A movement director works as part of a creative theatre team on the physical life of a production. That might entail creating a movement language or choreography or movement training with actors. Movement direction is a vibrant, ever-growing practice in British theatre, as well as in opera and film. This practice has a longstanding connection to Lecoq’s pedagogy, and this chapter traces a lineage of movement direction from an early Lecoq-trained practitioner, Claude Chagrin, to the present-day practices of four movement directors. They also trained at the Lecoq School in Paris and are currently movement directing in a range of mainstream theatre settings in Britain. I will be referring to conversations with Joseph Alford, Joyce Henderson, Toby Sedgwick, and to my own movement direction practice.

When researching the roots of movement direction in 2009, I stumbled across a set of rehearsal photographs for the 1964 production of Royal Hunt of the Sun in the archives at the National Theatre. They show a movement person, Claude Chagrin, on the rehearsal room floor demonstrating movements that look like positions of ‘le passeur’, capturing the diagonally extended arms of actors wielding imaginary poles. The next image is of actors with knees bent, centre lowered, in a wide-legged stance. Perhaps because of my own background with Lecoq, I was able to recognise across five decades a developing movement language, anchored in the Lecoq training, on the rehearsal floor of a seminal National Theatre production. I will draw on several evidences as I look at Chagrin’s work, but I will first start by briefly setting the context for postwar movement direction and then use an analysis of current practices to illuminate some commonalities between movement directors who share Lecoq in their training.

Early movement directors

The term ‘director of movement’ and credit for ‘movement’ started to appear in the great postwar flourishing of British theatre. That is not to say that movement work on production came into existence at that point; in fact, there is sizable evidence that movement processes from a variety of directions were influencing company-based work well before then. But alongside the professionalisation of much theatre work in the 1950s and 1960s, movement also started to be a contribution that was acknowledged in programmes and sometimes recognised by critics.
A wider look at what early movement directors such as Geraldine Stephenson, Jean Newlove, Liz Pisk, and Claude Chagrin were working on through the 1950s and 1960s gives a good indication of what movement direction at that time entailed. They were often involved in creating group movement such as chorus work, ensemble work or setting dances. They brought and realised physical ideas or stylised movement to new works, suggesting a visual, embodied and dynamic approach to a theatre text rather than a literary one. Their movement skills in mime or dance acted as an entry point into a creative process that was developed into actor-centred movement for the specifics of a production. These practitioners were often working across training and production settings, and this suggests that the actor’s body was continuing to develop physical expressiveness and capacity for transformation from the point of training through to their professional practice.

Several factors in the British theatre scene influenced the development of the movement director as a distinct role. The first factor was the establishment and growth of national theatre companies, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the National Theatre (NT), in the 1960s. Both companies had ambitious producing programmes with dual missions of producing classical texts whilst developing new writing, and a commitment to the ongoing professional development of actors. The demands of epic, classical or innovative texts, with large casts of actors, benefited from the practical skill of movement directors in organizing groups dynamically and from their talent for creative visual composition. Here were gathered ensembles of actors undertaking several roles in one play or appearing across several productions in a season on long contracts, so movement had a place to play in physical transformation, sustainability and on-going training.

The second factor is that movement directors came with practical, performance experience, which complemented the directors of this period from university or literary backgrounds. An emerging characteristic of the working relationships of movement directors and directors is that their creative collaboration grew as the work of that particular director developed. Movement know-how was starting to be applied more expansively in the conceptual and imaginative space of theatre-making over repeated collaborations, suggesting that movement directors were starting to contribute to the production’s rehearsal process as a whole and the resulting performance dramaturgy.

The third factor, the explosion of new writing in the 1950s and 1960s, had a twofold place in the growth of the movement practitioner. This new writing necessitated a new kind of acting style: one with a greater range of movement skill as well as the ability to transform. There was a new emphasis on the capacity of the actor to create, transform and embody characters from widely different classes, and to work in physically creative or abstract ways and with a demand for a researched authenticity.

This flourishing of new writing, with its stylistic ambitions and staging, required a new response from directors, designers and movement directors. Tracking Claude Chagrin’s movement work at the National Theatre can offer a real insight into the quest for new theatre languages appropriate for the challenges provided by new writing. Chagrin was asked by William Gaskill to become the in-house movement person at the newly established National Theatre. Her theatre credits often call her practice ‘movement’ or ‘mime’, tapping into a then fashionable cultural import from France. Scrutiny of her work indicates that the scope of her input was more than the particular techniques of ‘mime’, and that this term was being used as shorthand for an expressive movement style and movement dramaturgy. Being a mime artist might have acted as her entry point into production, but once she was part of the creative process, she was, in Julian Chagrin’s words, bringing ‘her brilliant ideas, visually brilliant, a strange mind – a very lateral thinker’ to bear on the physical life of the work (Chagrin, 2014).
Her decade at the National Theatre is bookended by two seminal productions: *Royal Hunt of the Sun* in 1964 and *Equus* in 1973; each taps into key parts of Lecoq’s pedagogic legacy.

**Someone (Claude Chagrin) even gets a credit for ‘movement.’**

(Hope-Wallace, 1966)

The authorial proposition of *Royal Hunt of the Sun* necessitated the development of a movement language, in this case primal movement in rituals and landscape. Rehearsal photos show Chagrin creating and guiding the physical work of the production with the company. Actors are training in rural work actions, such as hoeing or digging. Chagrin is demonstrating leg swings, ritual walking and mimed action. She and the director, John Dexter, are working on ritualised movement on the rehearsal floor as a two-person team of director and movement person. The richness of their collaboration is evidenced in the images of the rehearsal process and then rendered confused by written reports. The epic scale of the play and the resulting movement challenges are well described by Philip Hope-Wallace in *The Guardian* in 1964:

*The other sort of action, scaling the Andes, or being surrounded by the unknown tribesmen, beasts, and birds, is cleverly stylised in mime, with a splendid eyeful of movement and colour in the production of John Dexter and Desmond O’Donovan and the costumes and scenery of Michael Annals.*

(Hope-Wallace, 1964)

Critics feel the richness of the physicality of the work, in movement terms, but fail to attribute it to her directly. Chagrin has contributed to a stylised physical language that included chorus work, rituals, masks and a physical style for imaginary landscapes. In order to achieve that, she must inevitably have employed her skills in the techniques of mime and the orchestration of large groups in relation to narrative spaces, both real and imagined. Chagrin was well-prepared for this challenge by her Lecoq training, where she would have practised an inventive, body-led training; and at the National, this was given shape in Shaffer’s writing and Dexter’s direction. A decade later, in the mid 1970s, we see her creating a chorus of human horses in *Equus*, again combining several pedagogic ideas from the Lecoq training: observation, animal work and chorus movement, all of which will re-emerge as themes in the practice of contemporary movement directors with a shared Lecoq heritage.

**Contemporary movement directors**

If the developments in postwar theatre enabled movement direction practices to emerge and to be named, then the contemporary movement director is in a very different setting and frequently appears in the creative teams, making and producing work. New writing still continues to be a rich setting for contemporary movement direction but the need for movement expertise has now extended to work without an explicit movement imperative. Many contemporary directors are visually articulate and ambitious for dynamic physical worlds, and so they understand the value of movement as an integral part of rehearsal process. Directors have been building teams of creatives who repeatedly work collaboratively and experimentally within the mainstream. Contemporary actors are increasingly investing in a career-long and rich relationship to their expressive physicality. Movement direction is in a period of great growth and exuberance. Some institutions have very clearly positioned the movement practitioner at the artistic centre of their work: *The Globe* has a Master of Movement.
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(female); the National Theatre of Scotland, the National Theatre, many regional theatres as well as the RSC all regularly employ movement directors. The RSC and National have had more sporadic initiatives with Heads of Movement, with both posts sadly short-lived (five years and ten years, respectively), but continue to engage movement directors production by production. Smaller-scale companies, such as those performing on the London Fringe and Off West End, touring companies and regional producing houses, increasingly have movement input. With training programmes nurturing the next generation of movement directors, the first formal settings for apprenticeship and rehearsal room practice have been established in the last decade.

The growth of all types of immersive and site-sensitive theatre works, circus arts, dance theatre and new opera all contribute to a movement-hungry theatre scene. The movement directors working now are in a field that has a frame of reference of companies such as Complicite, Shared Experience, Cheek by Jowl, DV8 and Frantic Assembly, who have all, in their diverse ways, invigorated the idea of the performing body of the actor and sometimes in relation to classic texts.

While movement directors have slowly entered into the core of creative teams, it is as difficult now as it was in the 1950s and 1960s to identify any one dominant movement lineage. Current movement directors might draw on dance trainings such as ballet or contemporary or social dance; some are from actor trainings with strong movement practices, such as Lecoq, Gardzienice, Laban or Pisk; and some draw on movement skill in choreography or somatic practices. Lecoq’s pedagogy does, however, continue to influence the field.

‘Once the body opens up everything opens up’ (Alford, 2014)

As four Lecoq graduates working as movement directors, Joyce Henderson, Toby Sedgwick, Joseph Alford and myself all acknowledge our debt to our training but also maintain that it acts as a departure point for movement work, and enters into the mix of other movement influences and creative contexts that make up a movement director’s practice.

All Lecoq graduates develop the capacity to work with only what is there: these bodies and this space. From that point of departure, for those who movement direct, there develops a capacity to construct movement by creating dramatic structures out of the dynamics and rhythm of bodies moving. Movement directors develop an ability to work with different production aesthetics – with points of departure that might be very far from human psychology or narrative. The starting points for movement are infinite: the motion of the natural world, paintings, sculpture or materials, to name but just a few. As the emphasis of the Lecoq School’s teaching is on the body first and language as a consequence of physical impulse, students become very adept at creating from the non-textual by working from the physical to the verbal. This is very helpful for the movement director as our work often addresses the non-written parts of a production. Yet we are also equipped to understand the impulse of text and to know that text is often of primary concern for the actor. L’École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq is a school that produces all sorts of theatre artists, so there is a practice of working in groups and producing weekly responses in the form of newly created material. The ability to negotiate the complexities of creative teams is well practiced. All aspects of the work – whether it is acrobatics, movement forms or auto-cours – go through the body. It is not too big a leap to suggest that Claude Chagrin, like us, was drawing on fundamental movement skills like mime techniques but then filtering them through her visual imagination into actor movement.

A fundamental aspect of the work of the movement director that is nurtured in Lecoq’s pedagogy is the capacity to see and to analyse movement. Observation feeds imagination. For
the movement director, this process then becomes the springboard for movement work with the actor. The technical movement forms that we all learned, such as ‘le passeur’, ‘la mur’, ‘éclosion’, undulations, acrobatics and Feldenkrais gave us an embodied language for movement, such as fixed points, weight, direction, impulse and extension. They were not seen as an end in themselves; once the technique of the forms was adequately mastered, Lecoq would very quickly move on to the applications of these forms to dramatic play. This was done by the shift of timing, scale, gaze or quality. It is this capacity to see, analyse and then apply a form to a variety of movement outcomes that becomes potent for the movement director. Henderson’s observation of the turning heads of sunflowers towards the sun acted as the jumping-off point for a choric moment in the opera Fidelio. We have all, in a wide variety of settings, observed phenomena, analysed the movement principles at play, and translated them into movement structures for a dramatic moment or actor movement.

Lecoq’s teaching did not end with analysis; it extended into ideas of embodiment. A central tenet that underpinned Lecoq’s pedagogy was ‘je vois, je deviens’: I see, I become. So there are two main aspects to this: what am I seeing and how do I become? To feed the movement imagination, Lecoq’s teaching obliged us to scrutinize movement wherever it may present itself. This was typified in the ‘enquête’ at the end of the first year, where groups of students were collectively tasked to observe an aspect of life in Paris and find a way of recreating its dynamics. Sedgwick and I also recalled the exercise, which asked for the recreation of a day passing from dawn to dusk in a village square within ten minutes of stage time. This obliged us to consider the movement dynamics in relation to condensed time. Everyday movement was central to the work of the school, but that only acted as a doorway. The next step was into animal movement work that was supported by observations of free and enclosed animals. Thus, our range of observation went beyond the human figure into the motion, groupings and spaces of other beings. Step by step, the realm of movement then expanded into materials: we watched and became oil, captured the motion of unfurling paper, inhabited the elements of water, earth, fire and air. All these are observable, material parts of our world, but they also can act as metaphors for movement. Coming from British theatre traditions, where narrative and character journeys were driving forces, we now encountered movement in a rich and unfettered way, and in a way that shares conceptual and abstract aspects of dance. Then, finally, our bodies/imaginations would embody paintings, sculptures, music or choric text in order to inhabit its dynamic in a physical way. This led us to grapple with aesthetics and genre.

The training described above gives the Lecoq-trained movement director a variety of ways into a play from a multitude of movement angles. Alford suggests the training offered him ‘a way of discovering different ways of looking at the world and discovering how to articulate my way of looking at the world through making theatre’ (Alford, 2014). This is echoed by Sedgwick, who also talks about the importance of ‘watching’ and then ‘absorbing’ in order to create movement work. The aim is not to reproduce what is observed: the technique of ‘seeing’ gives rise to the process of inhabiting, which enables perspective, detail and imagination to shape the movement. The character of Joey the Horse in War Horse (NT, 2007) is not only a creation of accurately choreographed horse movement, but also has all the movement dimensions of a protagonist with emotional journeys, subtext and an equine world view – all manifest in the movement of a collective of manipulating actor-puppeteers with choric impulse, shared breath and intention. Here is the next part of the craft of the movement director: the capacity to see the world, to recognise the useful dynamics at play and then to render them concrete and doable for actors. In the series of Shakespeare plays I have movement directed for the RSC, I have been able to harness the metaphoric potential
of the material world that underpins Elizabethan cosmology. In an age where bodily experience is written into the language, a humoral reading of a character can open up movement potential. In Measure for Measure, for example, the imagery and language of stagnant, watery coldness associated with virginity throws a light on Isabella’s heat and capacity to take action. I translate the metaphoric into actionable movement activities that contribute to the actor’s embodied imagination for the purpose of character. We can see this in Alford’s movement work where, in one exercise, he encapsulated the arc of a stultifying marital relationship in Happy Days (Young Vic, 2014). He asked the actors playing the couple to create their everyday morning routine and then gradually started limiting the use of parts of the body for the female character by binding her hands, her mouth, inhibiting her head action. He describes a kind of movement experience that renders the abstract concrete and the physical experiential as part of a rehearsal process.

All four of us cite the relevance of auto-cours in our current work as movement directors. The auto-cours was a weekly, self-made group project that would have a thematic connection to the teaching of the week. The opportunity to test out work in front of your peers and teachers has benefits that are felt for all theatre-makers, but the particular gift to the movement director is that for two years, we practiced on a weekly basis creating and performing a new theatre event. We all now work within mainstream theatre settings, which may involve some devising, but more generally we are part of creative teams gathered around a text or score. The movement language has to be created within the aesthetic context of that production. The practice of auto-cours is invaluable in helping navigate the creative input of all the various collaborators. As Sedgwick suggests, auto-cours ‘allowed you, with other people, to brainstorm how you were going to do something, and you could see people’s imaginations being stirred in very different ways which was very beautiful’ (Sedgwick, 2014). The constraint set by the week’s theme is akin to the creative boundaries of any production, such as the director’s mis-en-scène, the particular qualities of the actors, the narrative imperatives.

The other more subtle learning aspect of auto-cours is the physical listening practiced by Lecoq himself, and his emphasis on the audience’s physical response to the work. His dialogic model between our work and our audience’s felt experience shaped our work as movement directors. This understanding of the exchanges that take place at a physical level between actors’ bodies and the audience’s bodies is key to our movement choices and contributes to the dramaturgy of the movement language for a particular production in a particular space.

As Lecoq-trained movement directors, we are all keen to emphasise the power of the ensemble, as this has a very tangible impact on the quality and nature of movement work. Our mainstream theatre industry is typically based on a mode of production that brings together actors for one particular show (there are, of course, exceptions, notably the RSC). Movement within an ensemble has the potential to quickly build an open, free and creative rehearsal space; and to augment the movement ambition of the work by bringing physical openness, relaxation and connectedness between actors, as well as opportunities for regular movement practice. Alford articulates our shared perspective that movement practice and physical warm-up can serve to build an ensemble out of a company of actors:

Physical preparation goes hand in hand with mental preparation, and physical sharpness with mental sharpness – but also about building trust and building familiarity and creating that environment where a lot of those normal inhibitions are gone, and I think it is a short cut to a lot of those things.

(Alford, 2014)
Sedgwick has introduced the Seven Levels of Tension for every piece he has worked on, with the objective of creating a shared language for the ensemble.

Our training had two broad approaches to navigating the movement of the chorus. One was through the exploration of the tragic chorus, which included the manifestation of the movement qualities of epic texts, as well as more spontaneous collective experiences such as a political rally. It is a combination of the formal and the organic that becomes useful for the movement director. We are often employed to nourish and shape large group movement. Henderson offers an insight into her approach, saying,

the things I’ve enjoyed the most and, I think, the best of what I’ve done, has been to do with big groups of people. When I worked on the crowd for *Julius Caesar* (Warner/Barbican, 2005) I was recommended a fantastic piece in a book, *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West. In there is a description of a crowd in Hollywood at a film preview that went mad – nothing to do with Julius Caesar – just a brilliant description of movement, of when [the crowd] became like a river, when it broke, when it shattered out of the crowd . . .

(Henderson, 2009)

The imagery of the story fed into qualities of movement that she could then offer to the actors.

The second was the *choeur d’ambiance*. This is an expressive chorus whose function is to render visible a protagonist’s inner life. I have often refigured this in the exploratory phases of discovering the dynamics of a play’s social structure or even in a choreographed dance where the protagonist – Rosalind – slipped out of sequence and timing with a group of courtiers. This is yet another tool that enables the movement director to structure and realise movement in the ‘unwritten’ parts of a production: in this case, movement is used to manifest the oppressive and stifling nature of the new court regime in *As You Like It* (Aberg/RSC, 2013) and Rosalind’s uneasy place within it.

Movement directors make movement possible – directly or indirectly. The Lecoq training in particular enables movement directors to move from observation to spatial and dynamic ideas such as opposition (push/pull), scales (levels of tension) and sequencing (like the Twenty Movements), to implementing creative movement ideas that help to develop ensemble movement for a particular work. This is often characterised by play, collective creation and movement as a pivotal provocation to the collective imagination. So, like Chagrin, we continue to invent out of the core Lecoq skills and apply that training with creativity to movement challenges in a wide range of contemporary productions.

**Notes**

With thanks to Toby Sedgwick, Joyce Henderson, Joseph Alford, Julian Chagrin, Sophie Chagrin-Cohen, Gary Yershon, Sue Lefton, David Nicholls and Jenny Ogilvie.

1. Joseph Alford studied at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq from 1995 to 1997. His movement directing work includes *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cat in the Hat*; *Play House*; *The Trial of Ubu*; *Idomeneo* at De Nederlandse Opera (ENO); *Clemency*; and *Blackta*. He is Artistic Director of Theatre O: <http://www.theatreo.co.uk/>.

2. Joyce Henderson trained with Jacques Lecoq from 1987 to 1989 in Paris. Her company movement credits include chorus work in *Dido and Aeneas*; *The Messiah*, ENO; *Julius Caesar*, Barbican Theatre and International tour; *Fidelio*, Glyndebourne Festival Opera; movement assistant for the children in *Death in Venice*, ENO; *School for Scandal* (BITE); *Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night’s
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Dream (RSC). She was one of ten assistants with Toby Sedgwick on the movement for the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

3 Toby Sedgwick trained with Jacques Lecoq in 1974 and was a founding member of the Moving Picture Mime Show. Movement direction credits include A Dog’s Heart (ENO), Tintin (Barbican Theatre), The 39 Steps (West End/Broadway/Australia/Europe), Frankenstein (NT, 2011) and War Horse (NT, 2007 to 2015). He won an Olivier Award for Director of Movement/Horse Choreography for War Horse in 2008. He movement directed the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

4 See front matter for Ayse Tashkiran’s biography.


6 Through ‘Le Passeur’, Lecoq taught movement fundamentals such as fixed point, the transference of weight, coordination of open and closed diagonals, and qualities of effort. See page 77 of The Moving Body (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2000) and extracts of classes in Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq (Roy & Carasso, 2006).

7 These four key movement practitioners called themselves choreographers as well as movement directors. Newlove and Stephenson are Laban-trained with a background in dance, and Pisk had a hybrid of ausdruckstanz in her background.

8 Movement in actor training predates the emergence of professional movement directors and remains intricately linked with movement teaching.

9 Peter Hall invited Michel Saint-Denis to the RSC to lead the artist development programme of the company. See Cox, 1964: 10–11.

10 Born in France in 1935, Claude Chagrin, née Neiderkorn, trained at the Lecoq School from 1959 to 1962 and did a little secondary training with Marcel Marceau. Following her marriage to fellow student and comedian Julian Chagrin, she made London her base until 1976, when she moved to Israel. Whilst in Britain, she worked on over 17 National Theatre productions from 1961 to 1974 for which she is credited with movement, mime and dances. Research sources include: the National Theatre archives; an interview with Julian Chagrin (Chagrin, 2014); and John Dexter’s reference to Chagrin’s movement in his autobiography, The Honourable Beast: A Posthumous Autobiography (1993).

11 Such as Maria Aberg, Katie Mitchell, Iqbal Khan, Joe Hill-Gibbins, John Tiffany, Michael Longhurst, Vicky Featherstone, Erica Whyman, Roxanna Silbert, Indhu Rubasingham, Jamie Lloyd, Marianne Elliot and Tom Morris, to name but a few.

12 Liz Ranken’s movement work with Shared Experience and Jane Gibson’s work with Cheek by Jowl have been at the centre of the physical creativity and style of both companies over several decades.

13 Royal Central School of Speech and Drama’s MA Movement: Directing and Teaching builds explicitly on its heritage from Litz Pisk to the present, and includes two Pisk graduates who have had a major role in shaping movement direction: Jane Gibson and Sue Lefton.

14 The ferryman, the wall, eclosion.

15 In her interview, Henderson said,

I would go back to the way we studied ‘Dynamics of Movement’ with Lecoq – to do with the ‘Laws of Balance’, ‘Push and Pull’. And I would have watched, or thought about, or looked at photographs of something like the sunflowers and tried to analyse what they’re doing and then find ways of achieving that with the actors.

(Henderson, 2009)

16 Toby Sedgwick connected this exercise to the opening section of a ‘Green and Pleasant Land’, a celebration of rural Britain at the start of the London Olympics Opening Ceremony 2012. His version of a village square, however, lasted for 45 minutes; and as well as the everyday, it incorporated the unexpected. These flourishes were designed to give the 80,000-plus audience a unique perspective depending on where they happened to be looking at each moment (Sedgwick, 2014).

17 Shakespeare was writing at the cusp of modern anatomy when the body was conceptualized through a Galenist division of four humours. These saps of the body were then related to body parts, physiological systems, and to temperaments and appetites. To notice the texture, description and temperature of the language of a character is accessing this Elizabethan pattern. It helps to shift my movement director’s contemporary knowledge of the body to a model which is intricately coded for a Renaissance sensibility.
British movement directors

18 See pages 90–91 of Theatre of Movement and Gestere in the English translation for Lecoq’s description of the scale of tension.

19 In The Observer, Kate Kellaway describes the makeup of the 100-strong community chorus: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/apr/10/theatre2>.

20 The movement is well captured in a review by Dan Hutton (2013).

21 See The Moving Body (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2000: 71–83) for Lecoq’s understanding of this part of the pedagogy.

References


Interviews


Articles


DVDs
