Maya Tångeberg-Grischin (b. Ursula Steiner), a Swiss-born performer, director, pedagogue and researcher, studied at Lecoq’s School of Mime, Theatre and Movement on Rue du Bac from autumn 1964 until summer 1966. For Lecoq, this period was an intensive time of study on movement during which he, for example, started his research on the clown. For a student, it was an ideal learning environment: the classes were small and the teaching very personal.

This chapter is based on Anna Thuring’s (AT) interviews and discussions with Maya Tångeberg-Grischin (MTG) and deals with her initiation into Asian theatre in Paris, and her subsequent career and pedagogical ideas that combine her Lecoq background with Asian classical theatre training.

AT: Lecoq was from the lineage of Jacques Copeau, who had an interest in Japanese Noh: he was for a few years associated with Marie-Hélène and Jean Dasté, who at the end of the 1940s produced, for example, *Sumidagawa*, which is based on a Japanese Noh play. In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq remarks that ‘through Dasté I discovered masked performance and Japanese Noh theatre, both of which have had a powerful influence on me’. In your opinion, what were Lecoq’s views on Asian theatre forms when you were at the school?

MTG: From the Western point of view, traditional Asian theatre forms are based on codified aesthetics and Lecoq did not like codified systems of movement because he resisted their immature use of body. He felt that these were closed forms that were not beneficial for the immature actor. However, I think that he did not object to a mature performer using these forms! Lecoq’s ideal was functional use of the body. He was strongly against aestheticism and tricks.

For this very reason, Lecoq rejected classical ballet and corporeal mime as training forms for the physical, creative actor. Classical ballet has had a strong impact on stage movement in European countries, but for actors it can easily become too restrictive. Etienne Decroux developed body and movement control even further through his analytic training of articulation and isolation of body parts. In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq writes that the codified movement techniques, whether via an athletic route, by the fixed dramatic forms of oriental theatre or through a grammar of modern mime, distort and stunt the creative development. Lecoq wanted an actor that moves synthetically from dramatic impulse to movement and never from technique to movement.
I do not remember Lecoq speaking about Sumidagawa. Yet, I know that he did choreographic and movement work for it and I remember that Lecoq used the term ‘un peu japonisante’ when referring to certain masks and movements. For example, a certain body posture, with deep bent knees, was called ‘le samurai’.

AT: After the Second World War, visits by Asian performers to Europe and to Paris increased. Do you remember any Asian performances during your years in Paris, and was Lecoq interested in seeing them? Were there Asian students at the school at that time?

MTG: The only earlier Asian exposure for myself was through art history, but during the first year at the school (1964), a pocket edition of Artaud’s *Le théâtre et son double* was published. However, we did not discuss it at the school. Lecoq did not particularly encourage reading as part of the curriculum or give any reading lists or recommendations. Artaud’s text provoked my interest in Bali. Akira Kurosawa’s and other Japanese directors’ films were shown in Paris during that time, and sometimes Lecoq referred to Kurosawa’s films in discussion, especially the rhythms and the use of sound in them.

Japanese films meant a lot for me, too. However, a clear turning point, a veritable ‘Asian shock’, was the Kabuki visit to Paris in winter 1965. I saw the performance several times. I know that also some other students of the school saw the performance but I am not sure about Lecoq. We did not discuss it at the school with him.

In spring 1966, we did our final school projects. Lecoq suggested for me themes around Paris, night and lunaire, but I wanted to do something else. So I made a short piece titled *Presque japonais*, seeking physical expressions à la japonaise but not copying. I knew Lecoq would have hated superficial copying! In this short play, I played a male character, inspired by the character Sukeroku doing his mie on hanamichi. At some point, my character screamed from the top of his lungs ‘save me!’ in fake Japanese. I had three student colleagues performing with me. Lecoq liked it and considered it very funny.

And, yes, there was one Japanese student at the school, but very briefly. The school had already become an international institution and Lecoq also encouraged us to use our individual national characteristics. Sometimes this was a struggle! Our ways of operating were so different. I remember that I could not communicate with this particular Japanese student at all.

AT: How did the interest in Asian theatre grow on you after you left Paris and Lecoq’s school?

MTG: Personally, I took Lecoq’s school as a basis to act, direct and teach movement-based theatre. Yet, from the day I saw Kabuki, I always felt the lack of real physical and vocal acting skills. After my diploma, I decided to acquire more of these skills but to base them consciously on neutrality and function and not on habits, mannerisms and complaisance! So, I was faithful to Lecoq’s principles.

I sought my way to various Asian performances and studied these in the same way as we had studied animals, materials and elements at Lecoq’s school. The aim was to build a personal archive for creative work. Without a mental and physical storehouse of physical experiences, techniques and skills material, one is stuck with one’s own mannerisms.

Lecoq’s approach formed the backbone of my work also when I moved to Sweden in 1970 and started incorporating Stanislavskian influences that I got from my teacher, director Radu Penciulescu. In 1972, I went with my students for a two weeks’ workshop with Torgeir Wethal at Barba’s Odin Teatret. I was constantly intrigued by the question how to do Kabuki and Bharatanatyam in practice and how to integrate it into the Western physical theatre training, and Odin Teater’s work and Grotowski’s ideas were giving me many impulses. In this particular workshop, we worked with sticks and I transferred some of this work to my own
productions. For example, I used sticks in a production named *The Dreams of Baldur* in which we also used Old Icelandic as the language. Finally, in 1979, I had an opportunity to go to Bali and that was the start of my practical exploration of Asian theatre forms!

**AT:** You mentioned that you wished to improve your technical acting skills by studying the Asian theatre forms. Can you elaborate this with some examples?

**MTG:** Lecoq's aesthetics were functionalistic. He was equally against talking heads, stagnant conventions, and the extreme technicality of corporeal mime. The dramatic circuits of the body that Lecoq writes about are good for developing sensibility for movement but they do not provide enough skills for psychophysical training. In theatre, movement has also to have a non-daily aspect, a dramatic, stylized, artistic aspect that Barba emphasized. This was revealed to me in Holstebro when I saw Odin Teatret’s *Min fars hus* (My Father’s House).

Lecoq was aware of this need for extra-daily energy in performances and called it *le prise dramatique*, dramatic choice. The aim was to develop movement skills, focus and collaboration with the partner on stage. But this is only preparation for acting, not acting itself. Of the two years, the first year goes into ‘emptying the cup’, getting rid of mannerisms and starting to build *disponibilité*. Eventually, Lecoq-trained actors move quite well – and there is a lot of variety in their work. Yet, in my opinion, some of them express their personal ideas in rather small scales and their acting style is surprisingly close to realism or, rather, stylized realism. I do not want to mention names here, but I suspect that many of them do not bother to learn more and develop their acting skills further. They think that their imagination and fantasy is enough.

I felt that Lecoq hated the virtuosi such as Marceau! Maybe this reflected his socialist sentiment. The virtuosi were luxury items for the bourgeoisie. He did not wish to train soloists but actors who could work as a group. Everybody could take his/her own thing from the training but they were not encouraged to play their own instrument as a soloist. And that is something that can be learned in Asia.

The Asian techniques seemed to offer much more for creating extra-daily energy and extra-daily form (stylization) than the European training systems aiming for corporeal excellence. For us in the West, Kathakali or Jingju can seem finalized, perfect but closed, styles. However, when practiced, the classical forms are open forms and they develop and transform with the performers within a frame. My interest was never to copy the physical forms, but to understand and to apply their underlying dramatic rules.

**AT:** The study of Asian theatre styles seems to contradict Lecoq’s emphasis on creativity. Can you give examples on how to connect the Asian practice with Lecoq’s training principles?

**MTG:** The question is not only about the movement training but also about dramaturgy. For example, Kutiyattam dramaturgy is good for elaborating situations; Jingju for composition of the emotional peaks and elaboration of entries and exits, as well as displaying the character; understanding the principle of *jo-ha-kyū* helps with the rhythm and connection of scenes.

In theatre, the uses of Asian classical theatre practice are multiple. First, Asian movement can be *used on stage in its pure form* as it is. This creates variety and contrast in post-modern dramatic expression and serves as experimentation with movement aesthetics.

Secondly, Asian movements can be *transferred*. A coded Asian movement is decoded and given another, more easily understandable content. This comes close to Lecoq’s technique of transfers, which means moving one movement pattern to another context. For example, parts of the movement of pushing a boat can be transferred to movements of tango. In transfers, any body movement gets a dramatic justification.
Thirdly, it is possible to use the principles of Asian movement without the form of movement but as weight shifts, the rules of arsis,8 trajectories, delivery and return, roundness, stylization, simplification, elaboration, rhythm, characterization, different uses of space, and work with costume.

AT: Can you clarify these principles and their connection to Lecoq’s training? For example, energy, weight shifts, rhythm, movement and costume, and use of mime would be interesting areas to discuss.

MTG: At Lecoq’s, we developed various energy types through animal movement and the four elements. However, Lecoq did not specifically speak about acting energy. Physical energy is also the result of a drive or an aim in a character in a situation. This does not necessarily need to be a psychological drive, though. Radu Penciulescu taught me well how to create focus in acting. The actor should be focused on a specific task, with the desire to solve this task. If the actor concentrates on solving this task, he develops and channels the energy on the task, not on himself. Penciulescu called this ‘objective energy’. It is very close to Grotowski’s ideas and Barba’s concept of extra-daily energy.

I started to develop forms of training by, for example, tossing and catching sticks in many different ways. Focus on a specific task like handling a weapon, a stick, a long ribbon, a fan or long water-sleeves develops the actor’s energy and channels it. Each object needs a different approach of focus and energy! The more difficult the task is, the higher the focus and the release of energy to solve the problem. Working with objects transports the focus to the outside of the body. It is the way for the actor to get the focus from himself. Later I learned that creating acting energy through acrobatics and other physical skills is an integral part of, for example, Chinese opera.

A most interesting series of Lecoqian exercises is blowing up a movement to the maximum and reducing it to the minimum until it is just breathing, but keeping the weight shift in mind. Similar maximal movement can also be seen in aragoto characters of Kabuki, and the minimal weight shifts in characters of Kunju. The movement that is reduced to breathing only is evident, especially in female characters of Chinese opera. This process operates in both directions: changing the direction of thought can be produced by weight shift or a weight shift can be created by changing the thought. The flow of movement energy developed by weight shifts can be put to dramatic use so that it represents both the main conflict but also the situations and emotions involved.

Animal and element rhythms, ‘rhythms of nature’, and following music are explored in Lecoq’s training, but in Asian classical theatre and dance forms, there is much higher awareness of rhythm. There is always an underlying rhythm that can be followed or contested. It is evident in entries and exits, in speaking patterns and accents. There is the rhythm of the actor’s own body and within the collaboration with the acting partner. Like breathing, artistic rhythm is constantly present in Asian classical theatre. This is not natural rhythm, but rather a fixed rhythm in actions. It can also be notated and repeated.

The relationship between movement and costume is interesting. Decroux performed almost naked. Meyerhold used workers’ overalls. Lecoq builds on a healthy, sportive body. The neutral body reflects a certain aversion from the stylized and artificial body. Asian theatre uses costume to transform both the body and the costume into a dramatic entity. The result is an expanded, heightened body. Costumed body is a mask. In this sense, the Asian body is also neutral. Individuality disappears behind this mask and is not even tied to the gender of the performer.

Stylization of rhythm, movement and mime in Kabuki, in Chinese opera or in Kathakali and Kutiyattam is far more dramatic than the European mime. Structure and exactitude are
also greater: there is clear beginning, middle and end. Movement is simplified, focus on the essence is strong and the mime is not defined by realism and coherence. In European mime, the dimensions are defined and the audience is expected to follow the action. In Asian mime, there is more openness and a certain aesthetic dimension. The audience need not always understand but can still appreciate.

AT: In 2003 you had an opportunity to create a four-year Physical Theatre Curriculum at Novia University of Applied Sciences, in Vaasa, Finland. Can you describe which elements it consists of and what role Lecoq’s method plays in it?

MTG: My own Lecoq background is strongly present in my pedagogy. I use Lecoq’s techniques to develop qualities in the students’ bodies: precision, feeling for form and rhythm, use of space, use of oppositions in the body. The voice is always produced by movement impulses. But I am also convinced that serious study of Asian theatre styles benefits physical actors and mime artists in several ways:

1. It helps to build up the actor’s physical body, energy, flexibility, rhythm, sense of movement form or style, sense of space, partner work, interaction of voice and body.
2. It has a neurophysiological effect on the psychophysicality of the actor. The experience of the ‘other’ dramatic movement system creates ‘new dramatic circuits in the body-mind’ and stimulates creativity.
3. It helps to build the actor’s dramatic body, acting skills (sense of dramatic weight-shifts and articulation of the body); sense of dramatic opposition and contrast for own creation (or for building a character, a situation, an emotion).

Lecoq did not approve of the extremely stylized aesthetics that permeate Asian classical theatre. Unlike European or Western physically oriented approaches, there is a conscious emphasis on technical skills to create the extra-daily dimensions. The actor’s self-expression is not an issue. Rather, the goal is to move away from it.

Throughout the curriculum, the students have lessons in Kungfu, acrobatics and pair acrobatics, as well as body and movement training with the help of sticks and ribbons. The goal is to develop force, flexibility, disponibilité to partner, energy, as well as the connection of body and voice. There is improvisation, movement analysis and a lot of mime, which is my own mélange of Lecoq, Marceau, some Decroux and Asian mime. Classical ballet and (sometimes) street dance are also learned. Each year, the students also work on a play.

The first year starts with games and play and the basics of Laban and Bauhaus techniques. Movement of geometric forms in the space is explored, as well as chorus movement in space. There is a short exploration of neutral masks but more focus on larval masks in order to explore extreme, degenerate characters and bodies. Age-masks and expressive masks are also studied. We examine the use of objects and learn how an object starts to live. The basics of Bharatanatyam and Jibengong are learned. Bharatanatyam is useful for its basic steps, rhythmic footwork and movement style. Chinese Jibengong helps with posture, breathing, stretching and relaxation. The first year ends in a performance of a Greek classic.

During the second year, we add Scandinavian sign language, Butoh, and start to work with the clown and Commedia dell’arte characters. The year ends with a Shakespearean theme or a fantasy play with a minimum of text.

In the third year, the students spend a semester usually in some Asian country. The introductory courses have already given some basic knowledge so that they are physically prepared for Asian studies. This four- to six-month period enables them to learn the basics of some
classical technique and to deepen their understanding of its cultural background. The forms that the students have learned include Jingju, Nihon Buyō, Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, Kalaripayattu, Mohiniyattom, Kuchipudi, Ottan Thullal, or Balinese dance; some of them even learn African dance and tango. The rest of the year is spent with Commedia dell’arte scenes and work on half-masks.

During the fourth year, the students are taught pantomime and gesture language, and we also work on the buffoon. At the end, they are required to write their final work and do a production that reflects what they have learned during the four years.

AT: It seems that there are a lot of different elements in the curriculum. How do you deal with it pedagogically and how much can be achieved in four years? Are the students truly disponible after they have finished their degree?

MTG: Techniques are not chosen at random. I have always the pedagogical and performance goals in mind. I wish to emphasize that Lecoqian disponibilité is in itself not an acting skill yet. I count it into the pre-dramatic preparation of the actor. From disponibilité, acting skills can develop, but the way to become a performer is long. After neutrality and disponibilité is acquired and mental and physical blocks are dissolved, the artistic dramatic body has to be built.

Achieving disponibilité is as important for me as it was for Lecoq. When I started my curriculum, I considered several basic physical techniques to achieve neutrality and disponibilité: kungfu and acrobatics for energy, reaction, collaboration, swiftness, power; classical ballet for feeling the form; Bharatanatyam for space and rhythm. Body education built on work with sticks, ribbons, kicks, jumps, turns and such; basic Laban and Bauhaus techniques.

In the afternoon sessions, we improvised and worked on scenes. In the beginning, the students could barely use any of the physical techniques they had learned but within one and a half years, the two ways began to merge slowly together.

Work with elements, animal movements and plant themes can form something that Lecoq called les circuits dramatiques, dramatic material for the body. This ‘archive’ can also contain other types of psychophysical experiences, such as steps and rhythms of Indian dance or the Chinese opera. They are all connected to feelings and stored in the archive to be recalled for creative work later. There has to be different kinds of materials in the archive. If there is only one type, it restricts the creativity.

Masks continue to be important tools in my pedagogy and training. Mask is a tool for the actor’s mimesis and it transfers everything into theatre. Larval masks are the most important masks for me because they evoke degenerated beings and drift towards organic forms. It is good to learn to work with non-realistic masks. Neutral mask is a useful tool, but neutrality can also be achieved through physical exercise, for example through Kungfu or any other form of martial arts that does not require building a character. The aim is the same as in using the neutral mask: emptying the body from mannerisms and building its functionality and disponibilité.

AT: You have also worked in Asia, mostly in India but recently also in China. What is the response of the students to your method of teaching and directing there?

MTG: In India, my teaching has usually been in short workshops, mostly for theatre art students at different universities. It is clear that disponibilité is something that has to be worked on also with the Asian students and actors! Also, there the actors and students have mannerisms and I have tried to tackle them with various methods. Not only with Lecoq-based exercises, but also with the the sort of Stanislavskian approaches that I learned from Radu Penciulescu. Usually I alternate between free and guided improvisation.
Basically, I work the same way in East and West. Ultimately, the method of working depends on the play. Usually the actors and students, at least in India, take it well because I am, in a way, standing between the cultures. I come from Europe but I have immersed myself in the classical Indian forms, texts and contemporary lifestyle for decades. I use Lecoq-based exercises in rehearsals and in workshops. There is preparation, animals, and elements and such, but not so much mask. Neutral mask is problematic in India, and also in China, because the relationship between the teacher and the student is different than in the West. Actually, I have never even tried using it in Asia! Asian cultures have strong mask traditions that the actors and students know even if they have not practiced the classical forms. Similarly, Asian actors already have a sense for stylized movement and they know that movement in a mask is always stylized. Self-expression does not dominate even in the contemporary theatre training. Preparing the performance is a more collective process. The idea of the neutral mask somehow dissolves in the collectivity!

I wish to enhance the creativity and quality of the actor’s movement and to extend the movement repertory by adding new, stylized dramatic patterns of expression from Indian, Chinese or Japanese classical theatre and other sources, even if I know that new movement systems enter the body/mind really only after about three years of constant training and need even more time to mature before they can be used creatively.

Notes

1 The school operated in various locations in Paris before settling at Le Central, 57 rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis in 1976.
2 Lecoq (2000: 5).
3 Lecoq (2000: 69).
4 In The Moving Body, there is an illustration of the nine attitudes. One is labeled as ‘the samurai’ (Lecoq, 2000: 78).
5 Sukeroku is one of the most popular early 18th-century kabuki dramas in which a son revenges the death of his father and reclams a stolen sword. In the beginning, Sukeroku, the hero, makes his spectacular entrance and strikes a pose (mie) on the pathway leading to the stage (hanamichi).
6 Ramanath (2014). This article gives a good account of Maya Tångeberg-Grischin’s artistic development and her theatrical activities in Kerala, India.
8 Literally: ‘upbeat’ in movement dynamics.
9 Ramanath (2014).

References