During my tenure as Head of Performance at Circus Space, now known as the National Centre for Circus Arts, the theatre department for the circus arts degree had a decidedly Lecoq flavour, reflected in the training backgrounds of some of the regular teachers and directors. There was no pedagogic exclusivity; Decroux-based subjects such as corporeal mime were also taught. Members of the movement department were purveyors of creative choreographic dance techniques bordering on physical theatre. Contextual performance studies exposed the students to a variety of artistic philosophies and performance histories. Nevertheless, core teachers in my theatre department (Bea Pemberton, Joyce Henderson and Mick Barnfather) shared a background in Lecoq and a connection to his lineage through Philippe Gaulier and his former performance partner, Pierre Byland. The syllabus we developed encompassed Neutral and Expressive Mask, Le Jeu, Ensemble and Chorus work, Clown, Commedia dell’arte, and classes in Melodrama and Bouffons, embracing what Lecoq called, in The Moving Body, some of the main dramatic territories.

In order to better understand Lecoq’s influence on contemporary circus, it is necessary to consider recent performance history and a wider context for these practices. An explosion of the ‘illegitimate’ popular forms such as circus, Commedia dell’arte, clowning and street theatre, took place in the UK in the 1980s. The new circus movement was ultimately instrumental in changing the attitudes of funding bodies from seeing circus as popular entertainment to perceiving it as being worthy of artistic consideration and development. Circus skills became more accessible and democratised through Reg Bolton’s pioneering ‘suitcase circus’ movement, and its offshoots, with roots in inner-city community arts. Juggling workshops and conventions popularised and celebrated that oldest of circus skills. Street theatre blossomed in Covent Garden (in London) through Alternative Arts. Jugglers, acrobats, mimes, magicians and street provocateurs animated this outdoor space. In the post-show talk for his in-the-round production of The Caucasian Chalk Circle at the National Theatre (1997), Theatre de Complicité founder, member and director Simon McBurney talked about the impact of street performance on his dramatic aesthetic. Whilst a student at the Lecoq School, he had busked outside the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and with the theatre practitioners Rick Kemp and Neil Bartlett in Covent Garden. He spoke passionately about the demands of holding the audience’s attention, of establishing complicity that has to be created with audiences in the...
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street, and of the circus-like, 360-degree acting sensibility the outdoor performer develops in that context. It was common for street performers to want to build on their physical skills by developing their performance ability with practitioners such as Lecoq, Gaulier and Byland. This is still a constant, as graduates from the National Centre for Circus Arts continue to develop their performance training at the Lecoq School in Paris, with Philippe Gaulier and Pierre Byland, and at London International School of Performing Arts (LISPA), which is also inspired by Lecoq’s pedagogy. Subsequent to this, the establishment in 1985 of No Fit State Circus in Wales and Belfast Community Circus created regional contemporary voices that were later to be heard nationally and internationally. That year saw the creation of one of the first new circus companies, Circus Burlesque, founded by the Lecoq graduate Mick Wall. The clowning and circus school Fool Time was founded in Bristol in 1986, superseded in 1993 by the creation of Circomedia, run by Bim Mason and Helen Crocker as a drama school for circus performers. The 1988 London International Festival of New Circus, directed by Adrian Evans and Nigel Jamieson, showcased the theatricality and new performance aesthetic emerging in circus. In 1989, Circus Space was founded in London by Jonathan Graham, enabled by an enthusiastic network of volunteers from the emerging, contemporary circus community, with the aim of facilitating professional practice for circus performers. A seed was sown and links with the Lecoq philosophy were created during the formative years of Circus Space, with the clown and devising courses run by Gaulier-trained Gerry Flanagan and Rick Kemp of Commotion. This demonstrated to the directors, Jonathan Graham and Charlie Holland, the viability of a Lecoq approach to the teaching of circus skills. A new performance and training landscape for circus was emerging in the UK in the 1980s through these newly formed companies, organisations and initiatives. This new, experimental and exploratory aesthetic created a dialogue between Lecoq’s work and contemporary circus as circus artistes searched for fresh sources of creativity and new ways of creating circus. The Commedia dell’arte was one of Lecoq’s dramatic territories that offered a fertile source of inspiration.

Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, former assistant to Lecoq and co-founder of the Dell’Arte School of Mime in California in 1974, writes in ‘Commedia And The Actor’ that ‘commedia is the sister of circus’ (Schechter, 2003: 88). The Dell’Arte school is still going strong, and it has pioneered and continues to deliver a methodology relevant for circus performers. Mazzone-Clementi’s concise, evocative phrase about circus and commedia resonated with me as I organised and ran classes in Commedia dell’arte at Circus Space. Commedia’s appeal to circus students is the bridge it creates to the variety acts of the British music hall and American vaudeville, and its evolution into the silent movie comedians. The silent movie legacy continues to fascinate some circus students because of the fusion of character and incident that it shares with Commedia dell’arte, and its integration and dramatic justification of a non-naturalistic, and even acrobatic, acting style. Arlecchino trips into a somersault, without spilling the wine. Buster Keaton walks a washing line, balanced on other acrobats, to elope with the girl. Commedia dell’arte offers an opportunity to engage in character study because of the marvellously differentiated, larger-than-life roles. Their scale and detail is a model for character projection on a large canvas. The application and exploration of circus skills in this medium can offer a dynamic route to the relationship between circus and dramatic expression on an epic scale. Mazzone-Clementi is interested in the juggling metaphor of performance: ‘Two points are not enough. It is the third point that makes things turn and move’ (Schechter, 2003: 88). In an exercise in a Lecoq master class at the London International Workshop Festival 1988, we explored the dramatic impact of the arrival of the third person into the balance of a circling duo. This created a new dynamic of dramatic potential and
spatial relationship. We can take Mazzone-Clementi’s three-object juggling metaphor and see resonances in aspects of Lecoq’s teaching. In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq discusses exercises for character creation where the number three is a creative nexus:

> With three sticks we can create a first space: a hut is already a home! Two elements would not be enough, because they would not be able to balance. For character, just as for a house, the rules of architecture require a tripod.

*(Lecoq, 2000: 61–62)*

Juggling three objects offers a circus metaphor of vitalistic performance and creativity for Mazzone-Clementi. I perceive a reverberation with Lecoq, who sees three elements as ‘firm foundations with a clearly defined structure’ (Lecoq, 2000: 62) for character creation and dynamic dramatic relationship. Moving further into the dramatic acrobatics of the Commedia dell’arte, we see a rich pedagogic seam for circus performers to mine. One of Lecoq’s interests in the Commedia dell’arte lies in the ability of characters to take situations to their limit, throwing off the constraints of everyday life. Hence its affinity with the extra-daily world of circus: ‘Harlequin begins to laugh so hard, he falls into a somersault’ (Lecoq, 2000: 70). For circus performers, this opens up a way of connecting a circus move and/or skill to a dramatic context and an inner attitude. As Lecoq says in *The Moving Body*, ‘this dramatic territory is an extension of what ordinary life can bring. That is why the level of playing will be pushed to the limit of acrobatics’ (2000: 113). Circus skills denote a body that expands its physical skills into extraordinary dimensions. Lecoq is naturally interested in dramatic justification: ‘When Pantalone falls into a rage and does a somersault, the spectators should not say: “What a wonderful somersault!” But “What an amazing rage!”’ (Lecoq, 2000: 116). This can be a fruitful study for circus performers – finding an impulse, in Lecoq’s words, from ‘an extraordinary emotive charge’ (Lecoq, 2000: 116) that can connect the circus performer’s humanity to their extraordinary skills and accomplishments. I also saw an example of this while I was teaching drama students master-servant improvisations at Italia Conti Acting School. One of the ‘masters’ suddenly ran up the wall and did a backflip of anger at his incompetent ‘servant’. Likewise, in the 1938 film *Convict 99* starring the British comedian Will Hay, the actor Moore Marriott runs up the curtains in frustration at an escape plan going awry. This is an example of an aerial and vertical dimension expressing an emotional and dramatic reaction, and, in Lecoq’s commedia language, taking expression to an extreme. Circus can actualise that emotional extension with what Bea Pemberton calls the four-dimensionality of circus language. A dramatic context for these circus skills that literally inhabit horizontal and vertical space can bring alive this four-dimensionality of circus. A pertinent example would be the 2014 production of *The Tempest* by Rick Kemp at the University of Indiana. In a circus setting dramatically warranted by Prospero’s ringmaster-like orchestrations, Aerial was envisaged as an aerial silk artiste. This offered the potential of four-dimensional expressions of dramatic actions giving voice to Shakespeare’s language.

Lecoq said he came to theatre by way of sports. The background of some circus students is in sports gymnastics. There can be echoes of a parallel journey for some circus performers – a journey from sport, the juggling clubs or street sport acrobatics like *parkour*, to circus artiste. In the case of Gísli Gardarsson of the Icelandic Theatre Company Vesturport, we see a journey from a young gymnast on the Icelandic national team to a theatrical circus artist. Lecoq was interested in a progression from sports skills into dramatic acrobatics, whether it was through the dramatic territories such as Commedia dell’arte, or even the catastrophic acrobatics of the *bourffons* (celebrating collapses and falls made possible by padded costumes). Lecoq states
that ‘by means of acrobatic performance, the actor reaches the limits of dramatic expression’ (2000: 70). If we expand the territory of acrobatics to include other circus skills, we can see examples of circus imagery as almost an epiphany of dramatic expression. Circus can become a way of expressing something so extraordinary in the human spirit. Certainly some theatre productions have used this vocabulary. Peter Brook’s legendary RSC production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1970) evoked the otherness of the fairy world through circus imagery. A recent review of Romeo and Juliet in the Victoria Baths, Manchester, by Home Theatre Company, refers to ‘the dangerous adrenaline rush of first love’, expressed through a trapeze routine with Romeo and Juliet ‘soaring high . . . without a safety net’ (Hickling, 2014b). The Icelandic Company Vesturport’s own production of Romeo and Juliet dramatised the bedroom scene on a ring trapeze, and Gisli Gardarsson, as Romeo, enacted his death scene on silk tissu. Circus and acrobatics have been a feature of this company’s productions, such as Faust (2010–2012) with its aerial ballet of Walpurgisnacht, and the acrobatic use of space in the company’s adaptation of Kafka’s Metamorphosis (2006–14).

During my time at Circus Space/National Centre for Circus Arts, I have seen students experiment with Faustian narrative, Beckett-like worlds, epic mythic stories, emotional passion and dramatic poetics. The work suggests, at times, an affinity with some of Lecoq’s experiments in the Laboratory of Movement Study (Laboratoire d’Étude du Mouvement, or LEM). The circus performer’s trapeze, rope, clubs, wheel or pole becomes an animated artistic extension of the performer. These artistes, with their circus disciplines and equipment, have an affinity with the photographs of LEM students manipulating the structures they create to depict human passions. There is the common ground of the externalisation of inner space. When some of my circus students expressed passion, disappointment, fear and joy through their physical routines with trapeze, Chinese pole and cyr wheel, the apparatuses were infused with an emotive animation emanating from the performer. A former student of mine successfully auditioned, with my facilitation, for a part in an opera. He impressed the director with the tender emotion he evoked with his manipulation of juggling clubs, as if he was caressing a baby.

Lecoq constantly stressed the dramatic justification for each movement, a principle that can guide a circus performer through devising, creation and performance. By contrast, circus performers might question the need for circus ever to be justified artistically. ‘Why do we have to justify circus and our skills?’ is something I have heard from ex-students, now colleagues, who I have worked with. They sometimes give vent to frustration with limitations they see in the quest always to justify. At contemporary circus shows, audiences do applaud the tricks, even during a routine that is focusing on dramatic development and narrative. Perhaps they are simultaneously applauding a wonderful somersault and a wonderful anger. Technique and its appreciation are important to circus performers and audiences alike. But Bim Mason, artistic director of Circomedia, sounds a warning about fixation with skill. He feels that Lecoq offers a way of ensuring that circus artists avoid the bubble of introversion that can result from skill specialisation. They can become empowered as artists rather than simply skilled artisans, and the benefits of group devising help to puncture the bubble of individuality. Does an obsession with skill lead to the ‘First Sorrow’ of Kafka’s unrequited, perfectionist trapeze artist (Kafka, 2005)? By contrast, when Joyce Henderson headed home to the British theatre scene after training with Lecoq, she was often disappointed by the lack of technique among actors. By comparison, when she worked at Circus Space, everyone was practising their craft. Because they practiced, there was already an energy and a level of ability that could be moved forward. Rehearsal time became more creative, inventive and playful. A fusion of skill and creativity could be realised. In the unique Lecoq-inspired ensemble work that Bim Mason
advocates at Circomedia, the same search is sustained within a framework that might be thematic or even narrative. Narrative performance and contemporary circus are interesting bedfellows, not least because of a continuing debate around the pitfalls of using circus gratuitously in the narrative or of shoehorning the story into circus.

Contemporary circus has explored the bridge between these two antimonies. Lecoq can be a guide. For Bea Pemberton at Circus Space, the combination of the discipline and skill of the circus artist and the poetic training a Lecoq approach provided was a marriage made in heaven. The pleasure of play and the poetic possibilities of space, time and image could be juxtaposed with the circus skills of strength, flexibility and endurance. Student shows at Circus Space often used circus skills within a narrative framework led by Lecoq-connected, -inspired and -trained directors – for example: global wars breaking out in kitchens (Mick Barnfather), Japanese folk tales (Joyce Henderson), mnemonic traces (Bea Pemberton). There have been professional shows and arts development projects, such as an adaptation of Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* by Tamasha Theatre Company (2013) and Osborne & What’s envisioning of William Wharton’s *Birdy* (2015). The circus image can be a catalyst for narrative. Two students developing a routine with trapeze and hat manipulation were a catalyst for my show *Still Moving* (2008), which I developed from a Lecoq melodrama exercise into an elegy for the New York Twin Towers and a yearning of magic and a sense of loss in the city. Philippe Petit’s account of his extraordinary feet of wire-walking between the twin towers in 1974 becomes also a circus memorial to their destruction. As he wrote in *Man On Wire*, ‘Remember the World Trade Center Tragedy. Establish a memorial site. Build again’ (Petit, 2003: 223). Synchronistically, Philippe Petit also came into my rehearsal while he was being shown around Circus Space. Contemporary circus can have a universal reach and dimension to its expression.

Contemporary circus values the dramatic performer. Conversely, the drama college has brought circus elements into its syllabus. This might take the form of acrobatics classes, or in the case of the physical theatre schools, an incorporation of a more comprehensive circus skills practice. As the external examiner for the degree programme in Physical Theatre at East 15 Drama School, I have witnessed a comprehensive performance philosophy that includes a Lecoq-based methodology of dramatic territories. The course director, Simon Hunt, has created a course where drama and theatre, text and devised work, storytelling and performance are all primary. Circus is studied as a vocabulary that can add another dimension to this work. In a production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, directed by Gary Sefton, the character Esmerelda made her first appearance in a bright red dress on bright red silk tissu, creating a perfect fusion of character and circus skill. The aerial dimension created an integrated image of the inner and outer dynamic of the gypsy street dancer. While directing a third-year ensemble show for the physical theatre degree at St Mary’s University, Twickenham (run by Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux-trained Kasia Zaremba-Byrne), I incorporated a circus vocabulary. In my show *Smog* (2014), inspired by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, I was able to draw on the acrobatic skills of the cast and the aerial skills of three of the actors. There was no problem about justification when the narrative called for the appearance of an actual traditional circus. The acro-balance and acrobatics were part of an integrated scene and situation. I also needed two lovers to climb a hill to overlook a city. The climbing of a rope onto a two-person trapeze allowed that to exist in the audience’s imagination. The subsequent descent of the male character into alienation and disgust was dramatised by a slow falling routine on the rope/corde lisse. Circus imagery dramatised both an outer and inner landscape.

This connects to Lecoq’s concept of psychological reality expanding into space. ‘We must be architects of the inner life’ (Lecoq, 2000: 21). Theatre increasingly draws on circus
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as a unique way of saying something that cannot be said any other way. That is not just a new phenomenon; Ionesco’s A Stroll In The Air is a play that has a trapeze written into the text. A show dealing with the subject of old age, Home Sweet Home by Tom Wright, at the Ukrainian Centre in Bradford, utilised a performance language that juggles music hall, drama and circus (Hickling, 2014a). There is a compelling poetic and dramatic potential in circus

Figure 26.1 The Lecoq clown returns to the circus. Smog directed by Mitch Mitchelson. Photograph © Christine Jarvis.
imagery. In The Bloody Chamber, the playwright Byrorny Lavery, adapting from the story by Angela Carter, writes a stage direction: ‘Mewing seagulls swing on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside’ (2008: 42).

Forever associated with circus in the popular imagination is the figure of the clown. In a sense, Lecoq took the clown out of the circus and contemporary circus put the clown back. Lecoq wanted to revive the tired old clown formulas. Lecoq says,

[... ] the reference to circus, which is bound to surface as soon as clowns are mentioned, remains marginal, in my view. As a child I saw the Fratellini brothers, Grock[... ] but we were not after this kind of clown at the school.

(Lecoq, 2000: 145)

There were to be no models, and the research into clowning was to be embarked upon in complete freedom. He generated some memorable theatre clown actors in the process. At the same time, the ties to circus were there; as Lecoq says about his ‘Practical Joke’ and ‘Double Flop’ exercises for three, ‘references to circus returns [...because] circus clowns come in threes: the white face clown, the Auguste and the second Auguste’ (2000: 148). Chaplin’s film The Circus ironically anticipates Lecoq clown pedagogy when Chaplin’s character is unfunny as he tries to be comic in an audition, but a great success when not trying to force an imposed comic performance, as unforeseen accidents take their course. Lecoq credits Pierre Byland with introducing the red nose (the smallest mask) into clown training at the school. Byland’s classes, those of his former partner Philippe Gaulier, and those of Lecoq himself place an emphasis on play, spontaneity and pleasure for the performer and for the audience. Mick Barnfather, a former teaching assistant to Gaulier, carries on this tradition at the National Centre for Circus Arts, and Bim Mason continues to do the same work at Circomedia. Circus students at these organisations are exposed to Lecoq-related clown teaching and are able to take this into contemporary circus shows.

Lecoq included circus skills in his design for dramatic acrobatics to try to free the actor as much as possible from the force of gravity; and he said ‘juggling complements the acrobatic approach’ (Lecoq, 2000: 70). Lecoq’s directions for juggling progression would grace a juggling syllabus at a circus school: ‘It begins with one ball, then two or three, four or five or more and progresses to everyday plates and glasses’ (Lecoq, 2000: 70). The particular emphasis is on dramatic justification. Brighella juggles chestnuts because they are hot. Dramatised play is explored in locations such as the shop and restaurant. The juggling syllabus at the National Centre for Circus Arts and Circomedia, whilst expanding the technical skills of the students, also places emphasis on their creativity. As a performance adviser, I worked with juggling students on dramatic scenarios and storytelling to find a dramatic vindication for their juggling dexterity. I would also advise students in other circus disciplines to be aware of what Lecoq referred to as ‘acrobatic movements [that] appear gratuitous’ (Lecoq, 2000: 70). He goes on to say ‘the technical mastery of all these acrobatic movements [...] has in reality a single aim [...] to give freedom to the player’ (Lecoq, 2000: 71). One of the training ambitions of the performance department at Circus Space was to try to make technically accomplished circus students players, by finding the pleasure of performance. Play is a central activity and a performance attitude in Lecoq pedagogy and in the performance philosophy of Gaulier. In an interview in the Observer newspaper, the Scandinavian actor Stellan Skarsgaard has some felicitous words on the value of play in creative processes. Commenting on why he enjoyed working with the director Lars von Trier, he said, ‘it was like children who have good playmates you meet in the sandbox and have fun together’ (Lewis, 2014). By creating a ‘sandbox'
of our own at Circus Space, we aimed to use play to generate creativity for solo numbers and ensemble pieces. For Bim Mason, the principle of the performer as the creator is fundamental for Lecoq and to Circomedia's approach. Performers can tailor their work to their different bodies in order to maximise their bodies' unique potentials. The implication for this is greater individuality and diversity in what is produced. This can be attested by the dynamic work emerging from the circus schools. In the spirit of Lecoq, course directors like Tim Roberts of the National Centre of Circus Arts constantly experiment with new projects and directors, ensuring the schools are places of continuing research. The Lecoq philosophy can combine brilliantly with the language of circus. This relationship can allow the humanity of theatre its fragility and vulnerability to playfully, poetically and dramatically engage with the extraordinary physicality of the performer.

Note

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References


