The triumph of theatrical Modernism in France and the West after 1945 occurred in the wake of a decade of economic depression and a devastating war that had ended the first wave of avant-garde theatre in Europe. Before the 1930s, the experiments of the Expressionists in Germany, the Futurists in Italy, the Constructivists in the Soviet Union, and the Surrealists in France, plus the work of Dalcroze’s eurythmics and the mechanical ballets of the Bauhaus, recognized the centrality of the actor for theatrical communication. Any one of these movements might have generated and sustained a rebirth of acting theory and practice in Europe. Instead, to simplify the history, German Nazism, Russian Communism, and French and Italian Fascism attacked and destroyed the legitimacy of avant-garde experimentation. In contrast, Modernist theatre had begun to flourish early in the century, partly because it rejected the avant-garde quest for utopia to search for universal, apolitical, and disembodied forms and essences that might help artists and their audiences to transcend the fragmentation and chaos of modernity. For the Modernists, the dramatist’s script, not the artistry of the actor, was the potential source of this transcendence.

The great architect of theatrical Modernism in France was Jacques Copeau (1879–1949), the French critic and director who founded the Théâtre du Vieux-Columbier in 1913. Although partly inspired by his knowledge of Stanislavsky’s System, Copeau primarily celebrated the creative work of the playwright, chiefly to elevate the great dramatists of the past (preeminently Shakespeare and Molière) above the commercialized excesses of star actors who used these plays as vehicles for their own careers. He insisted that the visual and aural appeal of the actor must never obscure the words of the playwright, whether the play was a traditional classic or a contemporary script. Nonetheless, recognizing that the genius of Molière rested on his combination of acting and playwriting, Copeau also hoped to create a theatre in which both could flourish. His school in Paris, the École du Vieux-Colombier, employed Charles Dullin and others to instruct a new generation of French actors and initiated a revival of silent mime. Despite Copeau’s interest in merging the physical and vocal work of the actor, his theatre and school did not last long enough to alter the primary traditions of French acting. Instead, the main line of influence from his innovations led through several French directors who elevated the playwright’s script during the interwar years, and it emerged as the foundation of French Modernism after 1945. The Modernist emphasis on the
dramatist’s language over the actor’s embodiment was to have a formative effect on post-war theatre in the West and France through the 1960s.

In contrast, Jacques Lecoq trained initially in swimming and track and field, and he worked as a teacher of physical therapy before turning to the theatre. He retained these interests when he worked with Jean-Louis Barrault, Jean Dasté, and others trained in the Copeau tradition during and after the war. But Lecoq was already putting some distance between himself and Copeau-inspired performance. Lecoq rejected the mime work of Etienne Decroux, for example, the chief advocate and teacher of silent mime after 1945. He took a more radical step when he departed for Italy in 1948 and stayed eight years: ‘Italy brought me back down to earth, grounding me in the lives of everyday people’, Lecoq related in an interview. ‘It introduced me to a commedia dell’arte that was actually a reflection of the human condition, in all of its glorious tragedy and comedy . . .’ (Lecoq, 2006: 99–100). Lecoq worked with a variety of companies and artists in Italy, including several temporary commedia troupes and a group that produced Brecht’s *The Exception and The Rule*. Giorgio Strehler, the great Brechtian director, and Dario Fo (with whom Lecoq staged a satirical political revue) also influenced his emerging notions of theatrical possibility. When Lecoq returned to Paris in 1956, he took with him a full set of leather commedia masks and ideas about acting that would challenge the Modernist French theatrical establishment.

Meanwhile, theatrical Modernism had moved in the opposite direction. In their drive to constitute a formal aesthetic sphere, separate from commerce, politics, and other areas of practical life, Modernists in France and throughout the West revived the aesthetic ideas of Immanuel Kant. This Idealist Enlightenment philosopher had distinguished aesthetic experience and judgment from the realms of science and practical morality. Kant limited aesthetics to bodily feeling and further rarified it by insisting that feeling was subjective and private, with no connection to conceptual thought. With Kant, the Modernists insisted that the activities of producing and responding to a work of art had to be understood on their own autonomous terms; most believed in ‘art for art’s sake’. Clement Greenberg, the widely read American postwar Modernist critic, was hardly alone when he stated that Kant’s ‘capacity for abstraction enabled him . . . to establish in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* what is the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have’ (Greenberg, 1995: 249). With the death of the avant-garde and the influence of Brecht and other politicized theatre artists still to come in Paris, Kantian Modernism nearly had the field of French theatrical culture to itself in 1945.

For Lecoq, however, Kantian aesthetics contradicted nearly everything he had learned, plus the practical knowledge he continued to gain from his ongoing experiences as an actor and director of movement. From a perspective based in contemporary cognitive psychology, Lecoq was much closer to understanding how our bodies and minds actually work than were the Kantian Modernists. According to cognitive philosopher Mark Johnson, Kant made the mistake, common among Enlightenment philosophers, of assuming that psychology could be divided among several ‘faculties’, and that each faculty had its own separate arena of operation. Kant reserved the bodily experiences of feeling and emotion to the faculty of aesthetic judgment, but relegated thought and practical intelligence to the faculties of science and morality. For Kantian Modernists, the theatre could only suggest the higher faculties of practical morality and conceptual reasoning through the disembodied language of the playwright.

In contrast, as we will see, Lecoq based his pedagogical principles on the realities of human embodiment, which, as Johnson and others affirm, provide the foundation for all practical and abstract abilities, including aesthetics. Of course, Lecoq knew nothing of current cognitive psychology, but his training in physical education led him to value the flexibility and
expressiveness of the body and its many connections to the mind. Contrary to Kant and the Modernists, he correctly assumed that human psychology was indivisible and recognized that the actor’s embodiment could be the source of action, morality, and knowledge. Rather than cutting up acting training into different styles, genres, and approaches, Lecoq’s School trained his students in habits of play, responsiveness, and openness that were foundational for the full range of stage performances.

Although Kantian Modernism in the postwar West was based on a mistaken psychology, its authority at the time was immense. I will summarize the Modernist reduction of the actor’s role in the theatre during the early decades of western Modernism and then focus on Modernism in France between 1945 and 1968, the immediate context for Lecoq’s early work in Paris. To conclude, I will briefly discuss how Lecoq countered the challenges of Modernism in his performing and teaching between 1956 and 1968.

Critic Martin Puchner writes that Modernist drama and theatre was essentially ‘a theater at odds with the value of theatricality’ (Puchner, 2002: 7). This was especially true for the generation of Modernist playwrights who flourished between 1920 and 1950, which included Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936), Paul Claudel (1868–1955), Jean Giraudoux (1882–1944), T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), and Thornton Wilder (1897–1975). Several in this group published poetry, short stories, and novels; most were used to writing works that appealed directly to readers, without the intervening presence of actors and other elements of theatricality.

Among these Modernist playwrights, Pirandello was one of the most successful and also perhaps the most outspoken in his attack on acting. He drew from his education in German Idealist philosophy for Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921), which contrasts the lives of actors – Pirandello’s symbols of people with no firm identity – with those of fictitious characters whose identities have been written for them. Apparently abandoned by their author, however, the six fictive characters cannot escape from their melodramatic conflicts, and they seek a resolution to their ongoing problems from the actors. The result is a play within a play, as the actors attempt to enact the roles and relationships of the six characters before them. By showing how the actors utterly fail to embody and perform the reality of these characters, Pirandello critiques the general failure of the stage to represent Idealist reality. His larger point, though, is that authors writing literature can approach the enduring truths of idealized character types, but the attempt at truth on the stage will always be compromised by the imperfect and mortal bodies of the performers. Only an author can help the six characters, implies Pirandello; actors will always fail them.

Other Modernist playwrights turned to Christianity, the traditional road to transcendence in the West and another arena for Kantian aesthetics. Included among the Christian Modernists T.S. Eliot and Thornton Wilder was the French diplomat, poet, and playwright Paul Claudel, who celebrated the mysteries and saving grace of Catholicism in several plays over a long career. His most famous work, The Satin Slipper, a seven-hour epic written between 1919 and 1924, is set in the Spanish Golden Age. In formal, elevated language, Claudel’s stately pageant explores the religious fervor that drove the Spanish conquest of the New World and the need to sacrifice earthly passions for the sake of divine salvation. Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–94) directed an influential production of The Satin Slipper at the Comédie Française in 1943, which led to a Claudel revival in the postwar period.

Many Western directors between the 1930s and the early 1950s also looked to the authority and language of dramatists as the basis for theatrical meaning and stability in a fragmented world. In Great Britain, H.G. Barker (1877–1946) had introduced British theatre to the dream of Modernism before World War I, and it flourished in the 1930s at London’s Old Vic Theatre under a succession of directors who incorporated several innovations that moved
Shakespearean performance away from the clutter of realism and into symbolic Modernism. According to historian Gary Jay Williams,

For all of modernism’s break from the dying gods of the nineteenth century, it did not give up religion so much as seek it in art. Its artists saw themselves not only as provocateurs but as prophets, and they viewed art as a liberator of the spirit from the trappings of a spiritually mordant past.

(Williams, 1997: 143)

Chief among these prophets was Tyrone Guthrie (1900–71), artistic director of the Old Vic from 1937 to 1945. Guthrie deployed simple ramps and platforms, minimalist props and costumes, quick lighting changes, and rapid movement and speech by the actors to lend Shakespearean production the speedier rhythms and heightened contrasts of the cinema. Laurence Olivier’s success in filming several Shakespearean plays – notably his *Henry V* (1944) and *Richard III* (1955) – confirmed the popularity of a more cinematic acting style for Shakespeare on the stage. For critics expecting universal values and spectators attuned to filmic perceptions, these Modernist staging and acting techniques rejuvenated Shakespearean production. Guthrie, Olivier, and the other Modernists believed they were scraping away realist encrustations on the plays to reveal transcendent, Kantian truths embedded in the language. Williams identifies Guthrie’s open stage, which he finally realized in Stratford, Canada, as a product of ‘late modernism’; it was designed to emphasize ‘the recovery of Shakespeare’s language’ (1997: 206). It seemed that Shakespeare’s plays, rightly staged, could elevate spectators to appreciate and enjoy universal meanings.

Modernist directing in the US began in the 1920s, often aided by the New Stagecraft scenic designs of Robert Edmund Jones and others. It continued with productions of the Group Theatre during the 1930s, and flourished in the stage and film work of Elia Kazan (1909–2003) after the war. By the early 1950s, Kazan had established his reputation on both coasts through his direction of the Modernist classics *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) by Tennessee Williams, and *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by Arthur Miller. Critics embraced these productions and several of Kazan’s films in Modernist terms for their poetic truths and tragic insights. Miller’s essays, chief among them ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’ (1949), also elevated the psychological realism of Kazan and others to the realm of universal values. At nearly the same time, historian and critic Eric Bentley, in his influential *The Playwright as Thinker* (1945), celebrated the dramatist, not the actor, as the key to transcendent theatrical truths.

In France, three successful directors during the interwar years – Louis Jouvet (1887–1951), Charles Dullin (1885–1949), and Georges Pitoëff (1884–1939) – advanced Copeau’s Modernist preferences for minimalist scenery, intimate staging when possible, and respect for the text. Jouvet, who directed many of Giraudoux’s lightly allegorical plays, demanded careful analysis and attention to the details of the script from his actors. Dullin and Pitoëff also fashioned their directorial visions from the playwright’s language; critics celebrated the first for capturing the inner poetry of the text, while the second was noted for emphasizing the author’s rhythms through the speech and movement of his actors. These disciples of Copeau put their Modernist stamp on a wide variety of plays, from Shakespeare and Moliere to contemporary foreign plays, and even extravaganzas featuring music and dance.

By 1950, then, influential theatre artists in Western Europe and the US had established Modernism as an international movement with an aesthetic style that could both transcend the traumas of the recent war and explore possibilities for humanity’s future based on universal
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principles. Modernism's apparent affinity for film and with film spectators was an added bonus not lost on theatre artists concerned about waning audiences.

In France, new governmental policies after 1945, plus a scandal, substantially improved the possibilities for the growth of Modernist theatre. When the Administrator of the Comédie Française passed restrictions on the number of films that members of the acting company could do, many company members resigned, seriously weakening the Comédie’s prestige. Eager to prove its cultural legitimacy, the new postwar government fed more funding to the state-supported theatres in 1946 and inaugurated an annual competition among them. In an effort to decentralize theatergoing – the war and occupation had concentrated most French theatres in Paris – the government also established and subsidized regional dramatic centers and began funding dramatic festivals across the country. With governmental funding at stake, those who managed the state theatres, the new centers, and the festivals looked for styles of production with cultural cachet and critical appeal. Modernism, by the late 1940s an acclaimed international aesthetic, could accommodate their needs and concerns.

New governmental regulations in the early 1960s under General De Gaulle also boosted the prestige of Modernist theatre. Gaullist policy instituted municipal cultural centers that included theatre in the mix of film, music, and the visual arts. This policy effectively crowned Modernism, which flourished in all of these arts by 1960, as the established aesthetic of French national culture. In addition, the inclusion of film at these centers encouraged actors eager to work in both media (plus the new medium of television) to seek training that seemed well-suited to both theatre and film. In that regard, Modernism had already proven its international utility.

Postwar French playwrights continued and elaborated many of the practices that had animated Giraudoux and other Modernists before 1939. Jean Anouilh (1910–87), who had worked with Modernist directors Jouvet and Pitoëff in the 1930s, continued writing during and after the war and remained prolific and popular through the 1960s. The Kantian Idealism of French Modernism was perhaps best captured in the plays of Henry de Mountherlant (1896–1972), which were frequently produced between 1945 and 1965. De Mountherlant looked to simple external action, complex psychology, and elevated style – the neoclassical ideals of Racine – for his plays. According to historian Oscar Brockett, ‘In all of Mountherlant’s work, the interest resides as much in the intellectual positions taken up by the characters as in their psychological traits and actions’ (Brockett and Hildy, 2003: 472). Even the so-called absurdist Eugene Ionesco (1909–94), Jean Genet (1910–86), and Arthur Adamov (1908–71), mounted their attacks against empty social rituals and arbitrary authority in Modernist terms, claiming universal validity for their insights into materialism, mortality, and despair. In this regard, Ionesco’s famous claim in 1958 about the superiority of his own dramas to Brecht’s political plays is instructive, and also representative of the desire within Modernist artistry to transcend social and political entanglements. Ionesco distinguished between mundane sociality and ‘true society’, which he stated was ‘revealed by our common anxieties, our desires, our secret nostalgias’; he added, ‘It is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa’ (in Carlson, 1984: 415). For Ionesco and other Modernists, mere political theatre could never aspire to Kantian transcendence.

The dramas of Samuel Beckett (1906–89) demonstrate the extreme consequences that French Modernism could have on the actor’s creative freedom. Beckett severely restricted the physical movements that the actors in several of his dramas could use to interpret and embody their characters. He placed actors in barrels (Endgame, 1957), encased them up to their necks in dirt (Happy Days, 1961) and entombed them in urns (Play, 1963). As the
American director of several of Beckett’s dramas, Alan Schneider, once noted, ‘Actors feel like impersonal or even disembodied puppets of his [Beckett’s] will’ (Puchner, 2002: 159). Sometimes Beckett reduced actors to minimalist mouthpieces for his language, as in Not I (1972), where all of the words spoken during the action of the play emanate from a female character named Mouth. Nor could later directors and actors of any of these plays change Beckett’s lines and stage directions; unless producers contracted to follow the precise details of his script, the playwright refused to grant production rights. Modernism’s desire to elevate the playwright’s vision over the actor’s creativity led logically to Beckett’s dictatorial control of performative embodiment.

Despite his later critical fame, Beckett remained a marginal figure in French theatre before 1968. This was not the case with actor, director, and mime artist Jean-Louis Barrault, however, whose various successes kept him near the center of French culture from the early 1940s through most of the 1960s. Trained by Decroux in silent mime, Barrault also emerged as a fine dramatic actor. Invited to join the Comédie Française in 1940, Barrault was soon directing as well as performing the classics. As noted, he staged Claudel’s deeply religious masterpiece The Satin Slipper – deploying Modernist conventions of minimalism, symbolism, and heightened speech for a powerful production that boosted his already impressive reputation. Barrault left the Comédie over the 1946 film scandal, in part because he had already starred as a mime in Les Enfants du Paradis (1945) and looked forward to more film work. Barrault started his own company, which flourished until 1956. Among his many critically acclaimed Modernist productions during that period was Claudel’s Christopher Columbus in 1953, another celebration of Catholic history. Barrault’s star continued to rise when De Gaulle’s Minister of Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, installed Barrault’s company in the Odéon Théâtre, renaming it the Théâtre de France. Among the Odéon’s famous productions during these years were several by Ionesco, including The Rhinoceros (1960), The Airwalker (1963), and Bedlam Galore (Délire à deux, 1966); Barrault both directed and starred in all three. By the mid-1960s, some critics were calling Barrault the French Olivier.

When Lecoq returned to Paris in 1956, he faced a French theatre that was heavily invested in Modernism, with Barrault near the top of its power structure. Although the two were relatively close in age (separated by eleven years) and had been friends during the Occupation, Lecoq had travelled away from Modernism while Barrault had embraced it. Contrasting the beliefs and practices of the two artists in the mid-1950s underlines their differences and provides a window into the difficulties that Lecoq faced when he began his school. I will put Lecoq’s pedagogical ideas next to Barrault’s Reflections on the Theatre (1949; trans. 1951), his self-promotional, semi-autographical book in which he recalled selective stories from his past and announced his vision for a postwar French theatre.

Both artists had a background in mime, but they came to think about it very differently by 1956. Despite Barrault’s early success in silent mime, his Reflections has little to say about that side of his education and career; when he does discuss mime, he isolates it as a separate performance genre, implicitly refusing to recognize that his experiences as a mime helped to shape his dramatic acting. He describes mime ‘as one of the two extreme points of pure theatre; the other extreme point being pure diction’ (Barrault, 1951: 26). While Reflections has much to say about the importance of speech as the vehicle for the author’s words, it mostly ignores the other ‘extreme’. Barrault ceased doing silent mime performances in 1950. In contrast, ‘The School of Mime: Actor Training’ was Lecoq’s initial name for his 1956 school, but he changed it soon after because, as he explained in an interview, others did not use the term mime ‘in the way that I meant and I very quickly became a prisoner of a misinterpretation . . .’ (Lecoq, 2006: 111). As a part of his training, Lecoq offered a kind of mime based in his understanding of movement.
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through sport and in his work in Italy that he viewed as foundational for all styles of acting. While Barrault abandoned mime partly because of its limited commercial opportunities and its perceived disconnection from language, Lecoq transformed the mime tradition into the basis for all performance, including dramatic speech.

Their differences over mime reflected a fundamental disagreement over embodiment. Barrault takes the Modernist, Cartesian position that bodies and minds work very differently. For him, the body of the mime artist has its own ‘purity’, but it exists at the opposite ‘extreme’ of the ‘pure diction’ of the ideal actor, the transparent communicator of the playwright’s words. Barrault’s language of purity here is no accident; his Catholic desire to transcend the body is a constant theme and a source of significant metaphors in Reflections. For example, Barrault credits Copeau for introducing him to theatre as a ‘religion’, and he ‘takes the veil’ when he signs on with the Comédie; he also notes that Racine reconciles ‘the sacred and profane’ and calls a playwright’s lines ‘the [Biblical] Word’ (Barrault, 1951: 21, 103, 106, 52). Like Claudel, whose Catholicism he praised, Barrault sought a version of Modernist religious transcendence through the theatre. Significantly, however, his expansive religious faith – both as well as Catholic – allowed Barrault to embrace a wide range of people and perspectives in his book, from Molière’s neoclassicism to Antonin Artaud’s cruel visions to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential Marxism. While none of these points of view fully accorded with Barrault’s spiritual yearnings, all of them (and more) could be accommodated within his understanding of Modernism as a necessary and inclusive church. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that Barrault’s frequent fusion of Catholism and Modernism appealed to many French theatregoers.

In contrast, Lecoq’s language typically avoided religious metaphors and embraced childhood play and embodiment, not ‘the Word’, as the source of the theatre’s transformative potential. ‘We begin with silence’, wrote Lecoq in The Moving Body, ‘for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew, and it is a good thing for students to begin by placing themselves in the position of primal naïveté, a state of innocent curiosity . . . when no words have been spoken’ (Lecoq, 2001: 29). Lecoq encouraged his students to establish the basics of their embodiment before approaching texts. For him, language emerged out of a ‘primal naïveté’, just as it does in the developing child. Although this quotation from Lecoq came after the founding of his school in 1956, he has said enough about his early pedagogical practices to indicate that these ideas shaped his teaching from the start. The emergence of ‘higher’ language from ‘lower’ embodiment accords with philosopher Mark Johnson’s understanding of evolution and cognition. Embodied cognition, notes Johnson,

is a non-dualistic ontology built around the principle of continuity, according to which there are no ontological ruptures or gaps between different levels of complexity within an organism. ‘Higher’ cognitive processes have to emerge from complex interactions among ‘lower’ level capacities.

(Johnson, 2007: 145)

Lecoq’s pedagogy, of course, defied the beliefs of Barrault’s Catholicism and his implicit adherence to Kantian Modernism.

For the rest of the 1950s and into the 1960s, Lecoq and his students struggled to find their footing in Paris – until 1968, when the student revolution directly challenged the apolitical, idealized principles of Modernism. Before 1968, as he had done in Italy, Lecoq worked with various companies as a movement trainer and director, used graduates of his school as the basis of a troupe that staged mime and commedia shows, produced some films in the style of burlesque pantomime, and began to incorporate training in clown into his pedagogy, all the
while continuing to teach and beginning to gather around him a coterie of devoted graduates. He lost his school building in 1966, forcing him and his students to wander for ten years among various temporary classrooms.

Nonetheless, 1968 was a turning point for Lecoq’s school and its embodied approach to actor training. Looking back on the student demands and actions of 1968, Lecoq remarked, ‘[N]ot only did we find that they confirmed the school’s vocation and the basis of its work, both in terms of training and research, but the events in themselves, with their power to provoke, gave the school another dimension’ (Lecoq, 2006: 118). Specifically, the events of 1968 led Lecoq to introduce the auto-cours into his curriculum – self-directed learning challenges that required students to work collaboratively to create a piece of theatre on a theme proposed by Lecoq. In contrast to the Modernist emphasis on a playwright’s script, this early exercise in devising invited students to create theatrical meaning without a dramatist.

The year 1968 also saw an upsurge in actor-centered productions and widespread questioning of Modernist assumptions about the theatre. Most in the theatrical establishment followed the government’s opposition to the students; when Barrault lost his Directorship of the Odéon Théâtre for providing help to some demonstrators, few major theatre artists objected. As revolutionary fervor subsided in the early 1970s, much of the previous theatrical Modernism was restored, but the status quo was now open to many questions that had been unthinkable a few years before. After 1976, when Lecoq finally moved his school into a more permanent home, his pedagogy could more easily shape a new generation of students for whom the tenets of Modernism were no longer taken for granted.

Note

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