The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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Mime, ‘mimes’ and miming

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MIME, ‘MIMES’ AND MIMING

Vivian Appler

At the height of the Nazi occupation of Paris, Marcel Carné (1906–96) raised a ghost. His 1945 film, Les Enfants du Paradis (Children of Paradise),1 reconstructs the mid-nineteenth century Boulevard du Temple (Boulevard of Crime) featuring the French pantomime popularized by Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1796–1846) at le Théâtre des Funambules (the Theatre of Tight-ropes). By 1945, mime experiments were already afoot among the Parisian avant-garde. Carné broadened the scope of the twentieth-century renaissance of physical theatre by resurrecting Deburau’s signature pantomime blanche (white-faced pantomime) on screen. Les Enfants du Paradis is a cognitive-historical palimpsest of a Parisian mime lineage embodied by the experimental twentieth-century mimes featured in it – particularly Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–94) and Étienne Decroux (1898–1991). Jacques Lecoq, although he did not act in the film, was a part of that period of theatrical innovation. Lecoq became, for the latter half of the twentieth century, what Deburau was for the nineteenth: he infused an existing performance genre with his own ingenuity and thus extended the legacy of the archetypal ‘French mime’ into the present. This chapter compares various mime lineages represented in Les Enfants du Paradis in order to historicize the emphasis that Lecoq placed on le jeu in his own teaching.

A contextual history of European mime2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Mime Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>581 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Satirical Dorian mime is first performed in Megara.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>534 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Thespis uses a mask in his first competition at the Festival Dionysia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Atellan Farce appears in southern Italy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>240 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Pantomime is born when Livius Andronicus loses his voice and carries on through movement accompanied to music (Lust, 2000).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1439</td>
<td>Gest of Robyn Hode was perhaps performed in a mimetic style (Hoffman, 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1550</td>
<td>‘Commedia dell’arte was born, some time around the middle of the sixteenth century, in the market place where a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held if a living is to be made’ (Rudlin, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1600s</td>
<td>Dumb shows appear in European dramatic plays.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
French mime emerged onto the early twentieth-century Parisian stage from a rich, global history. The above timeline illustrates that mime has been a part of European performance traditions since before Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) identified mimesis as an essential component of tragedy. Early twentieth-century European mime schools are considered here to demonstrate how Lecoq’s pedagogy differs from other significant mimes of his generation.

The revival of the Commedia dell’arte was central to Lecoq’s creative process. Lecoq was most impressed by commedia’s playful and improvisatory energy. He strove to tap that theatrical root as he developed his own pedagogy that would come to prioritize le jeu, which literally translates from French as ‘play’. Lecoq infused his approach to theatre creation with commedia, and his pedagogy thus stands out against two other distinct categories of mime contemporary to his theatrical coming of age: the pantomime blanche, popularized by Deburau (and practiced by Marcel Marceau in the twentieth century), and the mime corporel developed and taught by Étienne Decroux and Jean-Louis Barrault.

Neither Lecoq nor his mid-twentieth-century contemporaries would have had much success without the influence of teachers such as Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Jean Dasté, Amleto Sartori, and others who were interested in experimenting with past physical theatre traditions. Commedia was not an entirely dead art form when Copeau began his work in the early twentieth century. The stock commedia character Pierrot was living on the Parisian stage during the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Pierrot had become a regular in French pantomimes during the late seventeenth century at the Comédie Italienne.⁴ The character’s popularity peaked with Deburau’s embodiment of it during the early nineteenth century, and Pierrot continued to be a regular in Parisian pantomimes throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, Pierrot continues to be a ubiquitous presence in Western popular culture.⁵ Carné’s film participates in the proliferation of this popular French tradition, even as its featured mime stars, Decroux and Barrault, altered mime’s aesthetic form.

The history of Pierrot as a popular French icon cannot be separated from the history of Le Boulevard du Temple. Jean-Baptiste Nicolet began a little theatre on Le Boulevard du Temple in 1760, and soon what had been a seasonal fairground on the outskirts of Paris became a street full of small commercial theatres. The theatres on Le Boulevard du Temple became a popular theatrical venue for Paris’s working class, a phenomenon that did not go unnoticed.
by state-sponsored theatres. This led to a crisis: in 1784 the (state-sponsored) Opéra-Comique acquired control over what materials the little theatres on the Boulevard du Temple could and could not perform, thus beginning a long history of licensing conflicts that carried over from regime to regime. This licensure eventually resulted in the restriction of Le Boulevard’s performances to physical and non-textual genres.\(^6\)

The historicized theatrical metaphor for life in Paris under the Vichy government runs throughout the film as it features Baptiste (based on the historical Deburau, played by Barrault) caught between selling out to the powers that be versus facing the difficulties of living as a free man in old Paris. The opening scene of Les Enfants revives Le Boulevard of 1828 in all of its risqué, acrobatic, pantomimic glory.\(^7\) The shot pans across an array of physical theatre acts to reveal a crowded street full of outdoor exhibitions and rowdy spectator-participants. Les Funambules is featured with a tightrope performance on the busy street. A kick-line of dancers is found as the camera scans Le Boulevard for other diversions: a strongman lifting barbells, a monkey on stilts, a merry-go-round. The street scene revival is implicit to Carné’s resurrection of the political climate that permeated the theatre during 1828, when gag laws were strictly enforced on Le Boulevard and fines were imposed on actors for each vocal breach. Another scene close to the beginning of the film dramatizes the fearful atmosphere of 1828 Paris, and Carné’s social comment cannot be ignored.

Carné mines the historical popularity of Pierrot in order to unify Parisian audiences during his own volatile period of France’s history. In the following scene, Frédérick LeMaître (Pierre Brasseur) has gone backstage at Les Funambules to inquire after an acting job.\(^8\) He is greeted by the director (Marcel Pérès), who is in the middle of a rant about having to fine an actor for appearing, ‘onstage drunk and swearing’.\(^9\) LeMaître triggers the director’s complaints about Le Boulevard’s gag rules:

**LeMaître:** I want to act. (Je veux jouer le comédie)

**Directeur:** Act! Act! You have the wrong house. We’re not allowed to act here. We walk on our hands.

**LeMaître:** I can do that.

**Directeur:** And you know why? They bully us. Why? They fear us. If we put on plays they’d have to close their great, noble theaters! Their public is bored to death by museum pieces, dusty tragedies and declaiming mummies who never move. But the Funambules is full of life, movement! Extravaganzas! Appearances, disappearances, like in real life! And then – wham! [he kicks] – the kick, wham! – the slapstick – like in real life! And the audience. Sure, they’re poor, but they’re pure gold. Look up there, in the gods!

*(Les Enfants du Paradis, 1945)*

The actors use the phrase ‘jouer le comédie’, which literally translates as, ‘to play comedy’.\(^10\) To play comedy is a phrase that specifically applies to the development of French mime. It is the center of Lecoq’s pedagogy. After his rant, the director turns Lemaître’s gaze, ‘au paradis, au paradis’, to the gods – the upper balcony, which is crowded with a raucous and enraptured popular audience. They cheer as Pierrot, a hero of the French working class, takes the stage.

Barrault’s interpretation of Deburau’s Pierrot breathed new life into pantomime blanche whilst also adding his own mime corporel to the history of French mime. Other scholars have thoroughly investigated the difference between the two forms. Edward Nye summarizes that, ‘Decroux called [Deburau’s style of mime] “objective” or “indicative” mime, as
distinguished from “subjective” mime, which, according to Decroux, “depends on indirect evocation” (Nye, 2014). Decroux expert and mime Thomas Leabhart sums up the difference between pantomime and corporeal mime: ‘Whereas pantomime primarily emphasizes the body’s extremities and surfaces while depicting charming and entertaining vignettes, Corporeal Mime movements begin in the deepest parts of the body’ (Leabhart, 2007). Decroux’s mime corporel looks quite different than the pantomime blanche popularized by Marcel Marceau (1923–2007) and his student, Dimitri (b. 1935). Marceau performed with Barrault’s company and attributes part of the inspiration for his best-known character, Bip, to Deburau’s Pierrot (Martin, 1978). For most, Marceau’s trademark striped shirt, expressive face – painted white with highlights around the eyes and mouth – and animated hands are probably what come to mind upon hearing the word ‘mime’. Decroux’s mime corporel is much more apparently sparse. Mimes of this genre customarily perform in a simple body suit with a neutral, bare, or masked face. Pantomime blanche often works to indicate imaginary and invisible objects, people, and sounds. Mime corporel is evocative and resembles the modern dance of Rudolf Laban (1879–1958), whose choreography also relied upon movement in different planes extending from the body’s center.

Re-enactment, Les Enfants du Paradis, and Lecoq

Les Enfants captures Decroux and Barrault at a point in time when they were experimenting with pantomime blanche and mime corporel. The two forms are blended in the two actors’ bodies in the film, making the performance of miming itself a culturally re-productive act. Barrault re-presents Deburau’s 1828 Pierrot within a context of twentieth-century mime experimentation. Barrault’s re-enactment is only one level of many contained within Barrault’s and Decroux’s filmically immortalized bodies. Robert Fleshman claims that the film, ‘holds [Barrault and Decroux] together in the mind of the theatre’, despite the fact that, shortly after the film’s release, the two mimes parted due to aesthetic differences (Fleshman, 2012). Bruce McConachie borrows Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s theory of conceptual blending to suggest that, in performance, an actor’s fictional role blends with the actor who is playing that role: ‘when an actor plays a character, she is able to blend a concept of herself with a concept of the character to be played’ (McConachie, 2013). The scenographic blend in which Decroux appears as a figure of authority over Barrault is established through the relationships performed in Carné’s film. Decroux’s character, Anselme, is hierarchically superior to Barrault’s because of his status as Baptiste’s father. There is some resonance here with the actors’ off-camera relationship; they met at Dullin’s experimental workshops during the 1930s where Barrault trained with Decroux. The father-son relationship also resonates with the idea of the old form of mime (pantomime blanche) re-invented for the twentieth century as mime corporel. Garance (Arletty) disrupts this male-dominated pedagogy as it is represented in the film to a certain degree, since her living-statue performance is staged as simultaneously central to, yet apart from, the pedagogical action. The pedagogically significant scene that introduces these key players takes place on a platform stage outside of the Funambules building. Anselme introduces his son, who is dressed as Pierrot. Garance arrives and waits to be entertained along with the rest of the crowd. While Anselme advertises the theatre’s spectacle du jour, Baptiste sits silently on the platform and witnesses the theft of a pocket watch – a crime for which Garance is wrongly accused. Baptiste intervenes into Garance’s arrest; through pantomimic sleight of hand and expressive face, he conveys what really happened to the delighted crowd and the befuddled police.
Baptiste reveals the truth through the artifice of the *pantomime blanche*. Barrault, the actor, rescues *pantomime blanche* from cultural forgetfulness by restaging it through his application of *mime corporel*.

The mixture of twentieth-century actors’ bodies with nineteenth-century historical pantomime characters (and pantomimic actors) is the root of a persistent imprecision that has come to surround the terms ‘mime’ and ‘pantomime’. Barrault blends *mime corporel* with Deburau’s *pantomime blanche* and creates a cultural confusion of different sub-genres of mime among general audiences. Barrault’s revival of Deburau’s *pantomime blanche* is both an accurate reproduction of the kind of mime that was popular in France during the nineteenth century. In the film, Decroux’s trademark corporeal isolations are sometimes identifiable in his performance as Anselme. Barrault, on the other hand, uses the *mime corporel* (and often his trunk isolations are also identifiable), but he adds Deburau’s unmistakable facial and hand gestures to his re-presentation of *mime corporel’s* antecedent.

**History’s impact on Lecoq’s pedagogy**

Carné’s filmic Paris is a crossroads of physical theatre styles out of which Lecoq’s pedagogy emerged. Lecoq believed that old (and ancient) physical theatre traditions can provide vital energy towards the development of new theatre. To borrow the language of mime Daniel Stein, much of the early twentieth-century experimentation in Paris ‘moved backwards to move forwards’. Most physical theatre masters of the twentieth century can trace their pedagogical lineage to Jacques Copeau’s theatre, le Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, founded in 1913, and his subsequent school. Decroux was one of Copeau’s earliest students. During the 1930s, Charles Dullin, also a member of Copeau’s company, began holding workshops known as *l’Atelier* where Decroux, Barrault, Marceau, and Artaud trained and performed. Lecoq met Jean-Marie Conty in 1941 while attending ‘a college of physical education’; Conty introduced Lecoq to Artaud and Barrault (Lecoq, 2001). Lecoq joined the Association Travail et Culture around 1945, and there he learned mime technique based on Dullin’s experiments. In 1947, Lecoq began to teach physical expression at *l’Education par le Jeu Dramatique* in Paris, a school founded by Barrault with Roger Blin, André Clavé, Marie-Hélène Dasté (Copeau’s daughter), and Claude Martin. Lecoq joined Les Comédiens de Grenoble, directed by Jean Dasté (Copeau’s son-in-law and former student and company member of *les Copiaus*). Les Comédiens de Grenoble was Lecoq’s first exposure to Commedia.

Deburau, Decroux, and Barrault constitute a conceptual-historical backdrop that is necessary to understand Lecoq’s approach to mime. These four mime pedagogues are related through their participation in the legacy of the Commedia dell’arte. Commedia’s inherent physicality was important to these early twentieth-century experimenters. Differences can be seen chiefly between the pedagogies of Decroux and Lecoq; where Decroux found himself increasingly interested in non-verbal applications of physical theatre, Lecoq did not eschew text. For Lecoq, Commedia offered a spirit of truth in play essential to the creative act of theatre.

Lecoq incorporates mime as one of many tools available to the creative actor making new work. Physical theatre scholar Simon Murray states, ‘[Lecoq’s] work on commedia . . . is . . . about identifying key principles so as to reinvent them for the contemporary world’ (Murray, 2003: 53). Lecoq’s discovery that, for him, mime must be more than virtuosic mimicry, occurs during his early days of teaching at Padua University. In an interview with Jean Perret, Lecoq regales that after he first saw Decroux perform at the *Salle Iéna*, he was inspired to replicate
the ‘walking on the spot’ routine for his colleagues in Padua (Lecoq, 1987). Italian actor Agostino Cantarello offers the criticism, ‘Che bello! Che Bello! Ma dove va?’ (Lecoq, 1987). Lecoq continues, ‘Cette phrase resta pour moi comme un symbole de la prise de conscience que je fis sur le mime d’alors; je compris que le mime isolé, seul, n’allait nulle part’ (Lecoq, 1987). Lecoq discovers then that while articulate mastery of the body is important, the spark of invention and play is essential for his own development of meaningful performance.

Yet, Lecoq’s pedagogy derives from the same rigorous, athletic roots as that of his contemporaries. Lecoq explains his particular pedagogical mixture of ‘open mime’ technique and commedia’s essential spirit of play: ‘Mime is central to theatre: being able to play at being someone else and to summon illusory presences constitutes the very body of theatre. . . . Theatre is a game which merely extends this action . . . in different ways’ (Lecoq, 2001: 22). Mime, for Lecoq, constitutes one component of a holistic theatre practice. An expressive body is essential because it increases the actor-creator’s palette of choices: ‘The technical mastery of all these acrobatic movements, falls and jumps, has in reality a single aim: to give greater freedom to the player’ (Lecoq, 2001: 71).

The areas of exploration set for first-year students at Lecoq’s school in Paris incorporate movement exercises that reflect Lecoq’s early experiments. Exercises are designed so that young actors might discover connections among physical truths of daily life and theatrical roots, and develop an extra-daily awareness through pure movement. Lecoq’s holistic approach surfaces in his description of the reverse undulation movement, which he discovered while working with Dasté’s Comédiens de Grenoble:

I ask the students to adopt these positions one after the other and then, in the course of this physical progression, to experience passing through the different ages: infancy, adulthood, maturity, old age. The body in forward positions, back arched, head thrust forward, suggests an image of childhood or the figure of Harlequin. The vertical position, with the body upright, takes us back to the neutral mask, to the mature adult. The autumn of life, or digestive phase, makes us incline backwards from the vertical axis. We fall back into retirement. Finally old age hunches us up so that we become, once more, like a foetus.

Movement technique becomes a tool for le jeu. Lecoq’s emphasis on action mime – pulling, pushing, climbing, walking, running, jumping, lifting, carrying, attacking, defending, and swimming – derives from Lieutenant Georges Hébert’s (1875–1957) technique of centering physical technique around everyday actions.

Gestural Languages is a second-year unit in which students explore pantomime blanche, figurative mime, cartoon mime, mimages, and storyteller mime. This foundation in movement and gesture gives students a common physical vocabulary while also preparing for other genres that may involve text. Lecoq incorporates pantomime blanche early in a progression of mimetic exercises that incrementally involve more of the body, ensemble, and environment in order to create not just a language based on gesture, but an invitation to the audience to share in evocative, embodied play.

The archetype of the ‘French mime’ has endured in the twenty-first century because of twentieth-century experiments in an ancient form. Deburau’s pantomime blanche now blends with elements of mime corporel as well as Marceau’s twentieth-century Bip. Lecoq maximized the usefulness of an array of mime genres by re-introducing them in the pedagogical journey of his theatre school. Lecoq’s legacy survives through a living pedagogy that embraces the
history of physical theatre and empowers theatre practitioners to experiment, to play, and to create their own branches on the tree that has its roots in the Commedia dell’arte. In Lecoq’s words, ‘Écoutez, c’est très simple et très clair: 1. J’apporte un mime déchargé de ses codes, de ses formalisms esthétiques; 2. A partir de là, le mime prend la parole. C’est tout; et c’est au present’ (Lecoq, 1987: 113).

Notes
1 The title intentionally refers to the theatre’s upper balcony, which was the seating area reserved for the working class. In English, this area is commonly referred to as ‘the gods’. In French it is called ‘paradis’.
2 This timeline outlines some key moments in the history of physical performance to suggest a historical context for the experiments of Copeau, Lecoq, and others.
3 Artists such as Gordon Craig, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonin Artaud were exposed to global physical theatre genres – most notably Indonesian wayang traditions and Beijing Opera – that influenced the European and American theatrical avant-garde throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.
4 More about the development of Pierrot can be found in Commedia dell’Arte: An Actor’s Handbook (Rudlin, 1994) and The Myth of Pierrot (Evans, 2015).
5 Lady Gaga’s 2013 single ‘Applause’, on the ARTPOP album, features Gaga in Pierrot costume and makeup.
6 For a more detailed account of this period of French theatre history, refer to Hemmings (1994). Public planning also affected the theatrical traditions of Le Boulevard du Temple; David P. Jordan takes this up in his article, ‘Haussmann and Haussmannisation: The Legacy for Paris’, in French Historical Studies 27(1), 2005.
7 The theatre and the rest of the Boulevard had been demolished as a part of Baron Georges-Eugene Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris in 1862.
8 The historical LeMaître (1800–1876) got his start at Les Funambules and went on to become one of the great dramatic actors of the nineteenth century.
9 Les Enfants du Paradis.
10 The English subtitles simplify the term as ‘to act’.
11 Leabhart trained with Decroux from 1968–1972 and has written extensively on Decroux’s life and pedagogy.
12 Marceau and Dimitri were both, at different times, also students of Decroux.
13 Fleshman was a student of Decroux’s during the late 1950s and went on to perform many of his own experiments in movement and therapy.
14 A feminist history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century mime, also springing from the pedagogies represented in Les Enfants du Paradis, would be a worthwhile undertaking. Lecoq bequeathed the directorship of his school to his wife, Fay, and his daughter, Pascale. Annette Lust dedicates a chapter to the topic in her mime anthology.
15 Garance was previously introduced as a living statue on Le Boulevard du Temple.
16 Several biographies and autobiographical works and interviews about, by, and with Decroux, Barrault, and Lecoq are available in print. Good sources for mime histories include Annette Lust’s From Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond (2000), Bari Rolfe’s Mimes on Miming (1981), and Thomas Leabhart’s Modern and Postmodern Mime (1989).
18 For a thorough biography of Copeau, see Jacques Copeau (Evans, 2006). Barbara Kusler Leigh’s special issue of Mime Journal, ‘Jacques Copeau’s School for Actors’ (1979) is a history of l’École du Vieux-Colombier.
19 Later, le Théâtre de l’Atelier.
20 ‘How beautiful! How beautiful! But, where are you going?’
21 ‘This sentence stays with me as a symbol of the realization that I had about mime: I understood that isolated mime, on its own, was not going anywhere.’
22 The influence of sport on Lecoq’s pedagogy is discussed in Chapter 11 of this volume, ‘The Influence of Sports on Jacques Lecoq’s Actor Training’.
23 ‘Listen, this is very simple and very clear: 1. I bring a mime stripped of its codes, of its aesthetic formalisms; 2. from there, the mime takes on speech. This is all, and this is the present.’

References

Leigh Kusler, B. (1979) Jacques Copeau’s School for Actors, Mime Journal (9, 10).