The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

Mark Evans, Rick Kemp

The Toronto connection

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Martin Julien
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Toronto is often cited, perhaps with more apocryphal than statistical authenticity, as the world's third-largest centre for English-speaking theatre outside of New York and London. Unequivocally, though, it is the largest and most active city in English Canada when assessing theatrical activity, and one in which the teachings of Jacques Lecoq form an unusually strong and complex provenance for at least two generations of influential local and national practitioners.

The city's theatrical ecology in the late 1970s and early 1980s was in the waning season of its first flowering. The so-called ‘Alternative Movement’ had virtually exploded during 1971–72 with the founding of both the influential Factory Theatre Lab and the Tarragon Theatre, as well as the culturally defining first production of Theatre Passe Muraille's collective *The Farm Show*. Fuelled by an alternative vision of producing a national Canadian drama in reaction to decades of British and American dominance of its professional stages, Toronto's young and idealistic new practitioners quickly found their feet as avatars of a nascent nationalism that valorized local playwrights and exploratory home-grown methods of performance above the inherited aesthetic values of a post-colonial Dominion, shackled by its economically contingent relationship with the US producing syndicates. Subsequently, dozens of new professional and semi-professional companies arrived upon the scene to commandeer vacant industrial spaces and proffer their often half-developed inventions to a hungry audience.

Perhaps what is most salient to recognize here is that the burgeoning Alternative Movement had produced a surprisingly monolithic presence in English Canada within the span of a few years. As Denis W. Johnston puts it: ‘After 1972, on the other side of the watershed, the [...] major alternative theatres exerted a national influence and became an established institution in their own right’ (1991: 27).

Nevertheless, as the robust federal and provincial funding models established in response to the country's wildly popular centennial celebrations of 1967 began to wilt, and the new audiences began to splinter and fall off through a combination of demographic change and diminished expectations, the time was ripe for an approach to theatrical development that was not only more sustainable and self-sufficient, but also more rigorous and rooted in methodology. Quietly, a disparate group of Lecoq-trained local artists began settling into
the city to begin building a performance legacy that would have a long-reaching and transformative influence upon the developing theatrical environment. In this chapter, I will examine the establishment and growth of a number of these artists, and observe how their participation in this unique cultural moment has had a notable and inspirational effect upon an entire generation of devisers, helping to define a city's established performance climate while remaining resolutely dedicated to a specialized and rigorous European-based form of theatre-making.

The first generation

In this, it is impossible to overestimate the influence of the company Theatre Smith-Gilmour. Founded by the married couple Michele Smith and Dean Gilmour, who met and studied together at Lecoq from 1976–78, Theatre Smith-Gilmour produced their first 'clown' show, appropriately titled *Just Married*, for the first World Stage Festival at Harbourfront in Toronto. As Gilmour observes:

> We were part of Toronto's theatre avant-garde. All of us were creating outside of the mainstream. Being part of the new wave meant that we immediately had a place in the Canadian theatre landscape. Right from the beginning both Michele and I were teaching as well, so our work was not only bringing a new kind of theatre but also new ways of creating theatre. The other important thing that we brought to Canadian theatre was touring.  

*(Gilmour, 2014)*

Indeed, for several years Smith-Gilmour proceeded to tour both *Just Married* and their second creation-based production, *No Escape* (1982), not only across Canada but also in France, Germany, and Italy.

It was in these early years that Smith and Gilmour inadvertently catalysed two young theatre artists, Leah Cherniak and Martha Ross, who would go on to found Theatre Columbus, the second company which was to have an immense influence on the emerging Toronto scene. Ross, a graduate of Simon Fraser University who studied with Lecoq from 1979–81, remembers it this way:

> I was from British Columbia and new to Toronto, just visiting friends, and I accidentally fell into Dean Gilmour's clown class. And Dean said, 'if you can find a way to get the money together then you should go to Lecoq.' He just recognized in me that I was open to movement and play.  

*(Cherniak & Ross, 2014)*

During her second year of training, Ross became friends with another student from Toronto, who had just arrived to begin her first year as a student at L'École. Cherniak, who completed her training in 1982, describes her germinal encounter with Smith and Gilmour this way:

> I was at University of Toronto, in the drama program, and I adapted Cocteau's *Orpheus*, it was pretty visual and movement-oriented. And Dean and Mimi [Smith] came and saw it – I don't know why, I didn't really know them – and they told me to go to Lecoq, based on the show. Probably just an off-hand comment, and probably
they didn’t ‘tell me’, but just mentioned it, but in my mind I made it: ‘Go to Lecoq’.
I knew nothing about the school at all. But they told me to go, and I went.
(Cherniak & Ross, 2014)

In the summer of 1983, the two graduates devised the thirteen-page tragicomedy Until We Part, performed in an empty downtown Toronto office space. They then established the company in November of that year to produce the double bill My Dinner with Jerome and Fox Tales.

Theatre Smith-Gilmour and Theatre Columbus, having carved out a tenuous niche for themselves in the competitive milieu of alternative Canadian theatres, went on to form the Poor Alex Theatre Group (with Crow’s Theatre), an alliance that lasted from 1986 to 1990, and which shared production costs and occupied a makeshift sixty-five-seat playhouse on Brunswick Avenue. Over the following decades, both companies have gone on to create over sixty productions involving hundreds of artists, and garnered fifty-six nominations for Toronto’s coveted Dora Mavor Moore Award, winning eighteen times. Yet the demonstrable success and longevity of these two companies does not in itself explain how their influence extended into the broader theatrical community, and why such a significant impact occurred in this particular time and place. Perhaps the two general concepts which best elucidate this phenomenon of impact are collaboration and creation.

As has been noted, the ideals and practices of collective creation had already established deep roots in Canadian theatre by the early 1980s. Yet tied to this domestic model of production was an equally robust commitment to both the playwright as the progenitive agent of creativity, and to nation-building as the desired political narrative of playmaking. As Johnston reminds us, ‘[i]n the nationalistic climate of the early 1970s, the [alternative theatre’s] new playwright-based definition for Canadian theatre allowed them to dismiss a wide range of existing theatre as being simply irrelevant’ (1991: 11). And indeed, ‘irrelevance’ was the pejorative epithet often hurled at Smith-Gilmour and Columbus by the oxymoronic ‘established alternatives’ and by government-funded arts councils during their nascent years. Cherniak considers that

[when we started working there was definitely suspicion about the Lecoq grad, and people who come from Lecoq, and the kind of work they do [. . .] the theatre community was a bit strange about us for awhile [. . .] how we did the work, and what we seemed to be doing, was not always lauded by the community. Not literary or political enough, maybe.

(Cherniak & Ross, 2014)

Ross concurs: ‘There is something about Leah’s aesthetic as a director: she allowed chaos. We were messy, sloppy. We often didn’t know what we were going to show the audience’ (Cherniak & Ross, 2014). ‘Collective work was in the air,’ continues Cherniak, ‘and we were doing it from our aesthetic [. . .] there was this weird marriage of analysis and freedom that was very specific to us, maybe Dean and Mimi as well’ (Cherniak & Ross, 2014).

A notable aspect of this way of working was a commitment to devising theatre not from the ‘still-point’ of a lone playwright harnessed to an ideologically situated company assembled to enact and present his or her work, but from a shifting collective of creators who were first and foremost performers. Though their methods were unique, the four primary artists of Smith-Gilmour and Columbus were vitalized by their constitution as performers in a duo. The notion of collectivity – at least in the sense that it denotes a cooperative enterprise – was built
into their structure, as was the concept of creativity through equal collaboration. As Gilmour succinctly offers: ‘In our work we write with our bodies’ (Gilmour & Smith, 2014). Cherniak affirms that

[...] the idea of actors as powerful parts of the process of theatre in Canada was inadvertently something we also stumbled on because playwrights were and still are the centre of Canadian theatre and I think we helped, along with other companies, to prove that actors could be. Not singlehandedly at all, but we empowered actors to feel that they could participate in a process and therefore perhaps imagine that they might have something to say and contribute.

(Cherniak & Ross, 2014)

Cherniak’s idea that actors, guided by a sense of play and imagination, may be able to intuit a defining and constitutive role for themselves as authors involved in a collaborative process is extensive of Smith’s observation on how performers create when she tells us that ‘we believe that the actor’s imagination is at the centre of the process and the actors must risk failing in order to find a new freedom’ (Gilmour & Smith, 2014). Here, perhaps, is a new space of creative mutuality between the ludic and inventive approach to playmaking encouraged by a Lecoq-inspired training and Canada’s historicizing, nationalistic, text-based methods.

That there was a growing stable of Toronto actors, weaned on the prerogatives of ensemble performance and collective creative practice, and looking for fresh opportunities to create meaningful work, was apparent by the late 1970s. What might have been lacking was a pedagogically and aesthetically rigorous methodology through which to tackle the situation. Opportunely, Lecoq’s concept of the auto-cours arrived on Canadian soil to nurture this energy.

According to Lecoq, ‘[...] auto-cours emphasizes production, playwriting, and also the necessity of collaborative work in the theatre’ (2000: 92), and is arguably the most influential of his concepts with regard to the establishment of a Lecoq ‘legacy’ in Canada. The auto-cours approach to devising theatre feels wholly embedded in Smith’s clear-cut pronouncement of Smith-Gilmour’s ‘two ambitious goals’ from the beginning: ‘[...] one was to produce our creations and the other was to produce our Canadian adaptations of great literature that would be relevant to our contemporaries at home and abroad’ (Smith 2014). Indeed, the inevitability of investigating self-producing models of playmaking seems organically implicit within Lecoq’s pedagogical method. Cherniak muses:

I didn’t realize till much later when I returned home how much a part of the pedagogy that was. I just thought it was a way of how to work through the styles. I didn’t really understand it was actually giving us the skills to create work with other people. Even though that’s what we were doing. It’s so ridiculous, because what did we do when we came back? We created work. It was done so seamlessly. Nothing was explained to us – ever.

(Cherniak & Ross, 2014)

If ‘nothing was explained’ to this generation of artists who nevertheless returned to Canada in order to produce their own new work, then at least for the next cycle of practitioners to arrive on the Toronto scene from Paris, a solid template and profile for auto-cours explorations had been established as a benchmark and an example.
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The second generation

Since the turn of the millennium, a number of more recent Lecoq graduates – all trained in the early and mid-2000s – have made a conspicuous impact on theatre in Toronto. It is almost chimerical to speculate upon the reasons why a generational ‘gap’ of Lecoqian influence appears between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s. Certainly, there were Canadians who attended the school and returned to Toronto, such as Nikki Pascetta and Diana Tso. Cherniak speculates that shrinking arts council budgets and changes in funding models made it much more difficult for developing artists to produce beyond a project-by-project basis. Perhaps granting organizations and juries assessed that the tradition was already adequately represented by Smith-Gilmour and Columbus. Ross muses that there may have been a period of transition and readjustment at the school in the years leading up to Lecoq’s death in 1999, leading to a different set of strengths and priorities for graduates. In any event, there has been a veritable explosion of producing activity emanating from returning students in the twenty-first century.

I will look at the developing careers and ideas of four practitioners: Ravi Jain, Adam Paolozza, Amy Nostbakken, and Dan Watson. Although these representative artists are differentiated in their goals and methods, they maintain an active and conscientious discourse both with each other and with members of the generation preceding theirs.

Ravi Jain, who founded Why Not Theatre in 2007, is a much-awarded artist with over twenty productions realized or in development, notably collaborating with Smith-Gilmour on their 2010 production of *Spent* (with Adam Paolozza). He clearly views his work as stemming from both his two years at Lecoq and his continuing development within a Toronto movement:

Most people in Toronto associate Lecoq with Theatre Smith-Gilmour or Theatre Columbus. It took some time to show people that what I was doing came from the same inspiration as them, but it was not the same. When I started my company, which had an international focus, it was right when it was all becoming exciting and people were curious. No two shows are the same. [My work] is theatrical and engages in a dialogue between the audience and performer – all things learned and explored at Lecoq.

(Jain, 2014)

Perhaps what distinguishes the work of Jain and Why Not Theatre most pertinently is his commitment to inter-company collaboration and multi-cultural themes and inclusion:

Why Not has been acting as a connector between more established companies and independent emerging artists. We’re currently experimenting on a producing model aimed at creating more conversations between generations. The model is based on a Lecoq fundamental: collaboration [. . .] Toronto is a multi-cultural city, but that is not represented on our performing arts stages. There are many communities who do not ever enter a building because they are excluded simply because English may not be their first language.

(Jain, 2014)

This attentiveness to issues of diversity and inclusiveness brings a political edge to much of Why Not’s activities. That it represents a politics far removed from the national soul-searching
of the 1970s is not lost on Jain: ‘Toronto has changed a great deal in the years I have been here [. . .] now, we see ‘international’ just about everywhere’ (Jain, 2014).

Adam Paolozza’s Bad New Days theatre company, founded in 2008, is also based upon a collaborative producing model. A graduate of the Ryerson Theatre School, where he studied clown with Cherniak, Paolozza has also partnered with Smith-Gilmour on four of their productions, and he is a four-time Dora Award nominee. Although he situates himself firmly in the local tradition, Paolozza is keen to describe its evolution:

I think that the landscape was different in the 1980s, when you really only had a few companies in Toronto who had trained at Lecoq. I think back then people thought the work that these companies created was what Lecoq was about. But now it’s different. There are many younger companies, like mine, who are all creating diverse work thematically and stylistically. And yet we all share the common theatrical vocabulary that Lecoq gave us – a specific way of talking about making the work. This common theatrical vocabulary is creating a real community among people that have studied at Lecoq (and [Philippe] Gaulier for that matter). We all talk together, work together, and take care of each other. There’s a real living tradition happening in the city as we speak.

(Paolozza, 2014)

Paolozza also stresses the fresh dynamism of his home city’s theatrical milieu. ‘What Toronto has that other major European cities don’t have is a kind of clean slate,’ he says. ‘The theatre culture in the city is really only about forty to fifty years old [. . .] everything is still to be invented’ (Paolozza, 2014). This echoes an observation made by Martha Ross: ‘It wasn’t obvious how to do it, to survive and produce in Europe. I did go on this little tour with a show in a couple of places in France, passed the hat, and almost starved’ (Cherniak & Ross, 2014).

As Leah Cherniak assents, ‘I loved Europe but I realized that I didn’t know how to do that there. I was going to be l’étranger, be a stranger forever’ (Cherniak & Ross, 2014).

This is a sentiment picked up by Amy Nostbakken, who co-founded Theatre Ad Infinitum (with George Mann and Nir Paldi) in 2008. A distinctive, multi-award-winning ensemble based in London and Toronto, Nostbakken was nominated for an Outstanding Performance Dora Award in 2012 for her solo turn in The Big Smoke. Her ruminations on the opportunities of producing new, devised work in Toronto deserve to be quoted at length:

Here we have the most multi-cultural spot on the planet, a young city in a young country, buzzing with vibrancy, talent, promise, possibility and a palpable feeling that we, here, now, are the ones who can mold the cultural landscape around us [. . .] I work in both Canada and the UK – a country entrenched in the tradition of theatre, where punters have been going to see plays unsolicited for hundreds of years, where imaginative, provocative work continues to be made today (and sometimes protested then censored) – and when I return from London to this burgeoning city busting with people hungry to shape the scene, I am totally invigorated.

(Nostbakken, 2014)

Nostbakken is able to acutely identify the city’s Lecoq tradition as a definitive part of its ecology:
Now is a thrilling time to be making theatre in Toronto. Building on the new ground that was forged by the Lecoq-based practitioners who came before, there is a new generation of companies and an ever-growing community of players who are defying Toronto’s outdated provincial conventions.

(Nostbakken, 2014)

Dan Watson, co-founder in 2005 of the international collective Ahuri Theatre, also runs the community-based Edge of the Woods Theatre in his hometown of Huntsville, Ontario, north of Toronto. Watson won great praise for his conception and direction of *A Fool’s Life*, which garnered six Dora Award nominations in 2012, winning for Outstanding Sound Design. He also acted as a performer/deviser with Smith-Gilmour on two productions. According to Watson, it is somewhat of a double-edged sword being associated with the Lecoq tradition in Toronto:

I don’t feel like the way I create quite fits in with the way a lot of artists create in Toronto so that offers me a place. It’s like it’s a place between the outside and the in. My practice does not totally fit with a playwright text-based approach, and I’m not really experimental enough to be with folks that are very experimental. Having said that, there are obviously a lot of Lecoq-trained artists, and I do feel at home with many of them. So what I think we bring is an approach that is more earnest than some of the practices here (I think Lecoq training is very earnest in its approach).

(Watson, 2014)

Following Watson’s observation, what might this ‘earnest approach,’ assessed as lacking in ‘some of the practices’ in Toronto, signify within the city’s developing theatrical geography? Perhaps in a community where the initiating drive to devise and express an historicized identity through a nationalistic lens is near exhaustion, and where its polity and demographic is increasingly heterogeneous and multi-vocal, Lecoq-inspired processes of play creation offer rigorous methods for harnessing the collective imaginations of its theatre artists. As Alan Filewod puts it, when discussing collective creation as a contemporaneous Canadian practice,

[the modern experiment in collective creation [. . .] places the responsibility for the play on the shoulders of the collective; instead of a governing mind providing an artistic vision which others work to express, the collectively created play is the vision of the supra-individualistic mind.

(Filewod, 2008: 1)

The seriousness – the very earnestness – of a visionary, collective responsibility with regard to theatrical substance and intelligibility is a quality and a poetics perhaps ideally manifested within a Lecoquian framework of creation.

Moreover, Canada’s well-recognized ‘identity crisis’ – its view of itself as a political underachiever and underpopulated ‘middle power,’ most especially vis-à-vis its relations with Britain and the US – has stimulated a most solemn national project since at least the time of its confederation. However, this perennial evocation of an ‘outsider status’ also generates a dynamic that provides artistic practitioners with a potentially broader, and more inclusive, collaborative model for creation. ‘My particular practice and interests have led me to Community Arts,’ suggests Watson, ‘and I think this is something related to Lecoq training as well. The
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pedagogy invites you to draw inspiration from the world around you, and engage with different constraints’ (Watson, 2014).

The future

If the collaborationist model of creation appears particularly well-suited to the constraints of the Canadian psyche, so too does the auto-cours method of self-generation seem attuned to the new realities of funding and production. At a juncture where local, provincial, and federal arts councils find themselves overseeing stagnant or shrinking budgets, the DIY ethic of the Lecoq-based artist is finding willing executive partners drawn from more established arts organizations. Why Not Theatre and Bad New Days have recently collaborated and co-produced with the much larger Soulpepper and Tarragon theatre companies. Theatre Smith-Gilmour’s 2014 production of Take Me Back to Jefferson continues a long and growing relationship with the Factory Theatre; and Theatre Columbus, now helmed by original producer Jennifer Brewin (and renamed Common Boots Theatre), has revitalized itself as a purveyor of large-scale outdoor theatre.

Teaching is also an activity that continues to sow seeds for vigorous local Lecoq-based practice. Gilmour has mentored hundreds of students through his role as part-time faculty member at Humber College (daughter Nina Gilmour is a recent graduate) and York University. Cherniak and Ross have been teaching their own versions of Lecoq-inspired clown and neutral mask technique at numerous training institutions for years. Adam Paolozza convened and moderated a well-attended inaugural Lecoq Symposium in June 2014 at the Tarragon Theatre, with a panel including Cherniak, Gilmour, Nostbakken, Ross, Smith, and others.

Yet it is the commitment of individual practitioners to the independent producing culture of Toronto that continues to foster new and original work. No longer viewed with the suspicion by an ‘alternative establishment’ of theatre-makers, young artists trained in the methods of Lecoq – and his erstwhile student Gaulier – are finding a receptive audience for their unique hybrid of personal, physically-devised work entangled within broader political and inter-cultural concerns.

Notes

1 There are noteworthy examples of Lecoq-trained artists who made significant contributions to English Canadian theatre practice from at least the early 1970s. Adrian Pecknold (1962–63) formed the Canadian Mime Theatre in 1968. Educator Perry Scheiderman (1970–72) headed both the National Theatre School (1990–2000) and the Ryerson Theatre School (2000–10). Richard Pochinko was enrolled at L’École through 1972, and returned to Canada to form the Theatre Resource Centre and develop an entirely homegrown method of Canadian clowning. Although the contributions of these artists are noteworthy, their work in Canada developed in distinct and diverse ways that represented only oblique connections to Lecoq.

2 The ‘collective creation’ model of play-making was highly influential across the country and became the early ‘house style’ of both Saskatoon’s 25th Street Theatre and Vancouver’s Tamanhous. The Factory Theatre, under Ken Gass, was noted for its exclusive commitment to Canadian playwrights, mounting literally scores of productions in its early years. Bill Glassco’s Tarragon demonstrated a devotion to exploring the domestic lives of marginalized Canadians, such as the disabled in David Freeman’s Creeps and Newfoundland’s underclass in David French’s ‘Mercer Plays.’

3 The position of French-speaking Québec vis-à-vis the dominant role of North American English-speaking culture within its own history is difficult to assess here. It is provocative to note that the Frenchman Lecoq’s influence upon the theatrical scene of post-Quiet Revolution Québec may be a
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muted one. One notable exception to this might be the career of Brigitte Haentjens, Artistic Director of Canada’s National Arts Centre French Theatre, who attended Lecoq in the early 1970s.

References