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The actor/creator and three American ensembles

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Lecoq in America

Some of the most exciting and provocative new work from the latter half of the twentieth century up until the present day has come from artists trained at the Lecoq School. While there have been books which focus on Jacques Lecoq’s influence on theater practice in Europe, little has been written to assess the impact of Lecoq’s pedagogy in the US. Consequently, there is an uncharted body of work generated by Lecoq-trained artists:

By the summer of 2006, 4,506 students had attended Lecoq’s school from eighty-one countries, including 454 students from the United States. Of the total number of students who attended the school, a little over 1,500 had attended the two-year program, including an estimated one hundred Americans. The international nature of Lecoq’s school tends to geographically distribute trained artists haphazardly from year to year. One result is that graduates who wish to continue working with others in their year, end up forming international companies. The stresses on these companies are considerable, but the impulse to form them after the ensemble experience of the school is almost irresistible.

(Thompson, 2007: 5)

Lecoq-trained companies and individuals working in the US today include Avner Eisenberg (Maine); Dody DiSanto and The Center (Washington, DC); Deborah Fortson and Tempest Productions (Boston); the artists of Pig Iron and their school (Philadelphia); Julie Taymor (New York); Theater Imago (Oregon); Richard Crawford, Adrienne Kapstein, and The Movement Theater Studio (New York); The Moving Company (Minneapolis); Amanda Huotari and Celebration Barn (Maine); Theater Grottesco (Santa Fe); Pilgrim Theatre (Ashfield, Massachusetts); Wakka Wakka Productions (New York); Gates McFadden (Los Angeles); Ronlin Foreman (Director, Dell’Arte School, California); UMO Ensemble (Washington); Jim Calder (New York); David Gaines (Washington, DC); Paul Herwig (Minneapolis); Arne Zaslove (Oregon); Jonathan Becker (Ohio); and Stanley Sherman (New York).
Jon Foley Sherman, a Lecoq graduate, says of the school’s training, ‘It makes a distinct impression on each person. That is one of the beauties of his work’ (2014). The original work that these artists produce forms a whole body of new American plays whose physical scores often outshine their written scripts. Among these artists, one can often see brilliant pieces, created on shoestring budgets, performed for small audiences in borrowed spaces. They work in education, theater, film, opera, clown and circus arts, puppetry, dance, and visual arts. Capturing the breadth of this ephemeral work is a formidable task and impossible in a brief chapter; it would require a book of its own. This chapter, instead, will look at three companies that were the subject of my 2007 dissertation Tout Ensemble: The Actor/Creator and the Influence of the Pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq on American Ensembles (Thompson, 2007): Touchstone (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania), UMO (Vashon Island, Washington), and Theatre de la Jeune Lune (Minneapolis, Minnesota).

The term ensemble implies not just a company but also a group of artists with a shared vision and training. At the same time, ensembles have their own fragile ecology. As artists’ visions diverge, as children are born or people move away, an ensemble either adapts or disbands. At the time of this writing, Jeune Lune has closed its doors after thirty years, the Lecoq-trained artists at Touchstone have left, and UMO has reorganized. Their histories and productions, however, stand as examples of actor-created original work in the US influenced by both Lecoq’s pedagogy of creation, and his work on ‘dramatic territories’ or styles. Although they represent only a small fraction of the Lecoq-trained artists at work in the US, each of them made a home and fostered an audience in the particular artistic climate of their state and region. This chapter is a small step towards documenting the work of Lecoq-trained ensembles in the US.

**Touchstone: the festival of creation and Steelbound**

In 1994, Touchstone Theatre of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, together with Lehigh University, hosted a two-week festival celebrating the work of Jacques Lecoq and his International School. Lecoq performed his lecture/demonstration *The Body of Things* and offered a week-long master class (with third-year graduate, American Dody DiSanto, as his assistant). There were panel discussions on Lecoq’s pedagogy, and performances and workshops by graduates and companies from his school, including Jim Calder, Avner the Eccentric, and Theater Grottesco. At the time, three of Touchstone’s ensemble members had studied with Lecoq: Mark McKenna, Jennie Gilrain, and Eric Beatty. It is extraordinary to consider that Lecoq, whose students spanned the globe, had to come to a small town in Pennsylvania for a festival dedicated to his artistic vision of creation. Perhaps on closer examination of Touchstone, however, one can see the festival within a larger context – the company has a history of recognizing stories that need to be told.

Touchstone was founded in 1981 by Bridget and Bill George, and Lorraine Zeller. They had previously worked in theater under the direction of the charismatic Lehigh professor John Pearson. From its beginning, Touchstone’s work was physical – inspired by American mime techniques, street theater, and improvisation, but also deeply connected to their community. In 1987, they acquired an old firehouse. This home theater became a venue for their performances, classes, and also visiting artists. Touchstone ensemble member Jennie Gilrain noted, in a 2001 interview with the author:

We had always been a movement theater company . . . so quite a number of companies and solo artists that came through and stayed for a two week run were
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Lecoq-trained like Ronlin Foreman, Jim Calder, Grottesco and Avner ... there was some quality with these performers that was very compelling.

(Gilrain, 2001)

Gilrain and McKenna both left to study with Lecoq and, upon their return, helped organize the Festival of Creation. The festival and Lecoq’s visit would serve as a catalyst for the company to create an ambitious new project, Steelbound. A 2000 article in American Theatre notes:

Touchstone artistic director Mark McKenna and ensemble member Jennie Gilrain took the renowned French physical theatre artist and educator Jacques Lecoq ... on a tour of a working Bethlehem Steel mill. Struck by the vastness of the space, the pouring of molten metal and the cacophony of sounds, Lecoq ... urged the Touchstone artists to do a performance there with ‘a chorus that sings.’ Inspired by Lecoq’s enthusiasm, Gilrain conceptualized a multi-arts festival that would include a Greek tragedy played in the mill, involve professional artists and former steel workers as collaborators, and commemorate ‘the end of an era.’

(Cohen-Cruz, 2000: 17)

In the 2001 interview with the author, Gilrain noted that she approached the project like a Lecoq commande (the final project of the second-year students). Cornerstone Theater, with a history of community work, was brought in as a skilled collaborator. In 1999, the result was Steelbound, a play inspired by the Prometheus myth interwoven with local memories based on interviews of former steelworkers and their families, and performed in the vast Bethlehem Iron Works Foundry. The play was directed by Cornerstone’s Bill Rauch, assembled by writer Alison Carey, and composed by Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey and the Rock. The dramatic structure, however, was strongly influenced by Lecoq’s work in tragedy with a hero accompanied by a dynamic chorus. The cast of over fifty actors included community members, children, and a number of former steelworkers. Co-founder Bill George, who played Prometheus, had himself worked in the steelworks as a young man.

The impact of Lecoq’s training on Touchstone both stimulated and altered it. In the 1990s, all of the founders left the company to pursue other projects and to give space to the new training, especially the ensemble creation. Bill George commented on the changes that were evident in Gilrain and McKenna upon their return: ‘The one thing I wanted to do – original pieces, full length serious pieces, adult pieces that were abstract in nature, evocative and full of gestural images – they came back doing them, and they came back doing them in spades’ (Thompson, 2007: 163).

Lecoq-trained artists were recruited into the company with varying success. Touchstone had never just been about living the vision of an artiste; at its core, it was a theater for a specific community – Bethlehem. Nonetheless, it was a creative time.

The time from the early 1990s until 2008 (when McKenna, who was the artistic director during that time, left the company) can be considered a period of Lecoq-inspired work for Touchstone. The lessons of the Lecoq School, coupled with the company’s strong community-based work and aesthetics, made for some powerful work, including Don Quixote of Bethlehem, The Little Prince, Fish, Don’t Drop Grandpa, Never Done, and numerous classes, oral history projects, and storytelling events. The monumental Steelbound, with eight sold-out performances and an audience of over 2,600, marked, in many ways, the merging of the company’s dream of substantive work with its desire to respond and connect to the town that was their home. McKenna noted: ‘Lecoq identified a circular response between actors and the audience.
Touchstone is a community-based theater, and I’ve learned to adapt this circular response to our community audience’ (Thompson, 2007: 178).

Touchstone Theatre was a 2004 recipient of the Otto Rene Castillo Award for Political Theatre. The company, currently under the artistic direction of James P. Jordan, has a core of four ensemble members, including founder Bill George. Their Lecoq-influenced period, like the training that came before it, has become part of the company’s continued legacy as a supple and creative ensemble, responsive to its community and dedicated to new work.

**UMO and El Dorado**

In the mid-1980s, three Americans, Janet McAlpin, David Godsey, and Martha Enson, met while attending Lecoq’s Laboratory for the Study of Movement (LEM) course. Taught at that time by Lecoq and architect Krikor Belekian, LEM was an exciting opportunity to work in close quarters with those two masters at the helm. Enson and McAlpin, meanwhile, also attended the school’s first year and second year, respectively. (Enson, a skilled puppeteer, chose not to do the second year.) Upon returning to the US, they, along with dancer Esther Edelman and artists Steffon Moody and Abby Enson, formed Unidentified Moving Objects, or UMO Ensemble as they came to be known.

I wrote of the company in my 2007 dissertation:

"UMO . . . is, in many ways, the quintessential American movement theater company. One training does not define them; the company speaks the language of the body and a list of their influences reads like a compendium of movement training in the 20th century. . . . They are a resourceful group of artists with an eclectic blend of techniques and training from Lecoq, modern dance, Circle in the Square, Ruth Zaporah, Roy Hart vocal work, trapeze and other circus arts, yoga, improvisation, aerial dance and mask. In addition, many of the ensemble are also puppeteers in the broadest sense of the word – they manipulate objects."

(Thompson, 2007: 188)

Despite the varied training among the UNO ensemble, Lecoq’s tools of creation and styles work, as well as the plasticity and rhythm of LEM, are clearly evident in much of the ensemble’s twenty-plus original pieces, as well as in their approach to actor-centered creation. This was particularly true in their 1992 bouffon piece, El Dorado.

**Bouffon** as a theatrical style came out of Lecoq’s school. Rebellious, contrary, indulgent, and idiosyncratic, bouffons revel in the messiness of the world. El Dorado, inspired by the conquistadors and their insatiable search for gold, in UMO’s deft hands, became a mirror of modern society – petulant, greedy, and self-absorbed. It also became one of UMO’s first and most successful productions, and the company kept it in repertory. In 2000, it won notice at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival:

"Brilliantly embodied by the ensemble, these zany characters have as much fun impersonating the Spanish plunderers and their indigenous victims as they do fiddling with their costumes or trying to suck each other’s nipples. At times infantile, at other times wildly aggressive, the performers deploy expressive faces and evocative gestures that bring to mind commedia dell’arte, Theatre of the Absurd and even The Muppets."

(Veltman, 2000: 4)
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The actors created *El Dorado*, under McAlpin’s guidance, based on the *bouffon* lessons from Lecoq. When McAlpin exhausted memories and class notes, she made it up. In a 2006 interview with the author, she explains a central lesson from Lecoq on ensemble creation:

> It is not the actor who writes the *bouffon* material. It is the *bouffon*... That is what we did at Lecoq. That is what we did in *auto cour*... even in clown work; you put on your mask and you go. It is in the donning of the mask... Nobody I know in this country operates from that principle as a starting point. Maybe dancers do but not theater.

(McAlpin, 2006)

During a 2010 remounting of the piece, company co-founder Godsey said, in an interview with the *Seattle Times*: ‘I think this is truly our signature piece, the piece that established us as an ensemble-based company creating original works of physical theater’ (Berson, 2010).

Beside the more obvious influences of style, the Lecoq-trained company members also talk about Lecoq’s attention to rhythm and space; how all the elements of a performance are constantly at play – the source material, the space, the actors, their costumes, props, the audience. The shared space between audience and performer is essential to UMO’s work. Enson, in a 2001 interview with the author, notes:

> There is a very clear intentionality in the company not to always break the fourth wall, (we are not an audience participation company), but to know that it is breakable and to... cut through it at moments... I want that to be a live membrane.

(Enson, 2001)

Like Touchstone, UMO has formed deep roots in their community of Vashon Island, and this *live membrane* means their art isn’t produced in a vacuum but in relationship – to each other, their source material, and their home. Although the company has been restructured and core artists have come and gone, the artists of UMO continue to work – forming new businesses, collaborations, an UMO School for Physical Arts, and Open Space, a venue for classes, performances, and more. The core artists began a festival, *Islewilde*, which is in its twenty-third year. It is independent now, much like many of its eclectic founders. Meanwhile, UMO Ensemble and its dedicated core artists continues to produce ground-breaking and provocative work. A 2014 review of UMO’s latest creation, *Fail Better*, inspired by Beckett’s work, noted:

> The UMO Ensemble shows what makes it tick: balancing and swaying the see-saw, dramatic aerialist performances, comedy routines and theatrical mainstays like monologues, dialogue, singing, and dancing. Janet McAlpin and Terry Crane’s aerialist solos are breathtakingly creative.

(Douglass, 2014)

UMO’s cutting-edge creativity and physicality – the stuff that ‘makes it tick,’ inspired in part by their early contact with Lecoq’s training, continues to be visible and viable in the ensemble’s work today.
The legacy of Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Minneapolis (1978–2008)

Theatre de la Jeune Lune was comprised of five artistic directors: two Frenchmen (Dominque Serrand and Vincent Gracieux) and three Americans (Barbra Berlovitz, Robert Rosen, and Steven Epp). Four of the five company members studied with Lecoq, and all shared a common language of devising. This training, combined with the talent of the ensemble, allowed them to create over eighty original productions:

Jeune Lune has performed an eclectic mix of original shows, operas, classics and adaptations. Lecoq's training is evident in the exploration of styles work that includes clown, eccentric characters, tragedy, chorus, cabaret and, more recently, opera. It is also discernible in their choreographic use of space. Incorporating styles work from Lecoq and their own artistic vision, their work has spanned the poetic, the tragic and the zany.

(Thompson, 2007: 72)

One cannot discount the effect that Jeune Lune has had not just on regional, but on American Theater. Many of the American Lecoq-trained artists I have interviewed over the years studied with Lecoq because of Jeune Lune and their impressive body of work. Numerous companies, including Pig Iron of Philadelphia, have used Jeune Lune's actor-centered company structure as a model. Over Jeune Lune's thirty-year history, they inspired generations of artists and audience members. A New York Times article quoted a practitioner familiar with their work:

‘The company has a distinctive place in American theater,’ said Joe Dowling, the artistic chief of the Guthrie, . . . ‘Jeune Lune,’ he said, ‘represents the perfect bridge between the trends in European theater that are moving toward the iconoclastic style of performance and a more American, in-your-face style of performing. That goes way above anything that’s part of the regional theater movement. They do something that none of the rest of us do.’

(Papatola, 2003: 5)

For thirty years, Theatre de la Jeune Lune defied the odds. They created a prodigious body of work, and they had a unique artist-centered company structure where they shared the role of artistic director among five artists (up until their last few years). Although inspired by European companies such as Théâtre du Soleil and Complicite, Jeune Lune remained completely original, unpredictable, and visionary; a blend of breathtaking visuals, comic timing, and poetry. Their remodeling of an old warehouse in downtown Minneapolis was an ambitious dream replete with rehearsal and performance spaces, costume shops, storage, offices, and a backstage area that only artists could create. The award-winning space, completed in 1992, was stunning. In 2005, the company's work was recognized with a Tony Award as the nation's Outstanding Regional Theater.

Jeune Lune came directly out of Lecoq's school and is one of the few companies he mentions by name in the closing chapter of his 1987 book, Le Corps Poétique. Over the years, the company created numerous original pieces as well as adaptations of classical material. Sometimes they combined the two. Their 1992 production, Children of Paradise: Shooting a Dream, was one such example. Inspired by the events surrounding the making of the French film classic Les Enfants du Paradis, it also used the lives of the actors and the political situation
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of Nazi-occupied France to tell a story. The result was a sprawling dream, made coherent through a keen sense of rhythm, story, space, and architecture. The dramaturg for the production, Paul Walsh, would write about the inspiration for the work in The Production Notebooks, Vol. 1:

For years, Baptiste’s striving after the magic of the moon, especially as immortalized in French film director Marcel Carné’s 1945 film Les Enfants du Paradis, has inspired and fed the theatrical vision of Theatre de la Jeune Lune. The journey of the dream is their primary scenario; the articulation of half-glimpsed ideas is their goal; the immediacy of performance is their medium. It is natural then that Theatre de la Jeune Lune would turn to Les Enfants du Paradis as the source of their largest theatrical production to date.

(Walsh, 1996: 180)

In 1993, the play garnered national attention, winning the American Theater Critics Association New Play Award.

Jeune Lune, in addition to numerous original creations, mounted ambitious productions of Hamlet and Tartuffe, and stunning collaborations with opera singers in Figaro, Carmen, and Don Juan Giovanni. The company disbanded in 2008 when artistic differences, combined with financial woes, forced them to close their doors. While many assumed that the cost of running the building forced the company to fold, in a 2008 interview for Minnesota Public Radio, Serrand explains it was quite the opposite: ‘Since we couldn’t build an endowment for the theater, we borrowed against its equity. So the theater, the building, has actually helped us live and survive for many years’ (Combs, 2008).

In this way, the company was actually able to continue their ambitious productions long past their fundraising capabilities. One has to admire their gutsy decision to go down with their artistic vision uncompromised. The company counted some 2,000 artist-collaborators over their thirty years:

‘To say that I’m heartbroken is to underestimate the feeling,’ said Guthrie Theater director Joe Dowling, who called the theater’s decision to shutter ‘a huge loss that diminishes us locally and a national loss as well. This isn’t just another company that’s run its course,’ Dowling said. ‘It was a remarkable experiment that produced some of the best work I’ve seen since coming to America.’

(Papatola, 2008)

The artists who founded Jeune Lune continue to work: Gracieux is currently performing with Footsbarn Travelling Theatre in France, Serrand and Epp (together with other artists) have formed The Moving Company, and Berlovitz and Rosen continue to teach and perform around Minneapolis. Serrand recently mused in an interview that ‘One of the things that fascinated me was when Jeune Lune closed people thought, “Well, that’s over.” They didn’t realize that it was the people who made the work, and we continue’ (Serrand, 2014).

A Brecht poem was the inspiration for Jeune Lune: ‘At the moon’s change of phases/ the new moon holds for one night long/ the old moon in its arms’ (Walsh, 1996: 179). One of the many ‘new moons’ that Jeune Lune held in its arms was the award-winning Pig Iron Theater Company (Philadelphia). Quinn Bauriedel, one of the founders of Pig Iron, had been an intern with Jeune Lune before studying with Lecoq. In 2002, Pig Iron received a grant for a week-long residency with the artists of Jeune Lune. Bauriedel called the experience ‘pivotal,’
not just by providing structural support, but because of discussions they had with Jeune Lune’s founders on art and vision (2014). Throughout theaters and schools in the US, as well as in the continued work of the founding artists, the legacy of Jeune Lune lives on.

The seduction of company

Lecoq had an unabashed fondness for the ensembles that his school engendered. John Flax, a Lecoq-trained artist and the artistic director of Theater Grotessco, explained in an Ensembles Round Table during Touchstone’s Festival of Creation:

When you have a successful ensemble piece you touch things in the art form that just a project . . . no matter how good the people and the vision, can’t even touch. People always say, ‘What is the message of your play?’ and it is always different. The thing that is always the same is that they are seeing an ensemble work, and there is a community. Community is already a very large message, especially in this country.

(Ensembles: The Group Creative Process, 1994)

An ensemble builds a relationship with a public over years, inviting them on a voyage that is both personal and artistic. As David Godsey of UMO commented: ‘You know that muscle? The ensemble muscle? . . . Most performers never really get to flex that; they don’t even know that they have it. In America the training is so much about the individual’ (Godsey, 2001).

Training is a shared language, and in the case of Lecoq-trained artists, it is a language of creation. Avner Eisenberg, a 1974 graduate of the school, elaborates in a 2014 interview with the author:

Lecoq taught an organic nature-based approach to acting based on breath, the four elements, materials, animals, color. This approach develops an incredible vocabulary for the actor and a method for working based on the natural world instead of psychological- based work: it is in the body. I think that is why so many Lecoq-trained actors work together.

(Eisenberg, 2014)

What Lecoq-trained ensembles offer American theater includes: a resilient process of devising new work; a trained actor-creator who expects be an active participant in the creative process; and, finally, work that is often international in its scope and content and, frequently, in its company makeup. In return, the Lecoq-trained artist who chooses to work in the US faces a unique set of challenges. If one wants to learn about thrift and ingenuity, talk to a small theater company operating in the US: they need to spin gold from flax.

References


