In rural Nova Scotia in the Canadian Maritimes, Jacques Lecoq’s program for actor training has borne fruit. Les Araignées du boui-boui, a university- and community-based theatre troupe, has flourished for thirty-five years under the artistic direction of Lecoq-trained Normand Godin. Following Lecoq’s insistence on direct observation of life, Les Araignées create award-winning theatre that responds creatively to the minority linguistic and cultural environment of the French Acadian communities of the Baie Sainte-Marie. Our purpose in this chapter is to identify reasons for their success in this context by applying principles drawn from cognitive studies and neuroscience, explored in relation to Lecoq’s teachings on movement, language, and the principle of limitation in set and prop design.

In Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Performance (2012), Rick Kemp explores Lecoq’s insights into theatrical communication, movement, acting, and the body – insights congruent with neurological models of movement and meaning. Lecoq’s understanding of physical movement as the foundation of all theatre is concordant with neuroscience’s theoretical identification of sensorimotor experience as the source domain for human cognition, conceptual metaphor, and shared meaning (Kemp, 2012: 77). Embodied Acting points to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who, along with other researchers in cognitive studies, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and neurology, are developing empirically responsible models of language and meaning that displace objectivism and large parts of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and postmodernism. The mind is inherently embodied, argue Lakoff and Johnson: abstract concepts are largely metaphorical; reason is evolutionary, imaginative, and emotionally engaged (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 3–4). They acknowledge philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey, who understood that ‘our bodily experience is the primal basis for everything we can mean, think, know, and communicate’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: xi). Humanists might add that, before the emergence of cognitive science, many poets and theatre artists intuited the body as the source of meaning.

In this evolving field, the image schema is an essential theoretical concept. Johnson defines schemata as patterns of neurological activity corresponding to basic physical movements, which structure mental organization.
A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape or regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities. These patterns emerge as meaningful structures for us chiefly at the level of our bodily movements through space, our manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions.

(Johnson, 1987: 29)

Examples include our physical experiences of orientation, movement, and balance. Like much of cognition, schemata are unconscious: ‘Our schemata for spatial and temporal orientation are so pervasive and so constitutive of our ordinary experience that they are taken for granted (and thus overlooked)’ in standard accounts of meaning and understanding’ (Johnson, 1987: 31). Nonetheless, such schemata underlie our most sophisticated discourses and concepts, such as achievement, freedom, and justice – they are the foundation of ‘the embodiment of thought in language’ (Kemp, 2012: 77). The significance of this work reaches far beyond the domain of theatre, yet Jacques Lecoq is a pioneer in the field because of his deep understanding of physical movement and its relationship with meaning.

Lecoq’s repertoire of physical exercises and his program for actor training is founded on the principals of matter (wood, metal, paper . . .) and of the elements (earth, air, fire, water): Tout Bouge – everything moves.

The laws of movement govern all theatrical situations . . . themes may vary [but] the structures of acting remain linked to movement and to its immutable laws. . . . Outer movements resemble inner movements, they speak the same language. My main fascination is with the poetics of these permanencies, which give birth to writing.

(Lecoq, 2002: 22)

At his International School in Paris, Lecoq trained actors in movements that resonate with those energetic neuronal patterns or schemata underlying our cognitive processes: the body awakening, for instance, to discover the elemental aspects of the world such as space, light, and stone. These movements, schemata, and metaphors are foundational features of human biology and cognition, and so they are as applicable to the Acadian community as they are to a very wide range of other cultural and artistic situations: a versatility which is one of the distinctive features of Lecoq’s pedagogy. The power of his program of movement training rests on his identification and development of techniques for the conscious manipulation of the embodied cognitive schemata distributed throughout human cultures.

Three ‘natural everyday movements’ constitute the three main pathways of the movement training: undulation, inverse undulation, and eclosion (Lecoq, 2002: 75). Undulation is ‘the human body’s first movement . . . underlying all locomotion’, the movement of fishes, snakes, adult and baby humans, and of matter itself, as quantum physics tells us. Inverse undulation expresses ‘dramatic reaction’ (Lecoq, 2002: 77), and so, conflict (Lecoq, 2002: 75). For example, instead of throwing a stone in a forward motion of the body, one dodges an oncoming stone. As opposed to the active mode, where movement is initiated from the grounded feet up, the reactive mode (the inverse undulation) is initiated by an external object; reacting to this object, the movement of the body starts from the head and goes down to the feet (Lecoq, 2002: 77). Eclosion, on the other hand, opens from the centre as a global expansion or contraction; this is the movement of a plant or root system opening to the environment, expanding, retracting. Interpreted in relation to their natural limits of expansion and retraction,
balance and respiration, disequilibrium and progression, these movements are adapted ‘for performance itself, and for feelings’ (Lecoq, 2002: 78).

We link these foundational movements to two plays, Evangéline and Tristan et Iseult, where they are the basis for shared understandings, metaphorically instantiated and articulated through mise en scène, script, movement, and physical set. Working within the discourse of cognitive studies, we understand that metaphor is not a literary ornament but ‘a mode of activity in the structuring of experience’ (Johnson, 1987: 70); likewise, understanding itself is a meaning event: a contribution to a shared, public world (Johnson, 1987: 175). The broad social significance of theatrical performance is intimately linked to the cognitive and affective rapport between players and spectators.

Evangéline is the play with which Les Araignées du boui-boui are most closely associated, as it was performed at the Baie Sainte-Marie every summer for eleven seasons. A musical drama based on Longfellow’s well-known poem and iconic heroine, the play tells the story of the deportation by the English of the neutral Acadians during the colonial wars between England and France. The Acadian communities of Nova Scotia still live with the practical consequences and cultural memory of their brutal expulsion and expropriation, which scattered and impoverished their forebears. Normand Godin’s script (Godin, 1994–2004) translates Longfellow’s poem into theatre and into the minority dialect of Acadian French spoken in the community. Variously adapted and toured, the play was also performed out of doors – as Evangéline au bois – in a participatory version on the shore just 180 kilometres south of Grand-Pré. The sets are of the place: old wood, driftwood, the bellows of an old forge; and, in every scene, the great black fishing nets used on the Bay of Fundy. The local artifacts and language resonate strongly in the Acadian fishing villages, which are home to the first and primary intended audience.

In the first act, patterns of undulation, inverse undulation, and eclosion are strongly established. The lights come up as the priest and villagers enter in waves, swirls of leaves in the Atlantic wind; women and children card and spin, sing in rounds, dance in circles. Men young and old come in from the harvest. In a climactic moment, Evangéline and Gabriel are pushed together by the villagers who celebrate their forthcoming marriage. The lovers step in time, hands linked, their gaze the still centre at the heart of the village. Looking a bit like a Bruegel painting, this scene idealizes community life through the instantiation of eclosion at its furthest reach. If eclosion is the movement of a flower fully open to the sun, Evangéline and Gabriel are that blossom’s stamen, with all that the image implies in terms of regeneration, sexuality, beauty, and biological life.

Eclosion requires balance, a key concept for Lecoq and for Johnson, who treats it as a particularly generative schema underpinning our notions of health, justice, and reason (Johnson, 1987: 74–98). Johnson’s discussion of balance emphasizes the central point or fulcrum around which forces and weights are distributed. In Evangéline, that point or fulcrum is pre-deportation Grand-Pré. Disequilibrium threatens with the sighting of the British ships in the Annapolis Basin. The people debate – should we flee or not? The forge clashes and the people sing in rounds, ‘Vent frais’. Cold Wind. The violence of the ensuing deportation upsets the balance and establishes a powerful inverse undulation expressed in the reactive movements of the chorus as it flees, falls, huddles, and hides. In the second act, eclosion is echoed when the refugees find shelter in Louisiana, but the complexity of the counter movement is too strong to be stifled.

Eclosion is Lecoq’s term rather than Johnson’s, and it does not appear in the list of schemata in Johnson’s The Body in the Mind (1987). It is a dynamic variant of the cycle, which
Johnson discusses at length in relation to reproduction and other bodily cycles, temporality, day and night, seasons, the stages of life in plants and animals, and the revolutions of heavenly bodies (Johnson, 1987: 119). As he qualifies, life cycles never return to exactly the same place, and so the cycle is ‘perhaps best represented as a sine wave with its periodic “rise” and “fall”’ (Johnson, 1987: 120). The basic Lecoq exercise to encapsulate this notion has the actor wearing a neutral mask and lying down in the foetal position, then awakening to the world, rising and expanding, and extending his body to the fullest as he takes in the full experience of being. Eclosion might be viewed as a more dramatic and perhaps more accurate description of the cycle schema with its metaphoric dimensions.

In Évangéline, from the scene of the Deportation on, the dominant metaphorical structure changes radically: balance is largely absent, and the path schema picks up significance as Évangéline pursues her long search for Gabriel. Now, masks of two kinds are used: grotesque and neutral. The neutral mask, by essence inert, is deprived of expression. The eyes are limited to looking straight ahead and lose much of their power to communicate as compared to their mobility on a human face. The features of the neutral mask are symmetrical and balanced. The asymmetrical grotesque masks signify disequilibrium. They are used immediately following the Deportation, when the exiles wander the American colonies in search of food, lodging, friends, and family. As French Catholics, they are despised and rejected. On stage, we see them limp as an ensemble; like the masks they wear, they are deformed, bewildered, almost inhuman.

The grotesque masks were made by the actors. Larger than life, they differ from Lecoq’s character masks (jealous, boastful, cunning, timid, assertive); nor are they Commedia dell’arte

Figure 31.1 Acadian exiles wandering in the British colonies of America. Excerpt from Évangéline, drame musical, performed by Les Araignées du boui-boui, Pointe-de-l’Église, Nova Scotia. 2004. Photograph © Gordon MacWillie.
or tragic. They befit a people famished, torn, plagued, and stretched to the limit of human resistance. The masks fulfill their function of prompting the bodies to hunch and twist, on the brink of exhaustion, with fear egging them on. The exiles neither faint nor fall only because they huddle as a group, and the disequilibrium of one is the prop of another. Only Evangéline stands out without a mask.

The neutral masks are used in two scenes, in a contrapuntal fashion. Early in the second act, Evangéline tracks Gabriel from campfire to cold campfire, always arriving too late. Dark cloaked figures wearing neutral masks hold flickering lanterns. They are indifferent, offer no recourse, increase her solitude. Likewise, in the last scene, masked and shrouded figures wheel in huge bellows serving as beds for the plagued Pennsylvanians, among whom Gabriel lies dying. Evangéline’s violent dance of disequilibrium has resolved into sacrifice; become nun, she moves from bed to bed to offer consolation, while the masked attendants activate the bellows’ breath, the movement of life. These scenes feature folk songs of love and faith. ‘Il y a longtemps que je t’aime/jamais je ne t’oublierai’. If the neutral mask’s symmetry signifies balance, then balance is a peace purchased at great cost. The songs and the masks develop the narrative wherein the forward-thinking, active Acadian nation loses identity and is transformed toward the folkloric.

Mobilization of shared meaning through the metaphorical extension of the image schemata is not the only aspect of Evangéline to resonate, both with Lecoq’s theatre and with current questions in cognitive neuroscience. There is, in addition, the fruitful issue of language. Les Araignées’ original mandate was pedagogical, to train students in the use of standard French. This exercise was not conducive to good theatre. The foreign vocabulary, syntax, and inflexions sounded false. In 1986, the Araignées decided to recruit Acadians from the community and use their local vernacular in the plays. The texts were either translated or written freely in the style and tone of the actors’ tongue, whatever part of Acadie they originated from. Few communities of the Acadian diaspora have kept their speech as close to its ancestral sixteenth and seventeenth century form as have the people of Nova Scotia. Isolated among their English-speaking neighbours, and deprived of French input, notably in schools, until the 1980s with Bill 65, their French has not followed the linguistic evolution leading to present-day French in France, nor for that matter in Québec (Massignon, 1962).

Lecoq’s innovative approach to language proved to be compelling for the Araignées’ community theatre. During Godin’s tenure at the Paris school, Lecoq invited students to use their native vernacular in theatre work in order to elicit the intonations and gestures of their distinctive cultures. Godin, listening to actors performing in the fifteen languages represented in his class, learned how intentions and emotions are channeled through bodily movements, gestures, and that mix of vowels and consonants specific to national identity. The work on poetry was eloquent in this regard: Lecoq asked students to select a favourite poem in their mother tongue, and read it repeatedly to a group of five or six classmates who understood nothing of this language. The object was for the group to express the poem in movement. The reader was not to hint at the meaning, neither gesturing nor dramatizing the poem. After several readings, the student actors began to move in response to rhythms and sounds. The results were often astounding: in many instances, the actors’ movements described quite literally the narrative and images of the poem.

Since Evangéline deals directly with Acadian history and myth, it was doubly appropriate to follow Lecoq’s teachings concerning the use of vernacular language and to write the script in the variety of French spoken at Baie Sainte-Marie. The use of the minority Acadian dialect enhanced the ‘ethnolinguistic vitality’ of the community (Landry, Allard & Deveau, 2011), and gave the Araignées’ work artistic reach and meaning.
In linguistically diverse Baie Sainte-Marie, performing in the minority dialect meant that three major sectors of the audience – Acadians, francophones, and anglophones – experienced the language differently. Members of the local Acadian-speaking community (fewer than 10,000 people) were of course proud to hear and to perform words and expressions threatened by globalization and assimilation. Pleased to animate the idiomatic music of their mother tongue, the Acadian actors became fluent and highly focused in their intentions, which flowed out of their bodies in gestures and facial expressions, the glint in the eye and the voiced intonation. The staging of the familial linguistic register generated positive affective responses such as identification and laughter, and this was true for the actors as well as the audience.

Francophones from elsewhere, on the other hand, sometimes found the local French difficult to understand. Cognitive science suggests that under such conditions, the listening mind struggles to comprehend, and is highly attentive. For this sector of the audience, it is likely that the use of the local dialect enhanced cognitive engagement. Why is this? Research on neural processing of incomplete and partial information made headlines recently in relation to the widely noted phenomenon of irritation provoked by listening to one-sided cellphone conversations – a significantly more engaging (i.e. annoying) experience than listening to an entire conversation (Galván, Vessal & Golley, 2013). Our human minds respond to puzzles for reasons perhaps linked to evolution – an unknown sound could threaten danger. The important point is that for audience members hailing from the international francophonie – and they are a population critical to Acadians’ linguistic and cultural survival – the use of local dialect might well have enhanced an attentive and serious reception of the play and its messages.

Monolingual English speakers in the audience might also have laughed less and reflected more. These audience members, who emotionally identified with the French-speaking Acadian protagonists at the same time that they were linguistically aligned with the English-speaking British soldiers carrying out the cruel deportation campaign, may have experienced the discomfort of what is known in cognitive studies as ‘affective incoherence’ (Clore & Schnall, 2008). The anglophone spectators’ subject position may have been divided – for example, in the outdoor version, Evangéline au bois, when the audience was threatened by armed English-speaking soldiers, separated by gender and age, and deported.

The use of Acadian dialect created theatrical intensity for each linguistic group in the Araignées’ audience, albeit differently. As well, and across the board, the actors’ use of their mother tongue magnified the authenticity of movement and gesture.

By choosing to work in a minority tongue, the Araignées gambled that they could transcend the language barrier, and thanks to Lecoq’s approach, they had success, touring their work to many international festivals. Their audience surveys showed that people understood the play, accessing the meaning through movement, action, and language indirectly, as music or sound, as in Lecoq’s poetry exercise. Schemata-based movements and linguistic sound can communicate with any public. This was the experience at Lecoq’s school, where the constraint of ethnic languages constantly reminded the students to tackle theatre in a more global way, with action and movement. Lecoq’s teachings regarding the use of vernacular language were richly rewarding when applied to the Araignées’ Evangéline.

The principle of limitation with respect to sets and props is another aspect of the Araignées’ theatre that can be interpreted both in relation to Lecoq’s teaching and to the insights of neuroscience concerning cognition and partial information. At Lecoq’s school, Godin learned to view limitation as an artistic necessity: limitation of movements, objects, sets,
Lecoq, neuroscience, and Acadian theatre

paraphernalia, words. A few strokes of the pen, the space between: cognition engages, and
the spectator’s mind ‘perks’ and fills the void. The great black fishnets of Evangéline speak to
the imagination as prop and set; as church, prison, bayou forest, hanging moss, blanket, and
souvenir of home. As seaweed becomes shroud, they recall the living plants ripped loose by
storms and left on the shore to rot, the very metaphor of Acadians ripped from their lands.
When the play does not command every meaning and detail, the audience partners in the
creation.

Lecoq trained his students to improvise without a set, because part of the improvisation
was to perform the set: to create the desert or ocean by the panning motion of the head
along a vast horizon, eyes in synch as if they saw, in turn, a thousand vertical spaghetti, as
Lecoq suggested in class. The expansion of the chest and the elevated head suggest a moun-
tain; the contraction of the head into raised shoulders, a very small room. A pole, ably used
in the fashion of a rifle, blocks out the exotic nature of the real thing and shifts attention to
the actor. Tristan et Iseult is played on a chess board of beige and blue gym mats, and staves
and poles serve as swords, masts, spears, stakes, a telescope, a stretcher, and bows. The actor
is also part of the set: he or she is a punt, a door, a boat, a mast, and a lodge. Even when the
actor is off the acting area, the actor is still part of the play and meaningful; the actor may be
playing an instrument or creating a soundscape (bird calls, howls in the night, the sound of
the wind, the crashing of the waves). Nothing is hidden, everything is acting.

Godin based the script for Tristan and Iseult (Godin, 2000) on René Louis’ version of the
tragic and brutal medieval tale (Louis, 1972). Conflict and disequilibrium push the action for-
ward as terrible, destabilizing decisions dramatize Tristan’s betrayal of his own centre, or ful-
crum: the code of chivalry binding his life to his king’s. The props, poles, and staves enhance
the perception of imbalance. Chosen for their unstable nature, they cannot stand on their
own, but are oblique and manipulated, off-kilter, like the characters themselves: the noble-
men are dissatisfied with the king’s unmarried status; Tristan is torn between his love for Iseult
and his uncle; King Marc is betrayed by his wife; Tristan must betray both Iseult and his sec-
ond wife married in exile. Everyone is pushing, pulling, being pushed, being pulled, knocked
over, worried, and tense. Many exercises at Lecoq’s school touched on instability because, as
he said, it entails tension, and tension is the essence of drama. In the vocabulary developed
by Lakoff and Johnson, we would speak here of the balance schema and disequilibrium, the
dominant image schemata for this play.

Of all the Araignées’ plays, Tristan is the most physical, with fighting and acrobatics that
require suppleness and strength. Lecoq taught actors to use muscle tension, imbalance, and
rhythm to communicate with the whole body. The actors in Tristan worked in tights to accen-
tuate the body’s expressiveness. Jerzy Grotowski went further: his actors worked almost naked,
because the expressiveness of the body was enhanced by the muscle tone. Such is the beauty
of high-level athletes.

In the Araignées’ 2000 production, the mighty Tristan was played by martial artist Christo-
ophe Dol, whose fearlessness and athleticism made him a very convincing lover for Iseult. Dol
played bare-chested, his fine-toned musculature displaying extraordinary powers of
expression. When he drank the magic love potion concocted by Iseult’s mother, his dia-
phragm movements alone made the potion intake and its effect on his senses clear. Badly
wounded, he faced the fiery dragon: his back muscles, turned towards the crowd, conveyed his
life’s effort as he mustered his forces, lifting his spear high in the air, and bearing it down into
the dragon’s heart. An eminent Halifax actor, Walter Borden, who adjudicated the Liverpool
International Festival in Nova Scotia, raved over Dol’s power of expression. This no doubt
would have been, for Lecoq, the epitome of bodily expression. Many actors can convey a lot through movement, but few can use muscle tone to heighten their powers of expression.

To conclude, our experience demonstrates that Lecoq’s program for actor training can lend itself very well to the requirements of an amateur theatre where plays need to be adapted to the public’s experience of life. ‘The school’s sights are set on art theatre, but theatre education is broader than the theatre itself’ (Lecoq, 2002: 16). Lecoq speaks of a voyage pédagogique where teacher and student learn from each other: ‘One of the school’s unique features is to provide as broad and durable a foundation as possible, since we know that each student will go on to make his own journey using the foundations we provide’ (Lecoq, 2002: 16). As Kemp reminds us, Lecoq himself considered that he trained his students for a theatre yet to be invented, and he insisted that his graduates develop their own, unique style (Kemp, 2012: 90).

Lecoq confirmed that actors mature with patience and respect as they are invited into challenging territories; they work together for the elusive, for beauty and perfection. They search for that equation between the complexity of life and the simplicity of its depiction. Lecoq’s innovative movement training works in deep concordance with the image schemata and movement-based metaphors identified by neuroscience, and in this way enables theatre workers to achieve a more profound connection between life as it is lived and as it is manifested on the stage. Aspects of Lecoq’s training dealing with language and with directorial design are also congruent with the lessons of neuroscience, and have proven to be cannily appropriate for our culturally complex community setting. For these reasons, Les Araignées du boui-boui, through Normand Godin, continue to follow the path laid out by Jacques Lecoq.

Notes

1 People attempt to process and integrate peripheral information, Galván, Vessal and Golley (2013) suggest, citing the work of Vachon et. al on ‘attentional capture’, ‘a . . . general interruption mechanism designed to alert the organism to novel, and hence potentially important, events’ (Vachon, Hughes & Jones, 2007: 1060).

2 Tristan was also presented in 2003 at the World Amateur Theatre Congress in Halifax, where it won the Public’s Choice for best play, best director, and best actress (Georgette LeBlanc).

References


Lecoq, neuroscience, and Acadian theatre


