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La Mancha Theatre Company and School, Chile

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A theatre School should not always journey in the wake of existing theatre forms. On the contrary, it should have a visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself.

(Lecoq, 2002: 172)

In 1989, I founded La Mancha Theatre Company with Rodrigo Malbrán. We met at the Lecoq School when I was in my second year and Malbrán was completing the teaching diploma, a distinction shared by very few in the world at the time. Over the years, La Mancha has produced a highly varied body of work centred on devised performance in live and recorded media. Our projects have involved collaborating with theatre practitioners, poets, artists and writers in Europe, Scandinavia, Central and South America, cultivating rich links and long-lasting cultural correspondences. In 1992, we set up a permanent base in Santiago, Chile, and with the encouragement of Jacques and Fay Lecoq, established the La Mancha International School of Image and Gesture, the first of its kind in South America.

The repercussions of Lecoq’s teachings continue to reverberate in us both, long after our time as his students. This chapter attempts to capture some of these resonances by tracing the trajectory of the La Mancha Theatre Company and the school from a personal perspective. Firmly placed in the lineage of Lecoq, our school has developed its own curriculum through a process of constant re-evaluation and adaptation, in a way that chimes with Francisco Varela’s notion of ‘enactivism’, which sees cognition as resolutely entwined with life and unfolding as the subject dynamically interacts with the social and physical environment (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 2nd Edition, 1993).1 Viewed from this perspective, I will consider the challenges of introducing a distinctive approach to theatre-making in the climate of post-dictatorship and how La Mancha’s curriculum has necessarily responded to the evolving cultural, social and political context in which it is immersed. While I am wary of oversimplifying the challenges and experiences we have faced, I seek to exemplify how our practice and evolving curriculum affirm Lecoq’s pedagogical approach as essentially an emancipatory process, a life-long pedagogy of self-discovery, an enactive paradigm.
La Mancha Theatre Company: from Europe to Chile

From the start, we saw the company’s two-person structure as a viable basis for working internationally. This model involved bringing professionals and students together in each host country to produce innovative, project-based performance. Through a process of creative interaction, we experienced directly the cultural, artistic and social concerns of our collaborators, which were subsequently reflected in the collective authoring of productions. In 1990, we were awarded a research grant from the Norwegian Arts Council to review contemporary theatre training in Chile, Malbrán’s country of origin. There, we discovered actor training at that time was firmly rooted in the traditions of psychological realism, with an overriding focus on the actor as interpreter. The opportunity to introduce an actor/creator-centred approach appeared.

Concurrently, we were invited to lead an environmental theatre project with children living in the most polluted and destitute region of the Pacific coastline, co-funded by the Chilean Catholic University and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), based on the decimation of artisanal fishing by sea pollution and industrial trawling. A documentary of this process was shown worldwide by the IDRC. The insight gained from working on a project of this nature triggered a deep and long-lasting commitment to Chile as a future home for La Mancha.

The political backdrop to this decision is significant. During the Marxist government of Salvador Allende, the Chilean experimental theatre movement, with its long tradition of innovation and renewal, became deeply involved with the unfolding political process. In 1973, this culture of exploration and political activism was abruptly obliterated by the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet. Under his military regime, extreme censorship practices stifled any progressive forms of resistance. In the words of the Chilean playwright Benjamin Galemiri, ‘Culture was seen by Pinochet as an act of terrorism’. Over the next twenty-seven years, state censorship determined creative content. This is not to suggest that experimentation did not occur, yet Chile’s rich cultural identity had essentially been isolated and silenced. Our initial visit in 1990 coincided with the historic hand-over of power by General Pinochet to a democratically elected government, a very exciting time indeed and an opportune moment for La Mancha to invest in the cultural development of a new democracy.

La Mancha Theatre Company in Chile

In 1992, La Mancha established a permanent base in Santiago. Located in an era of political uncertainty where suspicion and mistrust, even within families, were still predominant forces, we found ourselves operating in a landscape of political paradox and cultural uncertainty. Our first production, Parranda: Selected Texts by Nicanor Parra by a Band of Bouffons (1992), was an incisive and humorous adaptation of poetry by the Chilean ‘Anti Poet’, Nicanor Parra. The British Council sponsored our collaboration with the British art collective Space Explorations, designers of the scenography, and with funding from the Norwegian and Chilean governments. The production premiered in the Catholic University. The following day, we were ‘invited’ by the university to remove three ‘seditious’ poems. Our defense of our artistic position triggered much excitement in the press, resulting in a vigorous national debate about the underlying censorship still permeating a nascent democracy. The production’s artistic values were eventually vindicated, and the censorship was retracted. Subsequently, Parranda toured major national theatre venues, festivals, and the most remote parts of Chile for the

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next two years. In 1995, *Parranda* was selected to represent Chile at the International World Theatre Festival in Costa Rica, thus confirming La Mancha’s position as one of the leading contemporary theatre companies in Latin America.

**The La Mancha School of Image and Gesture**

In 1995, we founded The La Mancha School of Image and Gesture with the Chilean actor and theatre professor Ernesto Malbrán Vargas. The school’s first cohort of nineteen was made up of La Mancha’s actors and financed by us. Our motives here were tactical. It was important to begin with a sufficient number of students and to establish a strong first year, open to an alternative teaching and learning approach. The core values of our mission were centred on the notion of the actor/creator and a commitment to preparing graduates for generating their own work. The title of the school was carefully chosen. The words ‘Image’ and ‘Gesture’ were intended to foreground the visual and the physical in a landscape dominated by literary-driven theatre. In implementing our vision, we were met with curiosity and enthusiasm by educationalists, the incoming democratically elected government, and a large sector of the cultural establishment. We also encountered a considerable amount of suspicion and resistance from the more established quarters of the theatre elite who, I would argue, were convinced that our intention was to undermine the integrity of the writer and the value of text-based theatre. As I mentioned earlier, stifling censorship had forced contemporary Chilean playwrights to operate from a position of subversive defiance. Theirs was an important voice. While it was never our intention to contest this view, in offering an alternative, we were directly challenging prevailing conditions. We realised early on in the school’s development that it would be our graduates who would eventually break through this resistance.

**Interacting with surroundings**

As a student of Lecoq, I remember vividly an overwhelming sensation of wonder when walking through the small, TARDIS-like door at ‘Le Central’ in Paris leading to ‘le grand salle’, a unique and extraordinary space. I had entered a parallel universe. In Santiago, we searched for a similar environment, a rented space that would serve as an essential component of the learning experience. Initially the school was situated on the outskirts of Santiago on the slopes of the Andes. Surrounded by eucalyptus trees, cacti, medicinal plants and a water supply from its own spring, Malbrán and I lived on the premises with our two daughters, alongside lizards, dogs, rabbits, horses, tarantulas, scorpions and condors.

Varela’s enactive paradigm contends that knowledge evolves through a bodily engagement with the environment and is rooted squarely in the irreducible nature of conscious experience (Varela & Shear, 1999). I would argue that our location permeated the consciousness of both students and staff with enduring consequences. Most students came from regional cities, and this exceptionally potent environment invited them to interact with an alternative world, serving as an immersive resource for first-year exploration of the elements, matter and animals, and extending to second-year work. For instance, plant life, with its multiple forms and variations, serves as an unlikely starting point for the students in the creation of their *bouffons*. Similarly, our approach to teaching *bouffon* integrates animal work to explore an alternative vocabulary for the movement, rhythm and world of each *bouffon*. These modifications were not imposed, but have evolved from the school’s unique location. In the words of the French poet Noël Arnaud: ‘Je suis l’espace où je suis’ or ‘I am the space where I am’ (Bachelard, 1994: 137).
Running a school before the widespread use of the mobile phone and Internet made for a totally immersive experience. International correspondence was entirely through letters, our only means of contact with the Lecoq School. We worked late into the evenings and throughout the weekends to build a creative, collaborative and highly rigorous environment for our students. There was a kitchen for students to cook so a cleaning rota was required, which soon extended to the collaborative upkeep of the entire school and grounds. What began as a practical solution gradually became an integral element of the curriculum and has become a means by which students value their working space and feel integrated into the aspirations of the project. It was not until later that I read that Jacques Copeau, the French actor, director and teacher, had introduced a similar system in the École du Vieux-Colombier. Mark Evans describes how Copeau’s students were responsible for ‘sweeping the floors, washing up and cleaning tables’ (Evans, 2013: 115). He writes that this was based on Copeau’s intention to train an actor who could respond to his vision of ‘the deep moral, social and artistic purpose of theatre’. Unbeknownst to La Mancha, we were echoing Copeau’s immersive ‘culture of shared work and creation’ (Evans, 2013: 115).

The Chilean Education Authority refused to validate the school. Their framework was based on four-year courses, so our two-year diploma went unrecognised. At first, we were concerned that marginalisation by the establishment would limit applicant numbers, but surprisingly, this had little effect and indeed, our independence became empowering. We could set up the school on our own terms, design our own diploma and develop an independent and flexible curriculum. Initially, the school was financed through income generated by the theatre company, but within two years, thanks to forward planning and a significant increase in student numbers, we were in a position to consider purchasing land to build a school to our own architectural specifications. The Chilean architect Pablo Vodanovic, a pioneer of earthquake-resistant buildings, designed a versatile space to encapsulate our vision. The current school was inaugurated in the year 2000 and consists, on the second floor, of two large rehearsal/teaching spaces that convert into one performance space with an audience capacity of 200. Situated on the banks of the River Mapocho, the surrounding land has been landscaped to create diverse rehearsal and performance spaces integrating indigenous flora and fauna.

With the opening of the new building, La Mancha was in a position to expand its international profile. For example, Floriana Frassetto, founder member of the Swiss group Mummenschanz, ran workshops with our students, and the Swedish Feldenkrais movement teacher Vesna Puric visited us from Belgium. Ongoing student exchanges with the New Zealand Toi Waakiri Theatre School and El Centro Nacional de las Artes in Mexico have contributed to the richness of the student experience. We have established links with local and regional agencies (project funding from the Chilean government and local councils), industry bodies, CODELCO, professional associations (providing school fee grants and donations), as well as employers and practitioners (theatre festivals and student placements). From a small cohort of nineteen, the school’s student body has expanded, on occasions, to over 100.

The curriculum

The curriculum was originally conceived along the same pedagogical lines as the Lecoq School, and these continue to influence curriculum development. It is important to acknowledge the degree to which, in the early days, our artistic vision dominated student output. This was a deliberate means of highlighting the potential of the creative work. Moreover, while it was not our intention to preserve or fix Lecoq’s pedagogy, we felt an enormous responsibility not to distort it. Perhaps this apprehension exemplifies the observation made by Jonathon
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Pitches that to place oneself in a line of practitioners going back many years, ‘is often driven by a genuine concern that they might otherwise be lost, misunderstood, diluted or misrepresented, compromising a hard-earned and long-exercised apprenticeship’ (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011: 123). Equally, in our attempt to respect the values and aims of Lecoq’s pedagogy, it has been important to avoid inflexibility in developing our own approach.

When writing the initial course document, we uncovered surprising discrepancies of experience. Whilst Malbrán had been at the Lecoq School only five years earlier than myself, his recollection of the process differed from my own. Far from being conceptually fixed or prescriptive, Lecoq’s curriculum was more fluid and flexible than we had imagined. These shifts in emphasis and curriculum content were inexorably linked to the unique contribution of its teaching staff. As well as M. Lecoq, we were both taught by Norman Taylor, Christophe Marchand and Sandra Mladenovic. However, Malbrán had been highly influenced by the Belgian teacher Lassaâd Saïdi, whereas I was a student when Alain Mollot joined the team. The staff’s distinctive specialisms and unique experiences enriched the depth and breadth of Lecoq’s approach.

In our own school, the presence of Professor Ernesto Malbrán Vargas complemented our own specialisms. His involvement with the Chilean experimental theatre movement and experience as a student at the Actor’s Studio, New York, in the 1960s; his early political engagement with the Popular Unity Movement in the government of Allende; and his application of Rudolf Laban’s work to the writing process along with his professional experience as a film actor (The Battle of Chile, 1972; Sub Terra, 2003; Machuca, 2004; El Viaje de Emilio, 2010), all made his a unique and profound contribution to the progress and expansion of the curriculum, most notably in the area of writing for theatre, which increasingly empowered the student voice.

The dynamic between teacher and learner

While staff input goes some way to explaining the mobility of a curriculum, Lecoq’s method is profoundly dynamised by the students themselves. Teaching the two-year pedagogical cycle, in my case over fourteen years, it is interesting to note that our own student cohorts changed over time. How does one account for the shift in student interest and concern? Moreover, what is the role of the teacher in this context? To address these questions, it is necessary to backtrack thirty years. The Chilean cultural background outlined earlier set the stage for La Mancha’s work, but this setting transformed as democracy increasingly asserted itself. In his own writings, Lecoq acknowledges that ‘The great strength of the school lies in its students’ (2000: 23). A turning point in my understanding of this assertion occurred when, in 1996, still in its early days, the La Mancha School featured prominently in the documentary Obstinate Memory (1997) by the Chilean documentary film maker Patricio Guzmán as a sequel to his internationally renowned trilogy, The Battle of Chile (1975, 1977, 1979).

The Battle of Chile chronicles the ‘Popular Unity’ era of Salvador Allende and had never before been shown in Chile. Guzmán returned to his homeland to show the film for the first time to a cross-section of society, with the aim of re-awakening obliterated memories. The filmed reaction of our students seeing The Battle of Chile starkly exposed the confrontation between an ineffaceable past and a new generation of young Chileans educated, essentially, to forget history. The result was overwhelming, as Cathérine Humblot observes in her analysis of Obstinate Memory: ‘The film ends with an intense and terrible sequence: the shaken, troubled
faces of the youths incapable of controlling the emotions that arise in them as they contemplate their own history.11 These were the faces of our students.

From that point, I became deeply mindful of the fact that students are not a tabula rasa, but crucially bring to the process elements of themselves and their experiences. These students witnessed their family’s involvement either for or against military rule. The hurt ran deep, and to discuss it or to explore it within a theatrical context was unheard of at the time. This may go some way to explaining the challenges of initiating the voice programme at our school. It was difficult to unearth why vocal projection and articulation were so problematic for early cohorts. Importantly, these students had grown up in a culture where, to talk openly, was acutely dangerous. While I may be oversimplifying the reasons for their unique vocal characteristics, it was compelling to witness subsequent generations become increasingly assertive and imaginative in their vocal work as democracy took hold.

Developing a dialogical space

Varela’s enactive paradigm asserts that identities are in constant motion. In line with this argument, the dynamic evolution of La Mancha’s curriculum is intricately and intrinsically linked to its students. If students change over time, it is crucial for the teacher to be sensitive to these nuances in order to identify a latent concern or an emerging possibility. As such, the La Mancha School curriculum acknowledges each individual and the evolving cultural context within which we work. Increasingly, we felt able to potentiate a process of enquiry seeking to explore possibilities with students rather than imparting fixed ideas, thus affirming that Lecoq’s approach is not about mastery but enquiry. Viewed from this perspective, Lecoq’s teaching approach chimes more accurately with what Peter Jarvis sees as a shift away ‘from a delivery of static knowledge to a dialogical relationship where knowledge is co-created’ (Jarvis in Kahn & Walsh, 2006: 36). In this sense, Lecoq’s teaching model is not fixed, but instead consists of negotiated realities and shared understandings. Through the process of making their own work, students discover themselves, and this contributes to a flexible and evolving curriculum.

From the year 2000, students progressively connected to the wider culture, turning their gaze outwards towards other art forms and environments. The consolidation of democracy in Chile led to a curiosity for re-encountering the outside world. This outward-looking perspective was galvanised by the growing number of applicants from other countries, including Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba, Brazil and Spain. Moreover, students connected to pressing contemporary issues. In Conteurs Mimeur or storyteller mimes (Lecoq, 2000: 103), they tackled challenging themes of incest, religion, abortion and education, topics that a few years before would have been unimaginable within a theatrical context. Our students embraced Lecoq’s world of the bouffon with relish. Its provocative and satirical qualities correspond with Chilean humour. Clown and Commedia dell’arte are styles that our students have gone on to champion in their own companies, and in Melodrama they choose real and pressing themes of exile, domestic violence, disability and poverty, drawing on their own experiences.

Lecoq’s exercise ‘Les Tribuns’ acts as a springboard into Tragedy and holds a particular fascination for our students, who are inspired by the imaginative reconstruction of a historic event involving the heroine/hero and a chorus. Over the years, we have been invited into a suffocating space to experience Anne Frank’s hiding place. Riders on horseback have charged down the mountainside to reconstruct the moment when the Mapuche Indian chief, Lautaro,
confronts the Spanish invaders. Students with Jewish ancestry were given yellow stars and herded into an isolated room as Hitler espoused his Nazi vision. Particularly memorable were Salvador Allende’s last radio address before shooting himself, John and Yoko’s ‘love-in’, and The Mexican ‘Chiapas’ defending their homeland in the grounds of the school. As our own daughters grew up, the students recruited them to play daughters of Che Guevara, civil rights leaders and French revolutionaries. Together, students and staff have vividly experienced the power of oratory, its diverse creative possibilities and the dynamics of the crowd. Furthermore, the possibilities of internal and external locations reveal the students’ infinite resourcefulness and imagination in their understanding of how a theatrical space contributes to audience experience. Crucially, this ‘reconstruction’ process highlights the tensions of the transition from the real to the imaginary.

‘Auto-Cours’ or ‘self-directed learning’ is a core aspect of Lecoq’s pedagogy. In the La Mancha School, the weekly sharing of first-year work provides a space for developing an understanding of critical feedback as part of the learning process. Second-year ‘Auto-Cours’ have become increasingly interactive and inter-reflective, evolving into a kind of laboratory of research and mutual discovery between teacher and student. Sometimes the dialogue is heated, but because it centres on the work itself, a highly productive and vibrant exchange is guaranteed. Writing on the relationship between student and teacher, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962) calls for a voyage of mutual discovery, an egalitarian and life-long engagement with learning. This view culminates in Bachelard’s fundamental principle of the ‘pedagogy of the objective attitude’, whereby, ‘whoever is taught must teach’ (Gaudin in Bachelard, 2005: xxi). Indeed, Bachelard has been acknowledged by Lecoq in his own writings. This call for a projective approach to learning and teaching echoes the way in which Lecoq’s pedagogy has offered La Mancha the means of evolving as a responsive rather than reactive institution. As such, Lecoq’s pedagogical model might best be conceived as a ‘method’ in its double meaning, combining ‘the rigor of a system and the indeterminacy carried by its Greek root hodos (“way”’) (Gaudin in Bachelard, 2005: xxi).

**Conclusion**

In Central and South America, La Mancha has contributed to a forceful momentum of collective creation and actor/creator-led work spanning two decades. Graduates have pursued careers as artists, actors, dancers, writers, directors and producers, forming national and international theatre and dance companies. They have also gone on to teach and direct workshops in schools, local communities, hospitals, prisons and indigenous communities, initiating and consolidating national and international networks as they work with each other across cohorts, cultures and continents. In turn, the theatre company and theatre school have evolved as both distinct but interactional entities. The company is now a space for graduates and teaching staff to explore and test boundaries of performance, serving as a springboard into the professional spheres of practice and research. The dynamic relationship between company and school has generated postgraduate courses in Teaching, Directing and Theatre & Human Development.

Our students offer the school paths for change and discovery, inviting us to continually challenge and renew our teaching and practice. As such, I would argue that La Mancha’s journey reflects Varela’s assertion that cognition is embodied and situated. His model of *autopoiesis* (or the ‘emergent self’) maintains that ‘knowing, doing and living are not separate things and that reality and our transitory identity are partners in a constructive dance’ (1996: 415).
I believe that Lecoq’s pedagogical approach activates this dance in the student, and in our case, drives the mobility and dynamism of La Mancha.

Notes
1 Francisco Varela (1946–2001), Chilean biologist, philosopher and neuroscientist.
2 IDRC: Canadian Crown corporation in collaboration with researchers from the developing world.
5 Nicanor Parra: Chilean anti-poet, mathematician and physicist.
6 Space Explorations: London-based artist group renowned for site-specific art work that responds to the former use of empty buildings.
7 Mummenschanz: Swiss Theatre Company founded in 1972 by Bernie Schürch and Andres Bossard (who met at Lecoq’s School) and Floriana Frassetto.
8 CODELCO: Corporación Nacional de Cobre (The Chilean National Copper Corporation).
10 Guzmán’s more recent documentary, Nostalgia for the Light (2010), is a culmination of this series.
12 Lecoq references Gaston Bachelard as having ‘analysed the materiality of the imagination: in L’Aire et les songes [Air and Dreams]’ (Lecoq, 2000: 44).

References