Simon McBurney and William Kentridge studied at L’École Jacques Lecoq in the early 1980s. After leaving the school, their paths diverged and both have become internationally celebrated artists. Kentridge is best known for his prints, drawings and animated films, and McBurney for his productions as Artistic Director of Complicite and as a prolific film actor. In recent years, both have arrived at directing opera and have staged international productions of *The Magic Flute*: Simon McBurney for De Nederlandse Opera (ENO) and International Festival of Lyric Art, Aix-en-Provence in 2013; and William Kentridge for Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie (Bruxelles), Teatro di San Carlo (Napoli), Opéra de Lille and Théâtre de Caen (originally in 2005). *The Magic Flute* was the starting point for this conversation (Kentridge and McBurney, 2014) between these two Lecoq-trained artists and reveals how their shared training in Paris indelibly shaped their creative processes.

**S.McB:** For so long I was asked to do opera and I found it difficult, because in the production form of opera, there are so many disparate elements. Everything is jammed together in this sort of unholy scrum at the end, and then something emerges which is not quite the beautiful thing that you had envisaged.

**W.K:** You are also stuck with the libretto, which is a given, and it’s much more difficult to rearrange that than a piece of theatre or a play. The space in which you work is much narrower.

**S.McB:** For me, that is equally what excites me. Because the space is narrower, it compresses your imagination, and so forces the imagination to find its way around things. When it came to *The Magic Flute*, my first thought was, what was it like to hear for the first time? Not in the sense of historical reconstruction, but how did the audience react to the story and what was the play between story and music? And I suppose in a sense what did the music actually do? The excitement, as you say, the narrowness of opera, was this idea of reacting to a musical score. Removing all thought of imposing something on it but exploring what was coming out of it.

**W.K:** It was the first large-scale opera that I had done. I started by taking the project on for better or worse rather than having an interpretation at the beginning.

**S.McB:** Are you musical? I mean, do you constantly listen to music?
W.K: Yes I do, and I listen to a lot of opera, but I listen to it more than I read the libretto.

S.McB: This is one of the mysteries to me about opera, because unlike you, I didn't listen to a lot of opera. It infuriated me because I never knew what the hell was going on. There was incredibly beautiful music going on at certain points and then at other moments there would just be . . .

W.K: . . . shouting.

S.McB: I thought, 'Well this isn't really for me'. This is not a communicative theatrical experience. However, in The Magic Flute there comes a point where it's almost like Mozart says 'let me take over', a sense that he is done with it and just writes music. The music is incredibly articulate. In the end I thought, I am going to proceed with the idea that Mozart was a relatively intelligent man. I am going to give him confidence even if I don't have total confidence in Schikaneder\(^1\) and this other extraordinary man Giesecke.\(^2\) What is interesting is what music does to people. For the vast majority of people, it taps into the emotions and goes beyond words. But at the heart of opera is this communication where music and narrative are conjoined. This question of music has always fascinated me, partly because my father was an archaeologist. I am very interested in the pre-history of music and language. One of the things I have been looking at recently is the fact that the hypoglossal nerve in the brain, which is the nerve that goes from the brain to the mouth, is very, very complicated. In prehistoric man, before we feel language began, the hypoglossal canal, which the nerve passes through, is the same size as now. It indicates that they had all the capacities for language that we have, possibly including intonation, rhythm, pitch and respiratory control. They had to have some sort of non-verbal language, and what is that if it isn't music? I have always felt that music is something that happens before language and that it has its own narrative. Music is this fundamental communication of the gesture that lies underneath the gesture of language and articulates the things that language cannot.

W.K: I was interested in the overload that opera gives you; it has always been an impure, excessive form and it's about what you're seeing, hearing and the story you are following. I am interested in the overload and how one picks and makes one's way through it. What you see changes what you hear, and what you feel is that absolute shift between those two elements. Is there a way in which the images can have the same narrative push as the music has? I think the glorious excess is extraordinary.

S.McB: Do you think that there is a human inclination towards the vast spectacle?

W.K: No, it's not towards the vast. When I talk about excess, it's towards pointing out that you have lots of incoherent segments and you construct them into a simple coherence. Even as we are talking, there are many other side thoughts going through our heads, but from those we construct the one sentence that comes out of our mouths. I think it's about the porous focus: when we think we are focusing on something, that single-minded focus is actually such a combination of different contradictory elements. That's almost a given when working with the opera. You don't know what to look at but your mind will almost make those choices, and from those things you will make your version of it.

S.McB: What I find fascinating about your work is I can see your mind or your vision reacting to everything. It is fascinating to me that you made Sarastro the centre of it because 'in diesen heil'gen Hallen' in the second act there are two or three verses that are almost exactly the same, but in fact something is happening, Sarastro is not the same at the end as he was at the beginning. For me, the very simple conceit was that this opera is about a flute that is magic. For Mozart, music has a transformative power. Just as the flute stops you from doing something or brings the animals alive, there is the idea that music itself changes consciousness and I think that this links in to the idea of the enlightenment.
W.K: Mozart’s Sarastro is interesting because it’s 1791, the beginning of the French Revolution, and the most optimistic moment of the German Enlightenment. You have a character that combines a monopoly of wisdom and a monopoly of violence and power. I think Robespierre would have described himself as a Sarastro doing whatever was necessary to bring people from darkness into the temple of light. I think that’s what the opera tries to do: it tries to bring people from darkness into light. So that made me understand Sarastro, and the violence he has, as a very ambiguous figure because one also senses that the optimism that Mozart would have had towards Sarastro is not cynical. It wasn’t until years after the production that I actually understood what the production should have actually been.

S.McB: Of course! Perhaps when we went to L’École Jacques Lecoq, either consciously or unconsciously we picked up on Jacques insisting that you only understood something through doing it. I am in enormous admiration of many of my colleagues who produce about six or seven shows a year, but generally they have worked it all out in advance. One of the things I really received from the school was this idea of embodiment, or from Jacques specifically, that when you do it you begin to understand it. That remains even in something like The Magic Flute.

W.K: I think the embodiment, as you say, learning it through the body, which was so much a part of the school, rather than through an analysis of psychology or a rational analysis: finding the psychology from what the body does. What movements do you do? How do you breathe? All of those things were certainly the most valuable. If I teach drawing, I almost always just use exercises from the school, very specific exercises. The six degrees of tension,3 so walking up and down the room: you can get somebody who is making drawings to understand that and transform how they draw. It’s both very specific and very learnable and trainable. You can practice and become good at the changing gears in the levels of tension or, taking an animal metaphor, for how you are going to move and breathe. You understand that the practice and the training, or the learning the grammar of something, can be a kind of strategy in the studio. You understand that that action itself will bring a whole set of meanings with it and listen to those meanings rather than starting with the meaning and trying to find the execution of it.

S.McB: I found that very interesting for opera singers. I don’t know if you’ve used that with opera singers as well? It’s enormously helpful for them in terms of moving.

W.K: So what sort of things do you do with them?

S.McB: I do exactly the same thing. I take them through the seven levels of tension. I say, ‘Now I would like you to move at this level of tension, but this aria is extremely tense’. So I will have the Queen of the Night sing this aria ‘Der Hölle Racher’ at this very low level of tension. Suddenly, the contrast of the two things means that she doesn’t care about her daughter at all.

W.K: How did you get her into that wheelchair? How did you persuade the singer to do that?

S.McB: I was an innocent in opera and also I had sort of had no respect for it. I said to them, ‘This is the proposition: I don’t know what I want to do but I will be asking you to move. If you don’t want to do this, that’s fine, go and do another opera, but if you want to do this with me, this is what I’m going to do’. Also, I was very lucky because I was in Amsterdam with Pierre Audi4 and he knew how I worked and he cast it. I didn’t know anybody, but I said ‘give me the singers that you think are appropriate’, but in a way that’s an extraordinary liberation, because then you say, ‘this is the material and now I have to make something’.

W.K: And you did such great things with them. I was doing it with the conductor Renée Jacobs, and he knew exactly musically how he wanted to do every note from the beginning.
It was completely clear for him. When it came to the singers, at first I pretended I knew what I was doing, ‘I want you to go and stand there, turn at bar 24 and come down’. I painted myself into a circle. At a certain point after about a week, I said ‘we need to have a meeting’. I said, ‘you’ve got to understand how a drawing is made. When you start a drawing you have an empty sheet of paper and you have some idea what the drawing may be and you put down the first mark. And then it’s a conversation between what you see, what is already there on the paper and what you vaguely imagine. The course of making the drawing is discovering what the drawing is. So here, we’ve got six weeks to rehearse. At the end of the six weeks, everybody will know exactly where to stand and at every moment where to move, but we’ve got the six weeks to do it. As much as you trust Maestro Jacobs knowing exactly what he wants to do, you’ve got to trust me not knowing what I want you to do. If you ask me what you must do and I tell you an answer, it will always be the wrong answer because I do not know’. For some people that was ‘fine, that’s great, what a nice way of working’, but for other people it was ‘God save us from these amateurs’.

S.McB: I think the same thing applies with Lecoq. I was not a director before I went to France. One of the interesting things about going through that first year was that I discovered that I can actually shape these things. But the only way I can shape it is that I have to not know. I cannot know. So that the idea of making a drawing, following a line on a piece of paper . . . for me the same thing occurs absolutely in a rehearsal room, and with other people. I have the impression, in fact, before I go into a rehearsal room, I have this image of a big book, I have a sleepless night and in the shower in the morning I think ‘I’ll do this and this and there’s the first half hour. Okay, everyone will know what I’m doing!’ I arrive in the rehearsal room, I open the book in my mind and do the first half hour and then there’s this moment where I open the second page, which I haven’t written . . .

WK: And there it is.

S.McB: And there it is. It’s really just simply like that. So the doing of that leads to the next page and the next page. Occasionally there are terrible days when you turn the page and there is nothing there and it’s a disaster. The central metaphor for Jacques in that first year, the metaphor of the journey, is something that I have retained very strongly underneath. What was interesting to me about his work was not the idea of some technique or anything, but about what he would call, ‘points de refère’ – reference points. There is nothing between them, but that’s where everything happens, they are handholds, something to hold onto for a moment and then entirely to be let go and forgotten.

WK: I also had no thought of being a director when I went to Lecoq. I went there thinking I was an actor, and I discovered after three weeks that I was not an actor.

S.McB: But did you enjoy acting?

WK: I loved it but whatever I did, it was the same. I could only do one thing. But I also discovered in those auto-cours that there was a lot of directing that came out of it. Not that I expected to be directing afterwards at all.

S.McB: What was very interesting was that every week you were with groups of people who were absolutely impossible and you had to negotiate. An ideal preparation for an opera director, in fact.

WK: Some people who just wanted to talk and talk and talk, which would drive me nuts. I’d think ‘just stop this, just get on to our feet and start moving’. That is a strategy: thinking by acting, thinking through doing. Physical thinking. For me as an artist, that physical thinking happens in the studio: the way the physical action of the drawing, the shoulder, the hand, the knuckles becomes a way of, not expressing thought, but generating thought. Of course,
working with other people is important. The activity of talking something through is often a way of checking what it sounds like to yourself as you watch the other person. Can they follow it? Do they understand it? But the activity of talking is the same as the activity of drawing or of directing. It’s in the activity of saying the sentences that new ideas come, that the second page writes itself. That’s a vital part of collaboration. The same thing happens with the drawing, the drawing is like a different person talking back to you, or listening. You start by drawing this vase of flowers, because it’s there and you need to start somewhere and you understand that in the first hour of drawing there are eight other drawings that need to be made. I’m always interested in the inauthentic origins of ideas and images. You don’t have to wait for the good idea. You look for the less good idea and then you can begin.

S.McB: Ideas are never a problem.

W.K: For me they are a problem, but I’ve learned not to trust good ideas. We had this idea in Faustus, we were going to have a puppet, because, you know a puppet can do what a human can’t do, it can grow and expand and we can have this emperor devouring the whole continent and the puppet will get broader and broader. We did it, but in the end all you saw were the coat hangers and the shoulders getting mechanically bigger and the belly getting bigger. The idea was dead in front of your eyes, all you could see was someone creaking out an idea. With all projects, I think ‘here’s a good idea and we’ll start with this, it will be the backbone’ and most of the time that initial idea disappears.

S.McB: I come back to the beginning when you talked about what people saw in the opera, and how you give them this overload. One of the consequences of what you do, is that the audience makes an arc through it for themselves. So it’s the same as you and your pencil and the page except that it’s not empty. This is principally what I took from Jacques Lecoq. I realise that in all my education I had difficulty sitting behind a desk, because I always started to do doodles. I thought, ‘I’m incapable of doing an exam. I’m incapable of learning anything. I must be the most stupid person in the world because this doesn’t mean anything to me’. However, I would say I am a fairly accomplished charlatan, and so I managed to fake my way through school and university. But the first time I was confronted with this was when I came to Paris with all sorts of ideas, academic ideas about what I thought everything was. One of the interesting things for me with Jacques was this question that improvisation set up. There was this extraordinary exercise where Jacques would say ‘The beginning of the world’. And I think, ‘I’ve got this idea, this brilliant idea’ so you improvise your incredible idea, you sit down and look at him, rather proudly. ‘That’, he said ‘is an idea, that is not the beginning of the world’. So the question of what you think you are showing and what the audience is actually receiving was an extraordinary illumination for me. And as I’ve said before, this metaphor of the journey has remained in the structure of all the compositional pieces that I’ve made ever since. I think for me, [a] compositional piece is easier than writing because that’s how I make work. I’m very influenced by the musical form, the idea of harmony, and juxtaposition and melody, and bass notes when I’m making something.

W.K: But what you’re saying about the difference between the idea and what is actually received, I remember there was one exercise where you simply had to come up slowly and simply stand up and be present.

S.McB: Oh yes, you encounter the world for the first time.

W.K: There were some people who managed to just stand up and be present. And you’d say ‘yes, that’s the actor’. And when I did it there were just too many doubts and too many thoughts going through my head, saying ‘I shouldn’t be here’. There was no place to hide.

S.McB: No, but that’s wonderful.
W.K: Well, you see what you are.

S.McB: Even though it was entirely physical, it was like a form of therapy because you discovered something about yourself that nobody could possibly tell you. Quite a long time later for me, I understood the intelligence at the heart of it that revealed the way you articulate something, the way that you think.

W.K: For me that very simple exercise, where you start bending down and you stand up in one gesture and you end up with your arms straight above your head? You need to have just the right energy in the first moment to reach the top. Neither to have too much energy that you have to stop yourself at the top, or not enough so that you have to push yourself into position at the end. The great thing about it is that it’s not just an idea, because it’s something that you practice and practice physically. And actually, whether in the end you can do it well or badly, it isn’t so important, but to understand it as a trainable skill. To actually think about the energy of the starting gesture, it’s what the rehearsal is about.

S.McB: I suddenly felt brought into the present, whereas all my education was about what are you achieving, or what have you learnt. It was to do with the past or the future. One of the other fascinating things for me was seeing people in the school from entirely different cultures do these exercises. The different approaches were extraordinary. I was in a group of people from all over the world, from Colombia, Brazil, Senegal, Gabon, Japan, Scandinavia, America. That was very revealing to me in terms of the exercise that you just talked about, because these exercises were about the impossible thing. The idea of the neutral is as impossible as the idea of the present, but the attempt is very interesting. And to see people, who without any forethought just stood up and were present, who were by and large not the Europeans or the Americans, was incredibly salutary for me. To understand that there was another way of seeing or being in the world other than the European or Eurocentric.

W.K: It manifested itself for me in not such a fundamental way, but I was interested that when doing exercises to do with emotion, the Anglo-Saxon way was always to ironise them: not to actually own the delight, the joy, the grief. Which is why I think in Melodrama, where emotions get played to the full, you could see that there was a way to do it without any irony, without any self-protection. I thought, ‘How lucky to be South American, where you can just own this emotion directly!’ We are embarrassed about strong emotions directly expressed. It’s one of the great things about opera, is that you really want big emotions: love, hate, desire. They’re not ironised. They’re fully shown.

S.McB: Jacques talked about the gesture underneath the gesture, the idea that there might be one gesture that might encapsulate grief. In some cases in opera, there is an extraordinary moment when there is a single gesture and everything moves towards it. It’s something that is often communicating a single thing through a complex set of filters, but the single gesture is something that interests me. That is a moment of extraordinary presence: this gesture that takes us to the limit of a human emotion or even an idea or intention. It becomes a single gesture that encompasses everything. At some point the words disappear into the music, and then come out of it again. I suppose, if you like, what I was talking about at the beginning, when I said that music comes before words . . . it’s almost like we reach back to a prehistoric time where there’s something elemental, underneath, which is then exposed or brought to light. It touches on the circumference of this unknowable thing that we call the imagination, or creativity. It shows you that you can become skilled at the beginning of the very thing that allows you to turn the page and find the next thing and the next thing. But the one thing Jacques didn’t tell you at all was what you should be saying.
Notes

1  Emanuel Schikaneder was the librettist for The Magic Flute.
2  The libretto for The Magic Flute, written by Schikaneder, shares much of its plot and many of its characters with the Singspiel Oberon, written by Karl Ludwig Giesecke.
3  This exercise is more commonly referred to as the seven levels of tension.
4  The founder of the Almeida Theatre, Pierre Audi, programmed a season of Complicite’s work there in 1989, including a production of The Visit and a piece of music theatre titled The Phantom Violin.
6  This exercise forms part of the work with the neutral mask.
7  Eclosion.

Reference