George Mann and Nir Paldi met at the Lecoq School in Paris in 2005. Although they never worked together at the school, upon graduating they moved from Paris to London to form Theatre Ad Infinitum, an award-winning and critically acclaimed international theatre company which draws heavily on the principles and working methods they acquired at Lecoq. This chapter, based on my interview with Mann and Paldi (2014), explores how these two artists use Lecoq’s methods to create theatre that is distinctive and original in form and uncompromising in content, while at the same time being commercially viable. It explores the international element of their work – Mann and Paldi actively seek out actors from all over the world as an integral part of their esthetic, and regularly tour internationally. It also investigates their working process – the form and content of their productions vary enormously but are always rooted in their training. Finally, it examines the ways that their training equipped them with the skills necessary to make work of a high artistic standard, as well as those needed to be successful producers and entrepreneurs.

George Mann trained at École Lecoq (2004–2005) and has also worked with the Polish theatre company Gardzienice. For Ad Infinitum, he co-devised and performed Odyssey (2009 to 2015), a one-man show based on Homer’s classic tale. In 2011, he directed and performed in Transluar Paradise, a story of love and grief told entirely through mime. A ‘masterclass in theatricality’ (Couch, 2012), the show was a cult hit at its premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Most recently for Ad Infinitum, George created Light (2014–2015), a co-commission by the London International Mime Festival, that fuses graphic novel and cinema-inspired sci-fi visuals and sound with non-verbal physical storytelling. He is the recipient of the 2015 Quercus Trust Award and has been appointed Associate Director of the Bristol Old Vic.

Nir Paldi trained at Lecoq (2005–2006) and with Ariane Mnouchkine at Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. Nir directed Ad Infinitum’s productions Odyssey and The Big Smoke – a one-woman show inspired by the work and lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The show was nominated for a Manchester Theatre Award and a Canadian Dora Award. In 2013, he created and performed in Ballad of the Burning Star (2013–2015), a mix of cabaret, drag, physical storytelling, and original songs about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The company premiered Ballad, ‘a theatrical hand grenade’ (Gardner, 2013), at the Redbridge Drama Centre. It received three awards, including The Stage Award for Ensemble Theatre, and most recently won an Off West End Award. Nir also works internationally as a freelance director.
He co-wrote and directed *Juana in a Million*, which won a Scotsman Fringe First at the Edinburgh Festival 2012.

**Beginnings**

V.A. Much of your work, such as *Ballad of the Burning Star* or *Light*, deals with political issues. Was forming Theatre Ad Infinitum a political act?

N.P. Well, in a way, it was a political act, not joining the mainstream, not getting an agent and deciding to do it on our own. But it wasn’t conscious. We are both very passionate about freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and the search for what that means is extremely important for both of us. Lecoq is so inspiring because it teaches you how to give exciting theatrical forms to your emotions and feelings. This, in turn, gives you artistic freedom.

G.M. Come to think of it, it was a bit of a political act against France. I tried to start the company in 2006 after I graduated and was living in Paris, but it felt impossible. I was so depressed and drained from all the bureaucracy after a year of trying. I wasn’t free at all. Then I visited London for a weekend – there was so much theatre happening, everywhere . . . I returned feeling so buoyed up with energy. I moved to London on August 1, 2007, and by October that year we were opening our first show – the difference between the theatre scenes in London and Paris at that time couldn’t have been more apparent.

**Lecoq’s auto-cours: freedom within a constraint**

V.A. Jon Foley Sherman describes how the *auto-cours* developed out of the 1968 student uprising in Paris (2010: 91). The students wanted to gain back a measure of control in the classroom. How do you use your training to work against the traditional hierarchy of the rehearsal room – with its pre-established text, a director and the performers slotting in as interpreters – in order to achieve the kind of artistic freedom you aspire to?

N.P. In the *auto-cours* at Lecoq – this is the part of the training where you make a new piece of theatre every week – you learn to work within a constraint. We work with constraints too, and as a collective, but unlike Lecoq’s *auto-cours* in which there is no leader, there is always a person who is leading in our process.

V.A. What do you mean by constraint?

N.P. So for *Light*, essentially, the constraint is complete darkness and actors lighting themselves. For *Ballad*, we are talking about war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Or the Israeli psyche through cabaret and drag. In *Translunar*, it’s without words, and we are traveling from youth to old age using hand-held, full-face masks.

V.A. So when you start the rehearsal process, you don’t know where it will lead, all you have is the constraint?

N.P. That’s right. We just went through this process again with *Light*. This is how we practice what we took from Lecoq: we challenge ourselves to completely reinvent the form every time we approach a new theme and a new story. You start with the constraint, then you develop the constraint, then develop the form within the constraint; then you ease the constraint to let the story breathe. It generates so much chaos and confusion. When it’s successful it becomes better than you, and you have to surrender. I think the strength of this method is the contrast between the chaos and the very strict technical ability and discipline. The chaos is organized.

V.A. What about achieving freedom from the training and the rules you learned at school? Lecoq always told his students that it would take at least five years to ‘assimilate’ the
experience of training at the school (Murray, 2002: 38). What has happened nearly a decade on in terms of the imprint of Lecoq's legacy on your work and your teaching? Do you feel you have absorbed it enough to liberate yourselves from its rigid application?

G.M. I think this is quite accurate. For me, five years after was in 2011, when I made Translunar. I felt I was breaking rules. In it, I worked with mask. At Lecoq, we were told never to touch the mask because you bring attention to its artificiality, and what you want is to create an illusion. And there are so many rules or constraints associated with mask – which is why I think I loved it, because it's all precise and technical and I can feel like I can control it (an illusion in itself). And there I was, making a mask piece that involved touching the mask because it's hand-held, and it felt so wrong at first and I was very conscious of breaking that rule. For me it was a big deal; I felt like it was the first time I started to break away from the training and found a genuine creative voice.

Nir, you had a similar journey with The Big Smoke. Because there are no voice classes at Lecoq, people hurt their voices all the time. You don’t consider it as an instrument in the same way that you consider the body. But in The Big Smoke, Nir and Amy ventured into this place where the voice is doing what the body does, creating spaces, colours, characters, atmospheres.

Lecoq and internationalism

V.A. In each piece, you work with artists from all over the world (Denmark, Israel, Japan, Brazil, Mexico, etc). How do you view the inclusion of different nationalities in your company? Is it to continue the spirit of internationalism of the school? How does it reflect your own belief system?

N.P. The Lecoq School creates a melting pot of cultures; it breaks the paradigms of who you are as a Brit, or an Israeli, an American or South African, etc. It makes you focus on what speaks to us all. And it brings us back to a very basic artistic discussion. We need to communicate in order to work together. Although I grew up in a settlement in Israel, on occupied Palestinian territory, and someone else grew up in Mexico or New York City, we need to find a way to show what it looks like on stage when someone goes to the grocery store. How can you find a way of communicating – ‘a person going to the grocery store’ – that would speak to people from all cultures?

G.M. It was a bit of a dream to find a way of working with the people that we found and connected with at Lecoq, somehow; even if it means paying a load of money for a flight, it’s those connections that we cherish and that are important to our theatre-making.

V.A. So in Ballad of the Burning Star, for instance, you were determined to work with the Japanese actress Seiko Nakazawa, whom you met during your training.

N.P. Exactly. She lives in Japan and is the mother of a young child. And I didn’t want not to be able to work with her just because of that. I wanted to work with her specifically because we believe in her as an artist. So we invested thousands of pounds to allow her to come to the UK with her child. Yes, I can find someone else, but it’s worth investing the money because of what she has to bring. We never regretted it. It challenges you.

G.M. It challenges the norm in the theatre and film industry where everyone is disposable. It’s quite spiritual, I guess. Seiko has a unique artistic personality and something creative to give that we won’t find in anyone else.

V.A. How was this choice informed by the content of that particular piece?

N.P. Because it tells the audience that although the subject matter is very specifically Israeli, the cast is not Israeli, it is international, and therefore the piece can speak to everyone.
V.A. And how does being a foreign artist impact your physical work in the rehearsal room? Did you notice anything different, Nir, about your body as an actor in a peaceful context (Lecoq, 2005–2006) and your body as it felt growing up in Israel? Were you able to use any of these insights for Ballad of the Burning Star?

N.P. For me, it is about culture. One of the experiments we did at Lecoq was dividing the class into pairs, and two people from different nationalities had to walk towards each other, and each person had to say 'stop' when their partner began to intrude into what they perceived as their personal space. That was fascinating. I experienced my body very differently from the way others did in my class – there were mainly British, French and North American students. For example, one comment I had in school was 'you have very strong red, and very strong black but you need to find many other colours – blue, yellow, green.' And I found this kind of subtlety of critical observations that does not intrude into your psychology, that doesn’t make assumptions, and that directs you in a poetic way, to be extremely helpful.

‘Tout bouge’ – Lecoq and urgency, life and death

V.A. Lecoq’s ideas about the body were influenced by his experience of World War II. As Murray describes, ‘By the end of the Second World War he had started to undertake rehabilitation work among the disabled’ (2002: 8). So a reaction to death and violence is really at the heart of his philosophy. Is this true for you too? You’ve both made hugely successful pieces which deal with these themes on a political (Ballad) and personal (Translunar) level. How do you feel your training may have helped you in addressing these issues in your work?

N.P. The training allows you to deal with it in a very stylized way, to maintain a metaphor and a poetic layer that therefore enables you to touch upon things that are much bigger. You can attack them quite directly because the theatricality is unashamedly present. We are constantly saying to the audience: ‘we have a style, this is theatre, don’t get confused, it isn’t reality.’ Ballad is a great example, for attacking the theme – it’s filtered through a style, so people don’t feel preached at. There is also the concept of life-and-death urgency – ‘il faut avoir l’urgence.’ We are here to play games, but the games are in service of something you have to say urgently.

G.M. Lecoq’s pedagogy is very rooted in the present moment, as is theatre. Central to his training is the idea that tout bouge (everything moves). If we allow ourselves to be in the present moment, we become aware of our own mortality, of our own flesh and blood and fragility. We feel alive. This is essential to theatre-making – to improvise from which theatre is born. It’s necessary to make sure that what you’re creating is working, alive and always moving. There’s something Darwinian about the pedagogy, creating with a genuine sense of urgency, brutally killing and throwing out what doesn’t work, and selecting only the best theatrical moments to survive the process and make it to the stage: a place where tout bouge. So there is definitely an inherent difficulty and violence to the training, and it prepares you for the world outside, too – it’s a bit like life.

Having something to say (quelque chose à dire)

V.A. Being able to access your own authentic voice as an artist is a crucial part of the training. George, you went from creating a show about personal grief to making your current show Light that deals with political themes, such as the [Edward] Snowden issue and state surveillance. Could you describe the transition between these two pieces with regards to Lecoq’s idea about having something to say (‘quelque chose à dire’)?
G.M. With *Translunar*, it was very personal; but the challenge was how to make it universal, which is why I chose to make a story about a fictional couple. It created space between my own personal feelings and experiences. I knew what I wanted to say quite early on, and it was like a compass guiding the project. I was really struggling to deal with the grief over the death of my father and a friend of mine when I was 21, and *Translunar* grew out of my need to share this grief; and that’s what it did.

Because *Light* is less personal, finding what I wanted to say was much harder. In that case, it was the reverse; the distance was already there, so I had to close the distance to better understand what it was that I wanted to say. I was suspended in a lot of chaos for a lot of the time, and I had to accept that that was part of my process – feeling overwhelmed by the dimension of the political theme, because I cared so much about it. Now I feel like I’m almost there, but it’s more challenging because it didn’t grow from my personal experience the way that *Translunar* did. I had to grow towards it.

V.A. And what about having something to say in a language which is not your own? Lecoq said that when we see work in a foreign language, we are responding to a language that is ‘universal, that of movement, music and sound’ (Lecoq, 2000: 8). Nir, you work in English, which is not your native tongue. How does this affect your writing process, for instance in *The Big Smoke*, a highly verbal piece, which you co-wrote with Amy Nostbakken?

N.P. I’m probably more used to writing in English now rather than Hebrew. It’s not a problem, though; it’s about creating a theatrical metaphor no matter what language you’re using. If it’s successful, the metaphor is so entrenched in the form you are working with, that the word choice is less important. In *The Big Smoke*, the poetry is in the words to a certain extent – but it is also in the figure of the lonely performer, lamenting her own suicide: for me the power in the piece comes from the unification of the metaphor and the text you’re writing.

So when we worked on that show, we would decide in terms of the human situation what happens in a certain scene. Then we would each go to different rooms, and we would write the scene and then come back together and take the best bits from each proposal and begin to set it to music.

**Successful entrepreneurs: moving to ‘the front of the pack’**

(Mackerell, 2009)

V.A. Ad Infinitum was set up just before the 2008 [economic] crash. What choices or compromises have you had to make – if any – to accommodate the lack of funding?

N.P. Well, for me, what saves us financially, is the fact that we tour internationally. The funding in the UK goes to venues and buildings mostly. The artists don’t see a lot of that money. With a box office split, you don’t get a guaranteed fee. If you are lucky as a company, you will barely cover your costs. So what happens is that the work gets seen much more abroad. For example, in our case, *Translunar* was performed much more abroad then it was in the UK.

V.A. Christophe Merlant has described Lecoq’s pedagogy as the ‘pedagogy of risk’ (Sherman, 2010: 5). Students are expected to explore and confront the possibility of failure on a daily basis, in the *auto-cours*, for instance. When you moved to London, you were really starting from scratch, both financially and professionally. How do you think your training helped you navigate the difficult economic climate compounded with the usual insecurities of making a living in the theatre?

G.M. Lecoq’s pedagogy taught me that failure is not only important – it’s necessary, it’s how we learn, it’s the only way to make good theatre. Failure used to terrify me, but now
I understand that it’s part of your journey as an artist, and ultimately it makes what you do better. You learn to be resilient; you learn to anticipate difficulty, that it’s a part of life. These ideas are not just present in the pedagogy, it’s even in the way you attend the school. You have to sort yourself out, fend for yourself, with very little help or assistance. It was really rough, I was completely on my own in a foreign country, and at first I didn’t even speak the language (learning a language is full of making mistakes), finding a place to live, a job, getting by – there was no help. But afterwards, it made everything easier to deal with. When I fail now, I ask myself why I failed – I hunger to find the solution, I don’t focus on the failure itself. I think about what it has given me, how it can help me.

N.P. It prepares you for the struggle of saying what you want to say, and finding a way of making it happen. Every week you need to generate a piece of theatre in school. If you say: ‘this week we are not going on stage,’ you get kicked out of school. So it’s not an option. And you also have to defend your piece, to stand by what you created, commit to it and own it – whether it fails or succeeds: in the auto-cours, you know that if it doesn’t work, you will get very harsh criticism. They will say ‘C’est horrible’ (‘this is horrible’). Jin Woo [one of the teachers] said, ‘Arrêtez ça, ça c’est degueulasse’ (‘Stop this, it’s disgusting’). And he was right; it was degueulasse. So it makes you very critical, necessarily so, about the theatre you make. But I think people are paying their hard-earned money for theatre tickets, and we have a great responsibility to give them good theatre in return.

V.A. Are you able to separate your work as artists and producers/entrepreneurs, or is it all part of the same vision?

N.P. We don’t separate production and process. The problems are a constraint, another challenge, a puzzle to solve. We find solutions; if you want to do something, you do a reality check: ‘am I able to mount an opera with a cast of 30 right now? Probably not.’ You find a balance between the reality and seeing that everything is part of a journey. In our workshops and master classes, we try to teach, ‘Don’t be a victim to reality, make the reality. See things as a part of a journey of your life as an artist’. Lecoq describes the two years in the school as a journey: ‘Ou va t’on aller aujourd’hui dans notre voyage?’ (‘where will our journey take us today?’).

V.A. With regard to failure, some of the students at the school are not admitted into the second year. Did the teachers encourage competition among the students? Was this helpful in competing to get your work seen later on when you came to Britain?

G.M. Having a system like that makes everything competitive. Everyone wants to go to the second year. But at the same time, no one knows what the boundaries are or what the rules are, and no one knows if they will be successful. And you don’t always agree with the final decision. It’s possible to fight the decision – you might not succeed, but you can sure as hell try.

N.P. If you really want something, you need to make it happen. You need to be proactive in general: what do you do when you don’t have work? You make your own work. Even when you negotiate with venues about how much things cost – do you agree with the fee or not? So this is a really important point in the school. What happens when you get a no. It’s a no, but that doesn’t mean it’s the end of the road. It’s not always about accepting. Sometimes you need to learn to say ‘I don’t agree, it’s not right.’

In reinventing both form and content with each new creation, questioning and subverting traditional rehearsal practices and viewing the uncertainty generated by material and artistic constraints as opportunities, Theatre Ad Infinitum has successfully integrated some of Lecoq’s most fundamental principles. While the style of each show varies enormously, a heightened theatricality and a focus on physical storytelling ensure that its work is able to transcend national borders. Ultimately, by challenging them to envision their lives as artists.
as indistinguishable from the reality of making a living in the theatre, the rigour of the training at Lecoq equipped Mann and Paldi to make brave, authentic, often transgressive work, which is nonetheless commercially sustainable.

References


Ad Infinitum productions to date

Bucket List (2015–2016)
The Magical Staircase (2015)
Light (2015)
Ballad of the Burning Star (2014)
The Big Smoke (2012)
Translunar Paradise (2011)
Odyssey (2009)
Behind the Mirror (2007–2011)