid embarrassment or concealment. *Bouffon* prepared the ground for this liberation, identifying social conventions (‘internalised hegemony’, in academic terms, or ‘the cop in the head’ as Boal (1995: 8) put it) and laughing at some of the absurdities and contradictions in the way humans organize their lives. This also provided me with a helpful disregard for trying to conform to the current fashions in theatrical performance, to ‘follow my folly’ rather than seeking validation by arts institutions or being weighed down by the heavy hand of intellectual approaches. Whilst at the school, I formed a company of students in collaboration with members of a company I had worked for previously. We built a following by performing on the streets and in rural areas, far away from the institutions and the recognised routes to establishing a company. Called Mummer & Dada (1985–91), this company explored unusual combinations, including, as the name suggests, rural amateur folk performance with urban surrealist iconoclasm, but also by combining comic *lazzi*, tragic Flamenco singing, circus skills, masks and brass band music. In the early years, we played with the idea of Heaven and Hell, either literally depicting God and devils, or with characters who espoused ideals – art, love, beauty, morality – and grotesque characters who made fun of them.

As a solo performer, I was able to risk taking my baby-king *bouffon* into the streets to interact with spectators. With its ridiculous costume and unfamiliar behavior, it could not be categorised and thereby easily dismissed. As a mask-maker, I was excited by the possibilities of visual folly. I constructed huge heads with swivelling eyes and extending tongues which concealed the performers’ bodies apart from their bare legs (*The Bigheads*, 2003–08). They could be simultaneously perceived as both Disney-esque mascots and lascivious, nightmarish provocateurs causing confusion in streets from Singapore to Detroit – unpredictability created fascination. As a teacher within circus-theatre at Fool Time (1986–93) and Circomedia (1994–present), I have found that *bouffon* work is a threshold moment for many students. The discovery that they have the choice to surprise and challenge expectations liberates them. The experience of a higher-status, direct-contact relationship to the audience empowers them. United by group rhythms and immersed in shared folly encourages and supports a fuller expression by individuals. The students also become more self-aware by discovering how their attitudes have been formed by home culture, educators and advertisers.

‘Following one’s folly’ is a liberating concept for artists; however, disdain for notions like ‘Art’, ‘critical acclaim’ or even ‘popular appeal’ carries with it the risk of self-exclusion and an inability to thrive within the current context. Many ex-students of Lecoq and Gaulier who set out to produce *bouffon* shows have marginalized themselves, appealing only to niche audiences and counter-cultures, finding it hard to sustain a viable existence as companies. There are a few notable exceptions, such as solo performers like Jonathon Kay in the UK, who briefly studied with Lecoq, and Eric Davis (Red Bastard), who received Lecoq’s *bouffon* training second-hand in the US. These two interact with the audience, inviting them into their games and playing with the edges of what the spectators find acceptable. Arguably, work that has emerged from *bouffon* but is distant from the padded bodies and scornful laughter has been more influential in wider culture. Sacha Baron Cohen was influenced by *bouffon* as a result of his training with Gaulier. His three main characters are clowns in their naivety
and pretension, but their interviews with unsuspecting figures of authority, fame and privilege are *bouffonesque* in their nature. He reveals concealed prejudices, hypocrisy and chauvinism by appearing to share them and by exaggerating them to their excessive conclusions. As in walkabout work, there are two ways his ploys are observed: first, the interviewee with whom he interacts may believe in the reality of the character, and second, the viewers in the cinema may know that Baron Cohen has set up the joke for their benefit. There is an implicit wink of complicity with the audience as he shares the secret of his ruse with them.

It is always hard to establish direct causation in cultural influences such as these: how much has been consciously adopted or received as part of ripples in wider culture. The early shows of the French circus company Archaos appear to have been strongly influenced by the emergence of *bouffon*. Even Banksy (who would have seen Archaos in his formative period) is *bouffonesque*, parodying ‘official’ culture and making fun of police, the military and security systems, using rats and crows as resistant underdogs. He frequently uses inversions to create playful ambivalence: a rioter hurling a bunch of flowers or, in direct contrast, a teddy bear throwing a Molotov cocktail. His most theatrical piece is *Sirens of the Lambs* (2013), with puppeteers inside a mobile meat lorry, grotesquely linked cuddly animal toys to the slaughterhouse.

Despite having roots as old as Tragedy, the *bouffon* style is arguably the more contemporary: the fracturing of linearity, the complex ambiguities between levels of play and the ridiculing of values, morality, duty and beauty resonated with the emerging Post-Modernist influences at the time. The play with layers of representation and the sideways approach to a theme has parallels in theatre forms close to Live Art. The kaleidoscope of slightly related or unrelated images mirrors the experience of internet surfing. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, all the major institutions have been challenged – the church, the law, the military, the police, the financial system, even the nation-state and democracy itself. So, the emergence of *bouffon* as a distinct theatrical territory was a perceptive insight into the cultural undercurrents of this period. Bakhtin's analysis of Carnival was located in the Renaissance period, when the church and feudal authorities maintained control through promoting fears of Hell and damnation. In contemporary times, individual behaviour is altered through ubiquitous advertising, inducing us to fear being seen to be lesser people for owning or consuming less (including ‘cultural’ product). Even if *bouffon* is performed by white, middle-class able bodies, there is an identification with rejects and outsiders, and this has a political dimension. However, the playful approach to ‘difficult’ themes avoids work that is serious or didactic. The *bouffons* reject established values, but through the harmonious community of their heterogeneous ensemble, they avoid the self-righteousness of the single perspective, proposing a different kind of morality: the appreciation of difference. In a period of increasingly fractured culture and multiple perspectives, this appreciation provides a model that is highly relevant.

**Notes**

1 Gaulier launched his own school in 1980 along with Monika Pagneux, who was part of the school until 1987. From 1991–2002, his school was based in London, where he taught, principally on his own. In 2005, he moved back to France, just outside Paris at Sceaux, Hauts-de-Seine. Since 2011, he has built his school at Etampes, where he has assistant teachers, all ex-students. In addition to the school, he travels widely teaching short courses, mainly in clown and *bouffon*.

2 Apart from *bouffon*, a good example is the LEM (Laboratoire d’Étude du Mouvement), an adjunct of the main course, which explores the relationship between space and movement using the construction of three-dimensional structures.
References


3 http://www.jonathankay.co.uk
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