In 2013, a production house from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, invited me to direct a project and do a performance. I had 16 days to put together an hour-long show with 16 artists from China, Korea, Malaysia, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Iran – most of these being very far from my own culture. Additionally, every artist that was in the cast originated from different disciplines. I had musicians and dancers from Bali and Malaysia. They all came from their own traditions, which meant they were each codified in and conditioned to their own different art forms. I had puppeteers from Peking Opera, the Iranian tradition of puppeteering and some European puppetry. The project was a melting pot of disciplines, cultures and languages. There were five or six people who did not speak any of the languages I speak, requiring two different translators. People from Iran, for example, did not speak any French or English; they only spoke Iranian. Similarly, some of the Malaysian and Chinese people had poor English. Translating text and communication within a 16-day project was in itself a big challenge. However, this constraint leads to one of the most interesting challenges: the necessity for a universal, concrete, poetic theatrical language.

The show was called Nama kamu atas perahu, or Your Name on a Boat, and it was a risk to accept it. But I said, ‘Yes, go for it – I will take this risk.’ Because of my experiences at Lecoq and elsewhere, I knew that it would just be a big auto-cours (self-course) like I had done every week at school. That was the great challenge, and I took it with pleasure and especially madness.

For this project in Kuala Lumpur, I decided on a poem as a theme. It was about immigration and a man who decided to leave his own country on a boat to look for a better life. He left his wife and everything he knew behind. This story is a tragedy about these people who are always looking for happiness and prosperity out there rather than looking for it in their own home and land.

The first thing I learned from auto-cours in the school was that a common language needed to be established that utilized the cast’s differences. As a researcher and creator, I look at the contributing artist, and from their human and artistic qualities I create a common language. For example, I had two types of musicians; one was a very skilled luthier from the Iranian
tradition, and the others were percussionists from Malaysia performing with Indonesian Gamelan music (with metallic drums). Combining these two types of musicians perfectly exemplifies the challenge. I had to be very concrete. To do this, I had to have a language of space, of physicality and of story that could be easily communicated across cultures through action.

I had the same situation with the puppeteers. There was a puppet player from the tradition of Peking Opera, which is a highly codified art form. As far as I understand, this art form has for years remained within its own patterns and language. Next to this, I had other puppeteers with a more European orientation, and one from Iran – a completely different perspective again. To approach this story and then to put their skills at the service of our story was like putting water with oil. They had difficulties understanding why they had to give up their own tradition, and they had many issues dealing with serious cultural taboos that at times caused a lot of distress for some. To work around and through this took time. In this project, time was an issue, so the creation of a common language was extremely important. This is one of the principles that I discovered in the school while working on auto-cours. One must draw on the principles that are permanent and universal in order to communicate not only in the creation process, but also with the audience. These universals are, for example, the space, the push and pull, the fixed point, and the forces that govern our physical behaviors. These in themselves can build a poetic language and a dramatic space.

Another thing I discovered in the auto-cours that I have found to be fundamental in my work is the spirit of collaboration, which is for me the most difficult but exciting thing to communicate in all the projects and stage directing I have done.

I find it very important to create in the group the feeling that we are not important, but rather, the story is important. Yet at the same time there is the feeling that everybody owns the story. They are the authors of this story, which is another element we experience at the school of Lecoq.

What I did was to put everybody in auto-cours. I created a very simple story structure and I knew what had to happen in each scene dramaturgically. I gave the cast a very simple sentence or told a short story, then I invited them to create some kind of a sketch of the story using the established common language. For example, I asked a group to create a market scene. The actors chose to manipulate many baskets in the space to create the illusion of moving through the market in a style of Object Theatre.

By the end of each day, they would have created a small segment of the show we could later refine. This is more or less what we did in the school.

As a director, I was interested in promoting and respecting the culture of everybody, their language and their skills. While different styles, skills and viewpoints were brought to the table, they eventually came together to form one single picture or tableau in the story as we progressed as an ensemble.

While they were working, I could observe which direction they were taking in their creation and how they were understanding the language and the space; and from outside, I could start to visualize costumes, ambiance, lights, etc., so that it was really like an organism that was quickly taking form. The style of the piece was arriving.

The great pleasure and risk was to arrive and discover the people, the space, and just having two weeks to create a show. As the director of the project, I was always trying to keep myself open to be questioned by the cast, which is something necessary in auto-cours at the school of Lecoq.

We didn't work in a hierarchical pyramid. Even if I was taking the last decisions by the end of the day, I watched them work and create, and at the same time started to compose. Over my
theatrical career after the school, I constantly encountered the lessons I learned in the auto-
cours in the school. I learned how to put differing techniques together at the service of one
story. Forced by the necessity to translate in the creation process, I found universal truths that
came from the laws of movement, not cultural clichés. These are universal laws that guide us
to build common theatrical languages. I realized that fluidness and joy is the key for collec-
tive creation and creation in general. Auto-cours at the school was an implication that there
is such a thing as our own theatre, a theatre of today. This is what I understood from Jacques
Lecoq's auto-cours: 'get together and play as children would do.'

At the end of the first semester during my second year, Lecoq provoked me to start a
research and to explore the tragic depth in Commedia dell'arte. After many years of research-
ing with the initial orientation of a contemporary Commedia dell'arte, I gradually developed
into a study of dramatic spaces. I started to be interested in the research of new theatre
languages, and I founded the laboratory of theatre research Manifesto Poetico. My research
became the source of my work as a pedagogue, stage director and actor. I have been work-
ing internationally with theatre companies, art institutions, filmmakers and theatre schools.
I produce my own shows, and I organize workshops based on my research.

A fundamental part of my research has been carried out at LEM (Laboratory of Movement
Study – École Jacques Lecoq), directed by Pascale Lecoq. Since 2011, I have been an associate
artist alongside the studies involved in the program of LEM. Together with François Lecoq,
I direct the project Manifesto In Action that proposes theatrical projects around the world.

**Enquête and the discovery of the unseen**

One of the projects that I want to do next year in New York is called New York Lands. I will be
doing it with 12 actors, plus visual artists, designers and musicians. I have decided to approach
this project as an enquête (investigation) of the city that will host the project.

We are assigned the enquête at the end of the first year of the school of Lecoq. We choose a
theme in the city, then we immerse ourselves in researching this subject for several weeks. We
observe everything, then return to the school and transpose what we observed into a dramatic
language and tell the story of this observation.

The enquête is an approach to create a piece. Its main principle is the concrete observation
of life. For me, it is a way to bring to light things that we don't see at a glance. For example,
the way the forms of different buildings exert tensions on the space between them, or how
the dynamics of lighting create lines. The interacting dynamics formed by urban architecture,
rhythms, sounds, smells and behavior are the observable material that will then be transposed
onto the stage.

My interest in using an enquête approach is to mix fluidly the concreteness of real life and
the abstract nature of what I just described in order to tell stories that concern people of today.
I search to understand the craftsmanship behind the observable material on the street, and the
mechanisms behind ordinary life in order to discover their stories. I think that the city of New
York is a fantastic territory and playground to do an investigation like this.

For every enquête, you find a style or way to tell a story that you did not know before, so a
new theatre appears. To do this, you must be available to see the world upside down. This is
Lecoq's provocation: to see life with a different eye.

The permanencies that Jacques Lecoq talks about (i.e. the fixed point, push and pull, ver-
tical, . . . etc.) are fundamental because when thinking about creating a show starting with
an enquête, I see that painters use three primary colors and perspective; these are permanen-
cies. They always use the same things to create their universes. If you look to architects, they
think of the system of forces, the vertical, the diagonal, the materials, etc., and these are their permanencies. For whatever you are going to build as an architect, you pass through those permanencies. What we learn at the school of Lecoq is that those permanencies exist for actors and theatre makers as well.

Probably nowadays, it is important to make an *enquête* observing the idioms of the cinematographic and technological universe that exist in our daily lives. What I am interested in is transposing an *enquête* of this nature onto the stage without using technology on the stage. I think New York City will be a rich research ground. For example, how can we transpose in an empty space the big screens that we can find in Broadway, or the use of the smartphone in the subways? What is the impact of TV culture and technology in the spaces of the city, and thus the dramatic space on stage?

**Commande and a lifelong provocation**

*Solo dell’Arte* is a solo show I created using the masks of Commedia dell’arte. The title of the show is a *commande* I gave to myself. Lecoq would give each student a phrase at the end of the second year of the school that was to be their commission (*commande*). From this phrase, one had to independently create a show without any supervision from the teachers. The teachers see the show, for the first time together with the audience, at the opening day.

My *commande* was a very big failure. My sentence was ‘*le dire ce n’est pas forcément le faire*’ [saying something is not necessarily doing it].

I tried to do what I try to do now with the *Sollo dell’Arte*, which is to tell a story while adding many different layers. At the time, I was already starting my investigation of the tragic depth in Commedia dell’arte (a research Lecoq provoked me to start earlier that year after an *auto-cours* performance of mine). So what I did for my *commande* was to select a story that was a tragedy about a young woman who is going to be raped. Then I took all the elements that I thought were related to tragedy (clichés), and the same for the comedy. I took a very big ladder and put someone singing on top; on another big ladder was a violinist with a white dress several meters long; and on the floor was a little platform with a dancer in all white. Then came three guys wearing commedia half-masks – an over-simplification of commedia that I poorly pasted into my piece.

The masked characters entered to steal something that was very precious, and then during the very animal grotesque theft of a necklace – the symbol of this young beautiful girl – she died. All this happened at the same time. It was three-and-a-half minutes. It was expected to be around seven minutes. The feedback that I got was essentially ‘what the hell did you do?’ My *commande* in the school was probably the worst that year. From this, I discovered that to reach the tragic depth in Commedia dell’arte, I could not simply take the idea and superficial mechanisms of tragedy and commedia and overlap them. I realized this was a research I would have to pursue in depth. It was a very big risk, but also a very big failure.

The multilayer combination of tragedy and comedy, and the elements of space, etc., was a big failure for me in the school; however, after years of researching, *Sollo dell’Arte*, ‘only the art of the actor,’ is now the *commande* that I gave to myself. Now I deliver on stage the tragic depth that exists in Commedia dell’arte. Also, over the years I have developed my own pedagogical approach to playing with masks (on one’s face and on the space) involving both masked and unmasked players. I framed this lifelong research in what I call today Manifesto Poetico, my International Laboratory for Theatre Research. This research contributes in my work with Pascale Lecoq at the LEM.
Solo dell’Arte is composed first of a prologue that summarizes what I want to say with this show, which is a brief explanation of the tradition of commedia and the importance of its spirit in the contemporary theatre of our time. This is regardless of whether or not the players are masked or unmasked in this theatre; rather, it is about reinforcing the importance of the actor as the main element of the theatre phenomena.

And second, the prologue is followed by two tragic stories that I wrote. The first happens in a village in the south of Spain during the night. It is set at a big party where a man and a married woman end up alone together by the river. The second takes place in Paris, where a man is in love with a prostitute. The night he decides to declare his love for her, she commits suicide.

I play the prologue in keeping with the popular Mediterranean tradition – the key here being popular, that is to say, a theatre for and with the audience. It is a way of being with the people and telling the story like a jester would have done – this belongs to an oral tradition that I saw in the way my father and my grandfather used to tell me stories. This we can see in Dario Fo, for example, who has been a big influence on my work. Then the following two stories are performed masked.

The big question is how to play with masks without falling into clichés of a Commedia dell’arte that doesn’t work any more. This was Lecoq’s provocation for me: how to make a commedia that lives today. I understood this – that duplication does not work – because of my big failure at the end of the second year.

I could not play a character behind a mask, which is how it was done in all the commedia I saw, but rather the mask had to be understood as a musician understands his or her instrument. I had to understand the engine or inner structure of each mask. To approach this, it was clear that I had to start from zero and go into an abstraction of each mask.

Another layer will be the abstraction of, first, the imaginary space where the story takes place, and second, the awareness of the concrete space where the performance is about to happen.

While performing, I essentially do not move out of a one square meter area. Here I play gestures, movements, attitudes and voice so that the audience can see the story with their imaginations.

With this I deliver an abstract space. For example, one moment my character is in the center of a square in the middle of the party, then all of a sudden I send a diagonal with an abstract gesture that describes the space, and my character sees the top of the stairs of a very big church, where his friend Antonio is. Then, all of a sudden, I send a horizontal in the opposite direction of the church, and my character sees many people. The crowd separates, forming a corridor, and Maria the friend arrives pushing in a different rhythm. These gestures allow the audience to construct the space of the story in their imaginations. All of a sudden, this whole story is made by one vertical on the right side, a diagonal towards the audience, a horizontal on the left, a full vertical for the fireworks, and a parallel horizontal for the river. These four or five lines are the abstraction of the space that helps the character and the actor tell the story. As a painter sketches on paper, the mask sketches on empty space. The goal is that the audience finishes the painting.

I’m interested also in how to approach a text. In one of the stories from Sollo dell’Arte, I took inspiration from a poem by Federico Garcia Lorca. It is about a man who met a woman who did not tell him she was married, and then they had an affair in the night at a party.

Rather than interpret this story myself as an actor or director, I pass through the point of view of the mask to tell the story. The mask is going to show to the audience what we do not
see in the poem, everything that is left undescribed: the atmosphere, the intentions of the characters, and the suggested actions. All this is passing through one interpreter, which is the mask – its system of forces, not its psychology.

This is part of my research that I started to touch upon in the LEM. It is to view the story and the mask from an architectural perspective. In the LEM, we look at opposites, forces involved in the body and its movements, fixed points, constructive forms, dynamics, vanishing points – this leads to the uncovering of the forces that are involved in the story itself.

It is this analysis of movement and structure that the telling of the story passes through. This is what I mean when I say the mask and its structure are the sole interpreter of the story that is being delivered, not culturally bound theories of psychology. This is for the audience to fill in.

For me, the commande is not just a sentence, but also a big provocation. It was a very big lesson. And I guess for all my classmates, the commande was also a provocation. For me, the great thing about the commande is the principal of a creative commission. Over the years, you can keep provoking yourself all the time, and giving to yourself the challenge to not sit down in what you already know and get comfortable with a way of doing things. We have to keep searching, collectively, as we do in auto-cours, and looking to the concreteness of real life as we do in the enquête.

I think Lecoq’s provocation is still alive in what I do, and hopefully it will stay alive the rest of my career, allowing me to keep exploring and discovering new artistic challenges.