Jacques Lecoq’s passion for the ‘theatre of tomorrow’ speaks directly to the artist that is insatiably curious, hungry to make their own work and not prepared to sit around and wait. It’s not for everyone, especially those wanting absolutes and assurances. It certainly has very little to do with a specific style of theatre. It’s been over ten years since I completed my two fascinating and gruelling years at the Lecoq School in Paris in 2005. I now work with my own theatre company, Jammy Voo, and teach aspects of Lecoq’s training at the university level. My time at the school seems both far away and close at hand. The pedagogy continues to be essential to my process as a teacher and a practitioner. It’s a durable, deeply considered and yet flexible training; a source I return to, question and rediscover, over and over again.

I considered Lecoq’s death in 1999 to be another ripple of movement in the life of the school, provoking the slow, inevitable change and renewal he so greatly valued. But with death comes a need to reflect and take stock. As the name Lecoq begins to settle more confidently into the theatrical landscape and language of Britain, there is a danger of it being pinned down as a style of theatre, and as a result all the diverse and wide-ranging practices connected to the school become lumped into one – particularly here in Britain, where venues, critics and audiences crave labels and want to know exactly what they are getting. If we focus too much on successful output and product, we might miss the profound usefulness of understanding the diversity within Lecoq’s approach and continuing influence. So if there is no singular style, are there themes and principles that Lecoq graduate artists have in common? In order to find out, I interviewed members from a selection of UK companies that were successful in the second half of the twentieth century, each one representing a different period, genre or stage of development. The companies’ histories in themselves suggest both a diversity of style and some commonalities of approach.
Footsbarn travelling theatre (1971–present)

Still active after over forty years, Footsbarn has produced nearly sixty plays, travelled to six continents, and is comprised of a multi-national group of theatre makers. Renowned for its riotous, often wildly imaginative adaptations of classics such as Shakespeare and Molière, their work overcomes language barriers with a distinct blend of visual theatre, music and magic. The company grew out of a meeting between actors Oliver Foot and John Paul Cook at Goddard College in the US. The pair set up Footsbarn in 1971 in Cornwall and initially performed around the southwest, pitching a tent on Cornish cliffs and Somerset village greens. In 1984, the company left Britain to tour internationally, remaining nomadic until 1991, when they purchased La Chaussée, a farm in central France. Paddy Hayter (a Lecoq graduate) and Pierre Byland (a former teacher at the school) currently work with the company. ‘Footsbarn’s influence can be detected in a subsequent generation of companies. Without Footsbarn, we may never have had Complicite, Kneehigh and Told by an Idiot’ (Gardner, 2008).

Moving Picture Mime Show (1977–1988)

The Moving Picture Mime Show (MPMS) was founded by Lecoq graduates Toby Sedgwick (of War Horse fame), Paul Filipiak and David Gaines in 1977. Their work was often very funny, physically precise and popular. They experimented with and re-imagined many of the forms introduced during their time at the Lecoq School (larval mask, cartoon mime). The group toured extensively and established itself as one of the innovators of physical theatre throughout the world, playing the London International Mime Festival over seven times. Shows included The Seven Samurai and Other Stories, The Passionate Leave, The Lottery, The Generals and many more. Members of MPMS have since developed successful individual careers, working in film, the West End, and teaching at the Lecoq School.


A professional performer since 1978, Bim Mason founded Mummer&dada, one of the pioneering companies (along with Kaboodle, with which Bim also performed) to experiment with the interplay of circus and theatre. The international group worked mainly on the street, eventually moving into a circus tent, and often used forms of direct-address storytelling in the style of Mummers’ plays using rhyming couplets or existing text. There was always audience interaction, many ‘routines,’ and an experimental approach to making accessible circus-theatre work. Bim was one of the original teachers at Fool Time (Britain’s first circus school) from 1986–1993 and currently runs Circomedia with choreographer and performer Helen Crocker. He has directed Fringe First Award-winning shows for companies Talking Pictures (1989) and Rejects Revenge (1995 and 1997), and he toured three solo shows to events such as the London International Mime Festival.

Hoipolloi (1994–present)

Founded by Lecoq graduates Shôn Dale-Jones and Stefanie Mueller, Hoipolloi are based in Cambridge, England, and have produced over seventeen original theatre shows, a film and a range of online digital material. The company are committed to creating new work that imaginatively engages a wide audience and makes them laugh. They have toured the UK and
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internationally (*Doubtful Guest, My Uncle Arly*) and in 2005 Dale-Jones created a popular alter ego, Hugh Hughes. The shows with Hughes blur the boundaries between stand-up and theatre, the real and the imaginary. His shows (*Floating, Story of a Rabbit, 360*) received high praise and won a variety of awards (Total Theatre Award, Fringe First). *The Wonderful World of Hugh Hughes* was nominated in the Off West End Awards, and the radio adaptation of *Floating* won the Best Scripted Comedy at the BBC Audio Drama Awards. The most recent Hughes show, *Things I Forgot I Remembered*, was co-produced with The National Theatre of Wales.

**Theatre O (2000–present)**

Theatre O's Joseph Alford and Carolina Valdés are both Lecoq graduates. The company create and tour devised, highly visual, inter-disciplinary theatre. In 2000, their first show *3 Dark Tales* was highly successful at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and toured internationally for several years. They continued to make and tour works nationally and internationally: *Astronaut, The Argument, Delirium* (Barbican, Abbey Theatre) and *The Secret Agent* (Young Vic, National Theatre Studio). Both have worked as movement directors for the National Theatre. Carolina has also worked in film (BBC’s *Call the Midwife, A Little Chaos*), and Joseph freelance directs, collaborating regularly with The Young Vic (*Happy Days, Way Back Home, Cherry Orchard*).

In addition to artists from these companies, I spoke with artists who graduated after Lecoq’s death in 1999. It’s evident from their work that the school is still producing adventurous, innovative practitioners, ready to grapple with fresh, original theatre-making in twenty-first century Britain.

**Jammy Voo (2006–present)**

Founded by Yngvild Aspeli (Norway), Kate Edwards (UK), Eliza Wills Crisp (UK) and Emily Kreider (US), Jammy Voo’s work weaves together elements of clowning, puppetry and visual creations, live music and singing. Their recent show *Birdhouse* (Total Theatre Award nomination for Innovation 2013) was Lyn Gardner's theatre pick of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and featured on BBC’s The Culture Show. The company have collaborated with Angela De Castro (*Slava’s Snowshow*) and Peta Lily (*David Glass Ensemble*). Earlier works *Something Blue* (Lowry, Underbelly) and *A Corner of the Ocean* (Tobacco Factory) received critical acclaim, touring nationally and internationally (Algeria, France, Poland, Norway). Their new large-scale family show, *The Sleeper*, is commissioned by Teater Innlandet Norway, with support from MCNN Nevers, France and The Northcott Theatre.

**Rhum and Clay (2011–present)**

Rhum and Clay is the Associate company of the Watermill Theatre and is made up of Julian Spooner, Christopher Harrisson and Matthew Wells. The company is known for playful, cinematic work that tours regularly and connects with a wide range of audiences. Successful shows have premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (*A Strange Wild Song, Shutterland, 64 Squares*) and toured from rural Devon to London. Company members often work with emerging theatre makers through their popular workshop/mentoring programme, running a festival called No Such Thing at The New Diorama Theatre in London as a platform for short-form theatre work.
I also interviewed Artistic Director Jay Miller, who conceived the innovative theatre space, The Yard, a converted warehouse in Queen’s Yard, Hackney. Born out of a collaboration between theatre-makers and architects, it is quickly gaining a reputation as one of the most daring and diverse theatres in London.

Omar Elerian (Lecoq School, 2003–2005) has worked as a director (Olivier-nominated You’re Not Like the Other Girls Chrissy and Islands) and as Co-Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre. His work challenges conventions and imagines pioneering ways of developing new writing. Finally, I talked with Charlotte Dubery, a 2010 graduate who has worked as a puppeteer for the National Theatre’s Elephantum (following in the footsteps of Toby Sedgwick of MPMS and War Horse fame), as a performer with Theatre Ad Infinitum on Light, and joined 1927’s run of Golem in the West End.

This list is far from comprehensive. There are many viewpoints that are missing or will be addressed elsewhere in this book (Complicité, Toby Jones, Brouhaha, Clod Ensemble, Theatre Ad Infinitum, Talking Pictures, Curious Directive, Clout, Dancing Brick, to name a few). I hope the following material will offer an insight, if brief and incomplete, into how Lecoq’s teaching subtly continues to shape contemporary practice in the UK. In the sixty years since the school opened its doors, the British theatre scene has shifted, morphed and changed – impacted by funding cuts, by political and socio-economic developments and by what audiences, critics and theatre makers perceive theatre to be or think it should look like. With such limited space, these concerns are not discussed here, though certainly they have influenced the way theatre is funded, made and valued in the UK. We must also consider that the school is international, and this inevitably means that not all ‘Lecoq practitioners in the UK’ are necessarily British-born or even based here anymore, as is the case for Footsbarn, for example.

The snippets of interview material below are starting points for a larger discussion. I’ve chosen to present the interview material thematically, and essentially without too much commentary – leaving the words of the artists to stand as they are presented and allowing the reader space to enter into their own form of dialogue with the quotes. But note how all these artists move quickly beyond the language of style and form and speak to ways of working, seeing, progressing and (arguably) living; and why and how, importantly, Lecoq had an influence on these factors. They make wildly differing theatre, some twenty years apart; but a few common themes emerge, and those themes have little to do with categorizing the work as a particular ‘style.’

Personal creativity

Lecoq always said that his was a school of creation. All of the interviewed practitioners wrestle with making work that is born from this unique place. Their creativity is not just a question of style, but also process – they generate material in ways that the traditionally trained actor who works with a playwright’s text does not. They search, they question. They play, dissect and pull apart all manners of form and style. Additionally, the material that they create communicates meaning in a variety of ways – not just linguistic. For better or worse, they take ownership of their theatre making. It is not Lecoq’s work or a Lecoquian style they seek, it is their own.

I often compare my experience at Lecoq to having received a new pair of glasses with lenses that make certain details and colours pop out. They’re brilliant glasses, but it’s the eyes and the brains using them that will decide where to look, what to see, what to ignore . . . if a company or artist’s work is easily labelled, then it might
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not be too interesting . . . there’s also an element of intellectual laziness in the habit of comparing things that look or feel similar. Nobody would call Gustav Marthaler, Arianne Mnouchkine or Yasmina Reza’s theatre ‘Lecoq’, and yet they were all Lecoq graduates.

(Elerian, 2014)

It [the pedagogy] takes artists into their own creativity. He encouraged observation of all things – the elements, the rhythms of nature, colours. So artists come out seeing, listening to the world around them – you know, ‘consummate livers of life’ as he (Lecoq) said. The forms you know, the clown, bouffons, melodrama – the students must take them further. The training provokes people to create their own work. The techniques are to be forgotten in many ways.

(Hayter, 2014)

Lecoq is not a style, but his teaching is a discovery of Dynamics and Presence and a journey through a variety of classical styles, forms and ideas. You pick up the tools that suit you . . . in order to create something new . . . I think there was a surge of Lecoq companies that started after the huge success of Complicité. So when we formed Hoipolloi (along with Bouge de La, Brouhaha, Parti-Pris and others) people were tired of seeing ‘yet another’ Lecoq company. Critics rightly picked on dramaturgical holes and ignored the larger propositions. Unfortunately, the mention of Lecoq meant that you were all bundled into one as a style, when none of us made the same theatre.

(Mueller, 2014)

Lecoq’s objective (and, I think, his great success) was to produce students who had the tools and aesthetic understanding to create theatre in THEIR OWN style, and make whatever they were trying to convey interesting to the audience. So the technique (of mime, for example) was not the point. Doing the technique was of value in that it taught the actor – not just intellectually, but corporeally – the value and use of the overarching concepts of attitude, immobility, rhythm, contrast, interplay of forces, projecting gesture into space, etc. These are the lessons that infect the body of the Lecoq student, and later help to make whatever that actor performs that much cleaner, clearer, and more compelling, whether in mime, mask, or spoken theatre.

(Gaines, 2014)

Theatre O continue to look for a theatre that does not yet exist, because only we can make it and we are constantly changing and evolving; it is always just out of reach. Take risks. Make mistakes. Learn. Get better. The most important and lasting impact of my training has been to make me question everything, but not to expect the answers to anything . . .

(Alford, 2014)

He analysed and validated a number of styles that, up to that time, had been regarded as ‘merely’ popular. His privileging of practice over theory or as a way into theory (practice as research) has shifted perspectives in a very fundamental way. He is a bridge between the purist modernism of Decroux and the cultural cross-referencing, collage and complexity of Post-Modernism.

(Mason, 2014)
Emily Kreider

The teachers are strict with the pedagogy and understanding the forms correctly. By the second year this is hard because you start to think about the theatre you want to make. But you have to fully encounter the forms first before mixing, pulling them apart or adding new styles. Then you can start on this ‘theatre that does not exist’.

In those two years you also start to find what you are good at, what excites you. Yngvild is an amazing puppeteer and puppet maker. So we see where that can live organically in Jammy Voo’s work. When Kate put in our first Arts Council bid, she did it to simply bring together women she thought were very funny. But when we started to integrate the humour and humanness (of these female clowns), with the delicacy and poetry of Yngvild’s creations . . . that was interesting territory . . .

(Wills Crisp, 2014)

I started working in the UK when I moved here from Paris, in 2009. At the time my knowledge of contemporary British theatre was limited to a few playwrights whose work had crossed the borders – Kane, Ravenhill and Bond – and of course Complicite. . . . What struck me the most was the variety of remits constituting an archipelago of experiences that felt disconnected and parallel to each other: new writing, physical theatre, off-west end and commercial were distinctions I hadn’t necessarily encountered before in Europe, while their distinction in the UK was remarkable.

(Elerian, 2014)

Accessibility and the audience

The primary ethos that one learns at Lecoq is the idea of generosity. Generosity in the sense that you are doing this work for the audience to enjoy. So there was never any danger of that awful attitude of ‘This is really great work, even if the audience are too obtuse to get it’. We wanted to share our work with the audience . . .

(Gaines, 2014)

Our approach has always been one that has the audience as a key part of the process. The training is so non inward-looking, always stressing that theatre is for an audience, and that’s influential for us in making accessible work. Also, something that repeatedly occurred in auto-cours would be a teacher’s response of ‘et alors?’ – we try and keep this question at the back of our minds when making work, interrogating why we are making something, why a particular story.

(Harrisson, 2014)

He (Lecoq) was suspicious/disdainful of the avant garde who seemed to leave the people behind. So I think today he might be exploring all the new different spatial arrangements, journeys, audience interactivity etc . . .

(Mason, 2014)

We are interested in creating an active relationship with the audience who, in return, have to engage with what’s unfolding before them, not just sit back and watch . . .

(Alford, 2014)
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We try to create a breathing space within the work to let people in, to be with the audience, not to play at them. It’s not always easy! We hope people leave not thinking how great the show was, but how a moment touched on their sense of self or the world, that they are not alone. To give the audience a moment to reflect, laugh – laugh at this ridiculous, beautiful, horrible world and their place within it.

We also use a highly visual language, so we are often able to reach an international audience.

(Wills Crisp, 2014)

Challenging the traditional demarcation of the roles of writer, director and actor

Determining the roles of author-actor, playwright and director continues to be the biggest challenge of all – particularly the role of playwright. In this country there is traditionally a very clear delineation between all these roles; when we make work there is not. This can be very hard to acclimatise to if you are not used to it.

There is a very delicate balance between the necessity of the creative contribution of all the members of the team and the fact that, in the end, a Theatre O show is guided by the artistic vision of Joseph Alford and Carolina Valdés – that vision can (and should) be dramatically influenced and made better by the people we work with, but it is still a ‘Theatre O’ show. Working out how to articulate this and to manage it well is the biggest challenge of all, and it’s at the centre of all our work.

(Alford, 2014)

For me, the most important impact Lecoq’s training has had on British theatre is the challenging of the traditional roles of writer, director and actor. . . . In my work I also give people specific roles in a production but those roles aren’t boxed per se . . . the designer can talk about the script, the writer can talk about the design, and the composer can talk about the acting etc. . . . I don’t consider a writer might necessarily have needed to write before – they could have been an actor, a cartographer or a cartoonist . . . as long as they have something to say and a means by which to say it . . .

(Miller, 2014)

We always simply thought of ourselves as theatre-makers. The job involves having an interesting idea, creating it as theatre, and presenting it to the audience. I guess that is now called (perhaps a bit too pompously) ‘author-actor’. . . . the actual writing down of the piece was always (and for me continues to be) a bit of a ‘Dumbo’s feather’ exercise. You write it down to make sure it is set down and will not be forgotten; but in fact it continues to change each time you go through it. . . . As for directors . . . fortunately, MPMS shared an aesthetic to such an extent that there was a general consensus about pacing, and what should be reluctantly left out. The Lecoq emphasis on objectivity and the universal principals of performance come in handy for this, as a shared platform . . .

(Gaines, 2014)
A company I used to work with would always credit the director, and never the company who devised the work, and more and more I have realised how important it is to credit the actual creation itself. By doing this it is clearer that the material was generated by the ensemble, and funnelled into shape by the director, as opposed to a more traditional approach where the director tells his actors exactly what to do. The challenge is similar for playwrights working in devised theatre . . .

(Dubbery, 2014)

The early shows were exciting, but maybe also more difficult, as everyone was keen and full of ideas, roles had to be established. We often ignored scripts in order to improvise around the core of the scene; that way, the actor/collaborator felt more involved and has a sense of ownership, and then the script will be either reintroduced, or amended to what it has become.

(Mueller, 2014)

In my opinion and practice the traditional idea of new writing as distinct from new work and contemporary theatre is a misnomer. Much of Lecoq's training and stimuli are based on providing creators the tools to develop their own form of theatre . . . I found many of the skills I've acquired during my time at the school extremely useful as a director and dramaturg working on new plays and shows, which need constant questioning to be developed.

(Elerian, 2014)

Movement

Movement is a word used so often in these interviews that it almost seems part of each practitioner's value system. 'Of course everything is movement' Paddy Hayter says, as if this is true not only for his approach to theatre making, but to life. 'Tout Bouge,' Lecoq famously said. 'Everything changes' or 'Everything moves.' In literal terms, this can refer to the body, first in stillness and then in movement. But 'Everything moves' also invokes an approach where the actor is always listening, looking and responding – to the rhythms and changes of nature, colours, materials, people, the times we live in. The Lecoq student is constantly reflecting and yet always moving forward, creating and exploring the architecture of space, exploring text in relation to space and through movement. The pedagogy is based on movement, on the movement of the students’ work as it progresses, and this certainly continues after they leave the school.

Footsbarn haven't stopped for over 40 years . . . we work to avoid stagnation whenever possible . . . the whole experience [at the school] gives you courage, it can be terrifying and no one else can go through it but you . . . it means the artists coming out of the school are very brave and ready to work. He [Lecoq] was an incredible teacher . . . but he had no preconceived plan for his students, except to keep moving and to continue with the journey, their journey.

(Hayter, 2014)

We never settled into doing the same thing twice. We always looked for something new. This was a challenge to start with, as venues thought: 'but this is not the same
as your last piece,’ but eventually, I think it paid off as they came to trust that we evolve and therefore grow constantly. . . . With Hoipolloi, we always carried on looking for what else there is. For the Hugh Hughes projects, we literally started by pretending to not know anything about theatre . . .

(Mueller, 2014)

Never stop moving . . . nothing should be given for granted; it’s when the landscape becomes unfamiliar, when one is lost, that we move into exciting discoveries . . . I’ve always tried to mine as much as possible from different experiences, practices and art forms . . . there’s much to learn – good and bad – from everything you can see. I hope this openness and curiosity has transmitted so far in my work at the Bush Theatre; we constantly challenge preconceptions about form, style and perspective in our theatre, from the way we develop the artistic program to the management of our venue and the relationship with our audiences.

(Elerian, 2014)

And when I asked what each interviewee thought Lecoq would have wanted for his students, time and again the response returned to this notion of movement.

To go out and make good work. Don’t get too precious. Keep questioning, keep moving.

(Aspeli, 2014)

He would have wanted us to stop talking and start doing.

(Alford, 2014)

To live full, happy, creative lives. To live as artists, to observe well and analyse. To have good relationships and family lives, to enjoy physical exercise and looking at nature. To see the world as constant movement, both in the sense of Tout Bouge but also to see culture as a constant evolving movement.

(Mason, 2014)

The companies and practitioners highlighted here have enriched the theatre landscape of Britain since the early 1970s. They share a way of seeing, working and imagining theatre that reaches out in dialogue rather than in fixed form, style or certainty. It is good to take the time to reflect on all the significant practice coming out of the school, but we shouldn’t linger here too long. At this very moment, all of these artists are already moving on, generating their next work or creative venture. They go lightly and stay curious, trying to remain flexible and available to what is next, what changes may come. And perhaps that is their style. Yes, ‘Tout Bouge.’ Everything changes. Everything moves. As Lecoq would have wanted it.

References