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LECOQ AND COMPLICITE

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At the beginning of Complicite’s production of *Out of A House Walked A Man* (1994), which is based on the Soviet writer Daniil Kharms’ stories and fragments of writing, one of the two actors who play Kharms, Toby Sedgwick, enters and announces that he is going to test out his theory of laughter. He glances around his audience, making eye contact with specific spectators to attempt to make them laugh. When one does, Sedgwick proceeds to play with the spectator’s laugh, building complicity with the spectator and making others laugh, then returning to the original spectator, embroidering the laughter, until nearly all are drawn into Sedgwick’s game, playing and improvising with the laughter. His improvisation appears effortless, but anyone who has taken a workshop on clown with Jacques Lecoq, Philippe Gaulier, or Pierre Byland recognizes that this is an exercise in finding one’s own clown. Most students will, in Lecoq parlance, ‘flop’, but paradoxically it is in the flops that one’s true clown is revealed. In *Improvisation in Drama*, Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow describe a workshop on clown run by Lecoq graduate and Complicite associate, Clive Mendus, with students at the University of East Anglia. They succinctly sum up the practice of the Lecoq clown: ‘The clown plays the realities of what and where and with whom he finds himself to be. He cannot know those realities in advance, for so much of it depends upon us, the audience, that it cannot be pre-planned’ (Frost & Yarrow, 1990: 68–69).

‘Clown’, ‘Melodrama’, ‘Commedia dell’arte’, ‘Bouffons’ and ‘Tragedy’ are what Lecoq calls ‘The Main Dramatic Territories’ and are discussed in detail in his book *The Moving Body* (Lecoq, 2000: 105–153). Lecoq originally described them as theatre forms which ‘[. . .] serve as an example, not for their museum aspect but for the scope they offer, so that the student can become familiar with the maximum level of theatrical play employing the human being in his entirety’ (Lecoq, 1979: 153). In his introduction to the ‘Dramatic Territories’, Lecoq writes: ‘A true understanding and knowledge of theatre inevitably requires a profound experience of play’ (Lecoq, 2000: 97). This chapter will draw on both ‘play’ and the ‘Dramatic Territories’ to trace the threads of Lecoq’s teaching in the work of Complicite, using examples drawn mainly, but not exclusively, from four productions: *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003), *A Disappearing Number* (2007), *The Master and Margarita* (2012) and *The Magic Flute* (2013). These productions have been chosen as they are representative of the spectrum of the company’s work since 2000, encompassing opera, textual adaptation, and an increasing interest.
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in intercultural performance. Their diversity and range permits a nuanced analysis yet allows commonalities across them to be revealed.

Lecoq places the body at the centre of his pedagogy, and corporeal practices underlie Complicite’s work. This takes many forms, from tiny gestures to intense and real physical labour, as when the actors construct a barn on stage in The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol (1994). In a chapter about the making of The Elephant Vanishes, Complicite artistic associate Catherine Alexander writes that the company engaged in

[. . .] a discussion about literal or representational work, and in contrast that which is dynamic or expressive. This distinction is central to understanding the training at Lecoq’s school and to getting inside the reason why Complicite shows have a unique flavour.

(Alexander, 2010: 67)

The emphasis on using a ‘dynamic and expressive’ approach in their work has been further developed through an increasing use of digital technology, which all four productions employ to not only enhance the mise-en-scene, to support and develop the narrative, creating a bricolage of layered effects collapsing space and time, but also to enable the company to extend the physicality of the body. In The Elephant Vanishes, for example, clouds are projected on the set whilst one of the actors hangs and swings on a rope, creating the illusion of hovering above them.

From the company’s beginning with Put It On Your Head in 1983, their shows were devised through improvisation and collaboration between the actors themselves, and most company members were drawn from a pool of actors who had trained at Lecoq’s school or with a former teacher at the school, Philippe Gaulier. From 1989 they began adapting material from existing texts and other sources, including plays, such as Friedrich Durrenmatt’s The Visit (1989), and working with writers, notably John Berger, whose story of French peasant life, The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol, they adapted in 1994.1 The company’s work has developed enormously in scope since then, yet collaboration and play still remain vital to the making process. These qualities are still strong features of the pedagogy at Lecoq’s school. Matt Feerick, Artistic Director of the company Wet Picnic, who graduated from the school in 2009, stressed the importance that Lecoq placed on collaboration: ‘The entire journey from neutral mask and ending with clown makes sense as a physical and emotional journey, they are opposite but somehow joined and recognise each other, impro and collaboration run right through it ’ (Feerick, 2014). Likewise, Steven Canny’s rehearsal diary for Light (Canny, 2000: 85–103), for which he was Assistant Director, provides examples of movement and rhythm exercises, games and company discussions which reveal connections back to Lecoq’s teaching, as well as the ways in which a collaborative and company ethos is developed during the rehearsal process.

Play and complicity are used as a synthesising practice in rehearsal, as an underlying ethos, and in specific moments in Complicite productions. A tiny yet memorable example of play and complicity between performers and with the audience occurred in The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol (1994) in a scene where Lucie Cabrol, played by Lilo Baur, is picking black currants from the bushes, which are performed by the cast. She trod on one of the actor’s hands, who looked at the audience and said ‘Ouch’. A more extended scene of play occurred in The Magic Flute during the duet between Papageno, the bird catcher, and Papagena in Act Two. They moved down from the stage into the auditorium and made their way through the front two
rows of the stalls, singing continuously. They acknowledged and occasionally paused to look directly at the audience, making eye contact with some spectators before returning to stage to finish the aria. This incursion was videoed live and projected onto the back wall of the set, so that the rest of the audience could watch the interchange and the blurring of the space between actor and spectator. The spectator’s sensorial perception of the heightened reality of the aria was further compounded by it being mediated through and mediatised by the projected image. The spectators were both distanced from the moment and yet became active participants, absorbed into and complicit with the scene as it unfolded in the blending of several realities and several fictions. Those spectators confronted by the singers could choose not to play; however, they were still implicated in the game. This complex use of technology felt entirely appropriate for an opera with its themes of reality and magic, the natural and supernatural, and its concern with a secret brotherhood which observes and guides humanity. This resonates with the example of the black currant bush in *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*, reminiscent of the openness and directness of clown play.

In his introduction to Lecoq’s 1987 book *Theatre of Movement and Gesture*, David Bradby notes of his teaching that ‘The exploration of the laws of movement was always practical and could only be experienced in and through the body. But neither was it divorced from the emotions [...]’ (Bradby, 2006: xiii). This synthesis of emotion and movement was evident in Complicite’s bold production of *The Master and Margarita* (2012), an adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov’s multi-layered satire on Soviet reality, belief and art under Stalinism. Complicite’s production fused *bouffon* and melodrama so that melodrama was played out by *bouffon* characters. For Lecoq, the territory of melodrama provides the student with an opportunity in which ‘[...] all the grand emotions come into play: good and evil, morality with innocence, sacrifice, treason, etc.’ (Lecoq, 2000: 105). Lecoq contrasts melodrama with the territory which emerges in the *bouffons* and is connected to the metaphysical and the divine but parodies these grand emotions. An example of this synthesis occurred near the beginning of the play in which the actors were going to work on a tram. Ostensibly they played people going about their daily business, but behind the façade of the ordinary, they created contra masks of contorted movement, distorted bodies and grotesque facial expressions. They transformed into a ghastly chorus, visually reminiscent of mediaeval depictions of the ‘Dance of Death’ revealing the ‘grand emotions’ prompted by lust, death and truth which lie beneath the everyday, and which are present in the original novel. The starting point of the story is that the devil, Woland, returns to earth accompanied by a black cat – in the production, a life-size, spitting and sexually provocative puppet – and a naked woman. This trio functioned as a grotesque and sinister sideshow, provoking their audience, coming down from the stage to accuse the spectators of being complicit with the institutions of state power and a corrupt political regime.

Similar to the scene in *The Magic Flute*, the audience was, in these moments, both distanced from the performance on the stage but also implicated in the narrative and actions of the characters. The distancing was achieved by juxtaposing three bodies on the stage, with contrasting movement patterns, rhythms of play and textures. Watching a naked body next to the unreal, yet somehow real, body of the cat puppet was unnerving for the spectator, but this visceral representation mirrored the mix of the grotesque and the poetic in Bulgakov’s writing. Complicite have been using puppets in many of their productions since *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1997, in which, in an astounding illusion, Grusha’s child was played by a puppet which then metamorphosed onstage into a live child. Lecoq does not mention puppetry in *The Moving Body*, although Julie Taymor, in an interview with Richard Schechner, talks about Madame Citron, a teacher at the school from 1969–1971, who ‘ [...] introduced
me to puppetry [. . .]’ (Taymor, 2001: 27) and that ‘Madame Citron animated objects, so it was really about mime, about understanding shape, form and substance’ (Taymor, 2001: 27). Like the play with objects and masks, and conversely the use of technology, the puppet extends the range of physical possibilities for both the actor and for the expressive use of space in the company’s work.

The production of The Elephant Vanishes (2003) was set in a contemporary, urban Japan, in keeping with the original short stories by Haruki Murakami, first published in 1993. It used an all-Japanese cast and was a co-production with Setagaya Public Theatre, Tokyo. Murakami’s stories are gently humorous, ironic, surreal, containing few references to Western stereotypical notions of traditional Japanese culture. In the programme for the production at the Barbican, London, in 2003, McBurney writes, ‘For us in the west, the sensation of reading Murakami’s novels is both familiar and disconcerting’ and notes that ‘We are from an Aristotelian dualistic world [. . .]. In Japan there is no such division. They have a unified and collective vision of the world which we find very difficult to grasp’ (McBurney, 2003). Lecoq’s emphasis on the actor’s embodiment can be seen as a challenge to Western dualism, and as Bradby observes, ‘Lecoq feels that all human beings share a communal poetic sense [. . .]’ (Bradby, 2006: xiii). The production conveyed the poetic sense through the depiction of everyday Japanese life synthesized with representations of the dreamlike, as the example of floating above clouds indicates. However, a programme note for Complicite’s 1986 Christmas show Please Please Please is revealing: ‘Looking at the extraordinary in the very ordinary, the poetic in the unpoetic, Complicite examine the inside pockets of grey gabardines and create a world of indecision, huge tenderness and remarkable idiocy’ (Theatre de Complicite, 1986). Clearly, poetic synthesis has long been a preoccupation of the company.

Many Complicite productions use a chorus drawn from the different choruses of bouffon, tragedy and melodrama as Lecoq describes them (Lecoq, 2000: 105–153). In The Elephant Vanishes, the chorus was used effectively in the moving ending, in which all the characters provided a threnody of interlocking voices and sounds from throughout the play. This reminded the spectators that the events and stories they had been witnessing were still resonating and present in a shared moment between performers and audience. Specific examples of the territories were also threaded throughout the production, such as in the scene of the vanishing elephant, where the actor performed a short piece of clown slapstick with his newspaper, his breakfast and a coffee cup. The highly comic scene of a midnight attack on a bakery by a newly-wed, very hungry couple also drew on the clown style which suited the absurd, comedic, yet transgressive undertone of Murakami’s original story, The Second Bakery Attack (Murakami, 2003: 36–49). Objects were protean and played with; the couple moved from lying in bed to making a loaf of bread by kneading the pillow as the dough. A short while later, they set off in their quest to find a bakery, creating a crazy car ride seated on chairs whilst a video of the passing city played behind them. Highly virtuosic, this cinematic episode referred back to Complicite’s second show, A Minute Too Late (1985), in which, using three chairs, the actors conjured up the hilarious scene of a hearse driving at top speed with a macho driver, a terrified passenger and a corpse which continually popped up.

Complicite’s production of A Disappearing Number (2007) was based on the true story of the collaboration between an untrained Indian mathematics genius, Srinivasa Ramanujan, whom a professor of mathematics, G. N. Hardy, invited from Madras to work with him in Cambridge in 1913. It used this event as a catalyst to explore the relationships between contemporary and colonial cultures, as well as between music, dance and mathematics. Their story was intercut with the contemporary fictional story of Ruth, a mathematics lecturer at
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Brunel University, and her relationship with Al, an American of Indian descent, a futures trader in London. Using film, projections from an overhead projector (OHP), movement and Indian dance, the production played with complex time frames and narratives, often simultaneously. A note in the playtext states, ‘A Disappearing Number is in part inspired by G. N. Hardy’s A Mathematician’s Apology with foreword by C. P. Snow’ (Complicite, 2008: 17), passages of which were used in the performance. At points in the production, this conjunction of factual and fictional material was commented upon by the actors, drawing the spectator’s attention to the play of reality and fiction in the moment of performance, but also asking questions about the ethics of mathematics. The play opened with Ruth giving a lecture on infinite numbers (the ‘Riemann zeta function’) which Ramanujan was attempting to prove in reality. The audience was addressed as though they were students of mathematics; the disjunction between the assumed role and the reality of being an audience, who were mostly ignorant of higher mathematics, was highly comic. The fundamental concept of mathematics as a priori reality bound together disparate performative threads of dance, movement and text, simultaneously synthesizing connections between different cultures, times and memory. Different practices of play were threaded throughout the production, including the representation of the play and the creativity of mathematics, even extending into metaphysical play, which suggested that, at moments of tragedy such as Ruth’s death in India and Al’s remembrance of her at the Cauvery River, the universe is still at play. These were spliced with scenes of Ramanujan voicing his feelings of alienation and depression at Cambridge. There were also moments of clown play; for example, the physicist Aninda removes Ruth’s spectacles when she is lecturing on infinity and demonstrates that they are not real by poking his finger through the eyeholes. It was striking in the production that the actors used the space in very specific patterns and groupings, which counterpointed the tragedy, much as the tragic chorus does. Whilst Lecoq warns against the movement of the chorus being ‘[...] aesthetically choreographed and militaristic geometry’ (Lecoq, 2000: 131), he analyses the precise use of space and the ways in which the tragic chorus is constituted to express the tragedy in the space (Lecoq, 2000: 132–135). Throughout, a number of mathematical infinities were represented, explored and played with as the actors became a chorus who appeared, disappeared and reappeared through a swiveling screen. Various geometric groupings were used as the chorus sometimes moved in a straight line, sometimes sitting on chairs. At other times, the actors moved in unison, dancing rhythmically and clicking their fingers with a repeated counting chant. McBurney’s direction avoided the movement of the chorus becoming ‘aesthetically and militaristic’ by using the space as the embodiment of mathematics. Lecoq writes that tragedy raises questions about fate, destiny and the relationship to the divine, but suggests that ‘Nowadays scientists are closest to these questions when they find themselves awed by the wonders of the cosmos’ (Lecoq, 2000: pp.126–127). The production gave the audience a sense of awe of the symmetry and beauty of mathematics – its laws are the architecture of the universe, going beyond the human and their everyday concerns. Ruminating on the contemporary hero figure, Lecoq concludes that, ‘Paradoxically it was the melodrama that produced the modern hero. The man in the street, living alone in the simplest, most ordinary way, became the hero (or anti-hero) for our tragic chorus’ (Lecoq, 2000: 136). In A Disappearing Number, the hero figure is a composite of Hardy, Ramanujan, Al and Ruth. Apart from Al, they are pure mathematicians, searching for transcendental yet ungraspable certainties, but they are also ordinary men and a woman. The central figure, however, is Ruth, who is on an odyssey to India to find Ramanujan’s archive – a parallel search to Alice’s journey across Europe to
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find her family in Mnemonic (2003). Ruth wants love and a baby with Al, and her death is not the classical tragic punishment from the gods as result of sin, but from a brain hemorrhage on a train. In this dense, multi-layered, sometimes comic meditation on mathematics and infinity, Complicite drew on many of the attributes of space, the chorus and the hero, which Lecoq asks his students to use in their work on tragedy. Yet, as in Mnemonic, the production is grounded in the poetry of the everyday, in which grand themes are combined with individual stories of travel, displacement and identity.

In his analysis of the territory of Commedia dell’arte, Lecoq writes that ‘The commedia dell’arte and its masks were part of my teaching at the school from the very beginning’ (Lecoq, 2000: 108); however, he emphasizes that he is more interested in ‘how’ commedia is played, ‘not what’ as a creative catalyst for contemporary performance (Lecoq, 2000: 111; italics in original). A search for ways of creating work and the ways to play it are pertinent to all Complicite productions. This was evident in the 2005 revival of A Minute Too Late at the National Theatre, London, with the three original actors: Simon McBurney, Marcello Magni and Jos Houben. Although the performers were now middle-aged, their prodigious inventiveness in this comedy about death made for a show that was painful, hilarious, tragic and touching, as in a scene where Simon attempted to fit the oblong photo of his deceased wife into an oval frame, trimming it with scissors until eventually it is too small. The characters mixed the practices and the appearance of the bouffon and the clown with scenes of melodrama, the commedia of desperation, and tragedy. After only twenty years, the clowns had finally invaded the National. In McBurney’s production of The Magic Flute, the three boys are a chorus of outsider figures, mocking the opera’s mystical and arcane themes. They were presented as grey, skeletal old men, suggestive of the bouffon, of whom Lecoq remarks, ‘They must have their origins elsewhere: in mystery, the night, heaven and earth’ (Lecoq, 2000: 118). In the trajectory from clown show to Mozart, many practices of Lecoq’s teaching are evident in their work, but they are not simply reproduced as exercises. They are interwoven in the nexus of the individual experiences of all collaborators, creating a unique performance language with which Complicite makes innovative theatre.

In an interview, Matt Feerick pointed out that a key feature of the school is that it is engaged in an ongoing process of research through practice and the body. He noted that the word ‘recherche’ was used frequently by many of the teachers, and that ‘the student is also seen as a researcher, so it’s not a training to be a clown or whatever but to find out something about clown, what the clown is for you and how you’re going to use it and of course this may change anyway’ (Feerick, 2014). Complicite’s work also parallels a core ethos of Lecoq’s approach to theatre making – that it is in a continual process of development, change and innovation. Thus, the use of technology and puppetry in their work can be seen as a development inspired by Lecoq’s pedagogy. While each Complicite production can be viewed in isolation, nevertheless they speak to each other in a dialogue of ongoing research. Perhaps that is what drew Simon McBurney to The Magic Flute in the first place, and it is the company’s continual exploration of forms of theatre and ways – the ‘how to’ – of telling stories which is the thread that connects Complicite back to Lecoq.

Notes

This chapter is based on a 2010 article, ‘A personal view of the works of Complicite’ in Total Theatre, Volume 22(4) pp. 20–23.

1 The story is in Berger’s collection Pig Earth (1979) based on contemporary French peasant life.
References

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