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Mark Evans, Rick Kemp

Pig Iron

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Gabriel Quinn Bauriedel
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The Irish poet Paul Muldoon¹ told me once that there are two kinds of artists. There are artists who look closely at a single thing and manage to narrow their focus to find a whole world inside a single observation. And then there are artists who paint on enormous canvases and make work about everything, all at once. At the time, I thought he was describing the difference between himself, a poet who can capture the most subtle nuances of language and can sharpen his gaze on a single moment, and James Joyce, whose books seem to weave together every corner of human experience. Later, it dawned on me that Jacques Lecoq was, in fact, both kinds of artist simultaneously. And maybe this distinction, for some, didn’t apply. Lecoq was, after all, interested in both seeing one thing in great detail, like the movement of the shoulder when throwing a stone into the ocean, while also widening the lens to take in the movements of every aspect of life on earth. Lecoq’s deep curiosity about these movements has had a huge impact on the creative life of the company I have co-led for 19 years, Pig Iron Theatre Company. Two key concepts — disponibilité and observation — have provided considerable fuel for our creative fire. Lecoq often used the word ‘disponibilité’ to describe a performer, a performance, and the value of being an artist. It is hard to translate into English, but I often use the word ‘openness’ as a substitute. Openness does not capture, though, the multiple connotations it has in French. For the purposes of this chapter, disponibilité can mean availability, openness, flexibility, readiness, and responsiveness. Alongside disponibilité, his training of his students’ eye through rigorous and careful observation — first of nature, then humans, always through movement — has left an indelible mark on me and my colleagues and has helped sustain our ensemble for two decades.

The Pig Iron origin story

In 1995, after a year spent working for Théâtre de la Jeune Lune,² I headed off to Paris to study at École Jacques Lecoq with two close college friends, Dan Rothenberg and Adam Koplan.³ Dan and I, along with five other fellow Swarthmore College alumni, had formed Pig Iron earlier that summer and had taken our first show, The Odyssey,⁴ to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. A few months later, equal parts excited and confounded by ensemble-driven devised theatre, we landed at 57 rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis along with an international community
of like-minded restless souls who shared a zealotry for physical dares and for forging a theatre that might render words irrelevant.

Pig Iron was greatly influenced by École Jacques Lecoq. The company was being launched at the same moment as Dan’s and my artistic identities were coming into focus. Our theatrical imaginations were being opened at the school. We were in the rare position of having a small organization that we were tending back in the US while studying in Paris, so we knew that the learning from the school could be immediately put to use on our next projects. Those in Pig Iron that did not come to Lecoq got a heavy dose of it in 1996. Dan and I were, to put it mildly, eager to share everything we’d learned. Eventually, we also wanted to introduce the Philadelphia contingent to some of the performers we were collaborating with in Paris, expanding Pig Iron from the founders to include several European members who would, in subsequent years, spend part of their year making work with Pig Iron in Philadelphia or on tour. Since those early days, the company has grown to include three Founding Artistic Directors, four Company Members, six full-time administrative staff, a 15-member Board of Directors and a two-year post-graduate school. The company always works with a director (this has primarily been Dan Rothenberg, though I have directed several projects), but we consider ourselves an ensemble-based company. We have toured throughout the US and to 14 countries on four continents. We’ve won two OBIE Awards and eight Barrymore Awards, and we were a Top 10 Production in the New York Times (Isherwood, 2008). Though the impact of the work has grown as the company has stabilized over nearly 20 years, the DNA has remained largely the same. Lecoq provided us with many tools to be able to build a company that is at once a personal endeavor and a collective one. Like a fine wine, Lecoq’s lessons continue to mature over time.

Every project the company has undertaken over its 19 years (29 original full-length works) has started from scratch, forcing us continually to ask similar questions with different answers: What does a character look like in this piece? What role do words play? How does the audience enter the world? What rules are broken? Though we have had important influences beyond Lecoq (including Joe Chaikin, Martha Graham, and Toshiki Okada), it was Lecoq who brought two of the most important pieces to the company’s long-term DNA: disponibilité and observation.

Disponibilité

A story from my second year at the school typifies the way in which Lecoq lived his artistic principles. We were working on grotesque characters and I’d come up with a drug-addled rapper with enormous headphones and pants that hung around the knees. Several classmates, one a gun-toting survivalist and another a rave-goer, joined forces to make a piece that was a contemporary look at British and American disaffected youth culture. These three characters stare comatose and drugged-out into space with occasional fights that erupt in gunfire and occasional arguments about the minutiae of music or clothing. Lecoq was puzzled by the piece, despite its warm reception from the rest of our class. He told us that our characters were on the margins and, therefore, it could only ever speak to a niche audience or, worse, an audience of insiders. This was, indeed, a failure according to Lecoq. We pushed back. These characters weren’t marginal; a rave-goer was, in fact, a recognizable archetype among young people. We thought he didn’t hear us. But the next week he worked with our characters as though they were canonized as archetypes of the school; he’d apparently looked into it and didn’t want to have an old idea about life, but a contemporary one.
He had a twinkle in his eye all of the sudden, gleeful that he was up-to-date with youth culture. Our piece continued to develop and was a highlight of our Soiree that term. What I take away from that memory is not that we had finally won an argument with Lecoq, but that he was, indeed, open to and curious about life. He did not want to become a fossil and, even at age 75, stayed relevant with the themes and stories of the young generation. He was able to question his own biases and to move beyond them. He embodied the disponibilité he sought to inspire in his students.

Lecoq charged his students and, indeed, himself to stay disponible. First and foremost, this was a deep belief about theatre: that its innate power comes from its ability to pose questions rather than answering them, and to activate an audience’s imagination. But it was also a way of living, a way of absorbing the world and staying available to the contemporary moment. The story of whether a rave-goer was on the margin or at the center of contemporary culture typified for me the artistic values that Lecoq held; like the Neutral Mask work, so central to the school’s pedagogy, he wanted to always be pushing toward the future and engaged by the present. To be disponible was to move, to be curious, and to be alive. It was the opposite of stuck, fixed, inert, dead.

**Disponibilité and Pig Iron**

This quality of disponibilité plays out often in a Pig Iron rehearsal process. We start with a set of questions but without a grand design of what the performance will become. There is considerable pressure to answer questions very quickly in the process. It might help with fundraising to be able to say ‘this piece will have five actors, be 75 minutes long, and feature a moose costume.’ It might help the production management to say that we’ll rehearse for eight weeks and premiere on October 1. But for us, staying disponible to the project is far more important. We improvise for weeks and months before committing to an idea. We are led by the moments that erupt in the rehearsal room – the moments that have the greatest theatrical value – as opposed to identifying an end point and working hard until we get there. We try to stay open and available, responsive to the piece as it leads us into unknown territories.

In 2000, we began working on a project with Joe Chaikin⁶ that premiered on September 12, 2001. Chaikin had a long career in the American theatre, notably as one of the great avant-garde directors of the 20th century and as author of the seminal book, *The Presence of the Actor* (1972). He, too, wanted the theatre he worked on to have disponibilité. Lecoq focused on pedagogy and Chaikin focused on directing, but they had a lot in common – they both talked and worked on stage presence, gesture, and physical expressiveness, and they both sought to reinvent theatre. Chaikin felt that every project needed to discover a new language if it was to be wholly original. He charged his ensembles to strip away artifice and social ways of moving, and to speak to uncover new ways of using the body and voice. It was no accident that he called his theatre the Open Theatre.⁷

Our project with Joe Chaikin, *Shut Eye*, began as a sort of haiku. Chaikin said ‘Office, nighttime, tired, sleeping, dreaming, ordinary, extraordinary,’ and from this prompt we began a devising process. Though the eventual project did not look like a project from Lecoq’s school, his values were present throughout. We essentialized stories into gestures; we played with performance states, including a dream state; we worked with business and medical jargon, finding the play in language that mixed absurd, nonsense language with heightened emotional language. Chaikin passed away two years after *Shut Eye* premiered, and the loss reminded me of Lecoq’s passing. Both were old men who still were part child, seeing the world with few
Pig Iron: disponibilité and observation

biases and coming to the work of making theatre without any recipe, only with impish curiosity and a desire to pursue what you don’t already know. They were both open and available to the work created in front of them, evaluating it as it is rather than as it could be, should be, or was before. Within openness is presence – that quality of fully being in the present tense. Presence is fundamental to both men, and the foundation upon which performance is built. Our best and most meaningful work is made when we take disponibilité to heart and are available to our collaborators, to the themes of the work, to the audience that has gathered, and to our own impulses to express shared concerns.

The Pig Iron School

In 2011, I became Director of the Pig Iron School, modeled in many ways on the Lecoq school. It is a two-year post-graduate program that trains artists to develop their own artistic voice and create original work. In the five years before the school’s launch, we had to convince many people that this was a good step for our organization. Why were we changing our non-profit after 15 successful years as an ensemble company that toured the world? To some, starting a school might have sounded like we were starting a deli or a casino. But to us, it had a logic that stemmed from our work with Lecoq and Chaikin. On the one hand, Lecoq urged everyone to stay in motion, to cease being static. I observed and was inspired by him to evolve, change, move. It seemed natural that we would never get stuck in one paradigm. Business as usual for us meant going in the opposite direction of the thing we just did. After making Cafeteria, a wordless piece about the cycle of life, we made The Tragedy of Joan of Arc, a piece with dense language, a tragic chorus, and a fallen hero. After a piece with loads of whimsy, we worked on a piece with plenty of suffering. On the other hand, a school was just giving a name to the nature and quality of our rehearsal process. We posed questions and sought answers in performance. We came to a project like we aspire to come to education – to research and uncover what we don’t know, what is hidden, what is impossible to talk about. A school was just our way of extending disponibilité. We aspire with the school to continually evolve what theatre is and what it can mean to us as a society.

At the school, there is a class in the second year called Performance Dares. It asks students to imagine theatre in 20 years. What are the assumptions we make about theatre, and how can we undo those assumptions to wake up an audience? Risk is a significant part of Lecoq’s pedagogy, and one that we believe needs to be injected into every rehearsal or class we run. To dare is to step out onto a tightrope and run across before you know every step of how to do it. To dare is to say to the world something that is hard to say or something that is not said. To dare is to absorb the world around you and to let it move you. Our school is a way of staying open, flexible, present.

Observation

Hand-in-hand with disponibilité in terms of Lecoq’s legacy for Pig Iron is observation. Observation is such a big part of the first year of the school, and it is the unspoken engine of the second year. I can really point to a pre-Lecoq and post-Lecoq way of observing. Lecoq taught his students how to look very carefully and, more importantly, how to observe not as a scientist with clinical distance, but as an artist who is moved by what he/she sees. Observation is active; there are consequences to it. The end of the first year project, les enquêtes, is perhaps the culmination of the theme of observation at École Jacques Lecoq. But for me, it has led to an endless source of artistic inspiration.
Pig Iron and observation

There are some important anecdotes about observation within a Pig Iron project that illustrate how this idea is central to our devising process. Early on, we made a play called Dig Or Fly. It featured aviators and excavators: Icarus and Amelia Earhart as aviators, Daedalus and Heinrich Schliemann as excavators. We realized that we needed to know something about this theme; we needed to know what it felt like to work as an archaeologist and a pilot. So, our Stage Manager organized a few trips for us. First, we visited an archaeological dig site in Delaware. We spent several hours in the hot sun, talking to researchers and watching them sift through piles of dirt outside a home that was once owned by a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The diggers noted that weeks might go by without finding anything. The team was jealous of the fellow who, two weeks before, had found half a comb. We watched the action of sifting dirt, discarding sifted dirt, and piling up fresh dirt to be sifted. It was not glamorous. But it created a vivid picture for us of the action of digging. It also brought to life the metaphor of digging – uncovering the past, taking away layers of history, discovering the dead. This day was pivotal in our process and brought a level of authenticity to the piece.

Similarly, our trip to an airfield and our conversation with the head of the facility gave us a rich picture of flying a plane in Amelia Earhart’s day. We learned about the mavericks who could, without penalty, fly a plane a dozen feet above a farm, encircle a city at close range, and otherwise frighten those on the ground with their daredevil tricks. This, too, found its way into the piece.

In another project, James Joyce is Dead and So Is Paris: The Lucia Joyce Cabaret, we started with Lucia Joyce’s story: James Joyce’s daughter, diagnosed with schizophrenia, who spent the bulk of her adult life in a mental institution. We knew we needed to investigate mental illness and mental institutions. Our access was limited, but there were many videos that gave us a window into the world of the play we were making. In some instances, we studied the movement of someone who had taken a drug to numb the effects of a mental disorder. In other instances, we studied the fractured speaking patterns of someone who hears voices. We found Frederick Wiseman’s documentary Titticut Follies (1967), in which guards and mental patients perform a cabaret together in a prison for the criminally insane. We soaked it in; we saw how it moved us. We talked about our own experiences with mental illness. Lecoq’s teaching asked us to observe without psychology and to put the observations into action before analyzing or theorizing. This aggressively non-intellectual stance leads to great discovery and differentiates his observational approach from that of other methods.

The idea of observation does not end with direct enquête experiences. It runs deeper. A friend, Troy Herion, who is a composer, told me once that he had reached a moment in his life as a musician where he no longer made a distinction between his music-making and the rest of his life. Music was just the lens through which he sees and hears everything. Birds sitting on a wire have a musicality to them, with a specific rhythm from one bird to the next – there are birds closer and further, creating a pattern. What is music but patterns of sound, Troy thinks. When he said this, I realized that perhaps the greatest gift Lecoq gave to me and to countless others was the gift of diminishing or extinguishing the distinction between life, on the one hand, and theatre, on the other. The clue was observation. His famous phrase, ‘everything moves,’ implies that there is an endless ocean of possibilities for theatre, because there are endless things to see, to observe, to be moved by and to absorb. Over the last 19 years within Pig Iron, this has meant that the work we put onstage springs from our observation of life. Sometimes, there is a one-to-one relationship: we go to the archaeological dig when making a piece about an archaeological dig. But it also means that my role as an artist is to
be a carrier of experiences in the world, helping focus an audience’s attention on things they might otherwise overlook. And sometimes I must help widen their gaze to make connections that only a poet could make, or to see more clearly the machinery of how the world works or doesn’t work.

This was, perhaps, most evident in a project we made in 2006 called Love Unpunished. Five years after the Twin Towers in New York fell on 9/11, we set out to make a piece about love in the suburbs. I had spent a year in Bali, Indonesia, learning to carve and perform masks, play gamelan, and dance. The comic masks – the idiots, buffoons, lovers, and fools who misunderstand life and wind up in hot water – were particular favorites. As a company, we loved playing with the masks, finding characters who stupidly fell in and out of love/lust and managed to survive by the skin of their teeth. But on August 30, 2005, Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, sent scores of people away from the city, and unleashed an ugly debate in America about race, poverty, and the role of the government. We were also in the midst of a war in Iraq that I didn’t support. We were still meditating on what had happened on 9/11/01. It did not feel like the moment to make a play about love in the suburbs using Balinese masks. So we altered our course and began putting our observations and feelings about America onto the stage. What resulted was a piece that looks at a single moment in time and space. The piece is set on four sets of stairs that spiral upward. The play imagines the long walk down 80 flights of the World Trade Center stairs and the moment when an ordinary evacuation turns into a panic. Somehow, within that single moment, if you observe carefully, is the split-second that changed the course of history but also the threshold between life and death. Love Unpunished looked nothing like an exercise from École Lecoq, but it represented his two greatest contributions to Pig Iron. The piece looked at one thing and at everything; it found the big in the small and the small in the big; it transposed time so that a single moment became an 80-minute piece; it came from our observation of that moment in our history and what wasn’t being said. What was the non-glorified story, the story that didn’t aim to cast heroes and villains but the story that just was without creative elaboration? Through our observation of that incident, five years after the event, we aimed to create a space of disponibilité for the audience, a space for reflection, meditation, and non-judgment.

Lecoq gave many gifts to many people. His knowledge of theatre was extensive, and his demand that theatre be relevant and arresting every single moment was legendary. No doubt, Pig Iron owes a great debt to him as we practice that same rigor in our rehearsal room. We care deeply about the mechanics of performance and about making theatre a riveting, necessary experience. But his contributions to Pig Iron that have been the most significant and long-lasting have been the ways in which he developed our artistic vision. To be disponible and to observe the world are the two principles that define me and my company, and that are more and more relevant the further we get from our time as students. In this way, Lecoq is very much alive within Pig Iron.

Notes
1 Paul Muldoon is a Professor at Princeton University and winner of the Pulitzer Prize.
2 Théâtre de la Jeune Lune was formed by Lecoq graduates in 1978. They split their time between Paris and Minneapolis for the first six years, then settled full-time in Minneapolis in 1985. They won a Tony for Best Regional Theatre in 2005. The company ended operations in 2008.
3 Adam Koplan is the Founder and Artistic Director of Flying Carpet Theatre Company.
4 The Odyssey premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1995.
5 For Hell Meets Henry Halfway and Chekhov Lizardbrain.
6 Joseph Chaikin (1935–2003) was a legendary American theatre director who won six OBIE Awards in his lifetime, including a Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1984, he suffered a stroke, leaving him partially aphasic. Samuel Beckett dedicated his final poem to Chaikin, What Is The Word.

7 Joe Chaikin and a small group of actors founded The Open Theatre in New York City in 1963. It lasted until 1973. Their productions, including The Serpent and Terminal, toured many countries around the world.

8 Cafeteria premiered in September 1997.

9 The Tragedy of Joan of Arc premiered in March 1998.

10 Dig or Fly premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 1996.

11 This project premiered in April 2003 at Princeton University.


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