The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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From Paris to Cape Town

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A contextual conversation

Magnet Theatre is an award-winning, independent, physical theatre company that has operated in and out of Cape Town, South Africa, for the past 28 years. The company was created directly after my return to South Africa after two years’ study at L’École Jacques Lecoq. It was formed in 1987 to produce *Cheap Flights*, which was my first solo show. Magnet Theatre, developed with co-artistic director Mark Fleishman, now has two components: (1) a professional theatre profile with an original repertoire of over 30 productions, many of them award-winning, that have been performed all over South Africa and internationally; and (2) a set of multi-layered educational processes and projects that are linked in South Africa with the social advancement of marginalized and previously disadvantaged youth. Both trajectories of the company seek to celebrate a spirit of theatrical research and to challenge participants in our activities (performers and audiences) through experiences that shift bodies, assumptions, feelings, beliefs and understandings (Magnet Theatre, 2014). Both emphasize the primacy of the human body in the act of theatre and as a site for redress and social transformation.

The two main influences that have defined the nature of both Magnet’s production work – the themes and creative methodologies – as well as its educational processes, have been Lecoq’s pedagogy and the particularities of the South African context, specifically as it relates to violence and oppression and its impact on the body. Magnet Theatre’s work is the site for a conversation and a meeting between these two influences.

Lecoq’s poetic statement ‘*tout bouge*’ (Lecoq in Keefe & Murray, 2007: 192) could easily be construed as a description of the way his pedagogy has moved around the world. My own journey to and from the school (1984–86) is evidence of the rebounds, the ideas that resonate (‘*Tous se ricochet et se réverbère*’), the non-linearity of the process of dissemination (‘*D’une point a une autre, pas de ligne droite*’), and the developments, changes and evolution of his ideas (‘*Tout évolue, progresse*’) (Lecoq in Keefe & Murray, 2007: 192) as they meet the new context of South Africa and impact on the work of Magnet Theatre.

In what follows, I refer to Edward Said’s travelling theory as a frame to understand in more detail the inevitability of the modifications that are ‘part of the historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another’ (Said, 1983: 236). In other words, these are the
条件 for acceptance and resistance which confronted Lecoq’s transplanted ideas from the beginning of the life of Magnet Theatre in South Africa in the 1980s.

Moving ideas

Lecoq’s practice, by virtue of the fact that his school was filled with international students, travelled – an inevitable evolution and migration of ideas. ‘The work of theory, criticism, demystification, deconsecration, and decentralization . . . is never finished. The point of theory therefore is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile’ (Said, 2002: 451).

The intercultural connections between France and South Africa were complicated by the history and impact of colonization in Africa. An awareness of postcolonial theory meant that, in importing Lecoq’s pedagogy, I was compelled to consider the necessity of challenging the ‘canons of Western art’ (Fortier, 2002: 195). I was aware of the potential violence of imposing a practice that was in fact embedded in the culture and philosophy of one of the imperial powers. These considerations provided ongoing critique of the perceived value of Lecoq’s training in the South African context, and operated as a measure of restraint and as a stimulus for certain modifications. Modifications are an inevitable ‘part of the historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another’ (Said, 1983: 236). Theory, in this process of moving from place to place, needs to be answerable to an ‘essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations [. . .]’ (Said, 1983: 241). If theory remains unresponsive, it can become ‘an ideological trap. It transfixes both its users and what it is used on [. . .]’ (Said, 1983: 241). Moving theory from site to site is what ensures its robustness: ‘the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual theory’ (Said, 1983: 226). Said echoes Lecoq’s affirmation about the constant motion of life, in relation to theory. Lecoq’s ideas were themselves garnered from travel, predominantly to Italy, and influenced by Greek and Japanese traditions, skewing any definitive notions of fixed origins.

Said breaks down the process of the movement of ideas from one place to another into four phases:

- ‘First, there is a point of origin’ (Said, 1983: 227).
- ‘Second, there is a distance transversed’ (Said, 1983: 227 ibid.).
- ‘Third, there is a set of conditions . . . of acceptance or . . . resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its instruction or toleration’ (Said, 1983: 228 ibid.).
- ‘Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place’ (Said, 1983: 228 ibid.).

Conditions of acceptance

Violence and the body

Lecoq was born in Paris in 1921 and was a young man when the Second World War broke out. He lived through the German occupation of France and witnessed the impact of the war, considered to be the most devastating and destructive in human history. I propose that
Lecoq's pedagogy, his physical theatre, responded pendulum-like to the overwhelming reality of death and violence by focusing on the living, moving, differentiated body. For Lecoq, such a pendulum swing response to violence is ‘inevitable’ (Lecoq, 2006: 35). Referring to the resurgence of the focus on the moving body after World War II, he states: ‘The return to nature and spontaneity of gesture is an inevitable result of the overwhelming limitations that suppress life’ (Lecoq, 2006: 35). The overwhelming evidence of death (as a result of war and violence) forces a focus on the living body and the way it invests in the future and in individuality through movement and action.

Magnet Theatre’s own context of teaching and creating work in South Africa has likewise been steeped in a culture of violence in which the body has become a marked site. In South Africa, violence seems to exist as something that is endemic and continuous, with assaults on the human body from the early moments of the colonial interaction continuing through the period of apartheid into the present.

All forms of violence – be they physical or symbolic, overt or covert – impact on the body. Violence imposes stillness on the body through death and maiming. Violence erases identity and ruptures the normal functioning of the body. If the body is the place where violence makes its mark, then the body can also be the site on which to offset this marking through creation (Scarry, 1985). In South Africa, the images that saturated the landscape during the struggle years (the late 1980s coinciding with my return from École Jaques Lecoq) were of resistance: images of young people insisting that despite the persistent violence and oppression, the structures of power could and would be changed. Destruction and creation, repression and resistance were binaries set up within the socio-political landscape that the theatre responded to both in form and content. ‘Life in South Africa, filled as it has been with desperate struggles for change, for power and simple survival, has a physically dynamic nature which feeds physically dynamic images on the stage’ (Fleishman, 1997: 202).

The body, therefore, that Magnet Theatre is concerned with is this violated body, a body threatened, facing its erasure, a body that is subject to oppression, to racial categorization, embattled through being immersed in social and political environments that are systemically violent. Lecoq’s pedagogy enables a response to stillness, erasure and the ruptures imposed on the body by violence in the following ways:

- The notion of the body in constant movement counters the stillness imposed by death and challenges all types of hegemonies.
- A theoretical focus on paradox suggests a constant dynamism and movement of thought that challenges the fixed and the canonical, leaving spaces for (re)negotiation.
- The development of a strong, expressive and articulate body counters the weakness associated with being a ‘victim’ of violence and the unspeakable silence imposed by pain – the unsharable nature of violence (Scarry, 1985: 3).
- The emphasis on play is an antidote to the mechanical, unthinking body capable of unspeakable acts; play is essentially disruptive to power (Evans, 2014: 151) and a tool for the revelation of the specific subjective identity of the creative body threatened by both overt and symbolic violence.
- A focus on transformation engages with possibilities of change and therefore liberation, unsettles fixities as one reality shifts into another, and encourages the possibility of tolerance (Simon McBurney, cited in Jenkins, 2001: 4) through imaginative, empathetic leaps between people and the story of the world.
Race and (Im)mobility

Another significant contextual element essential to understanding both the enablement of Lecoq’s pedagogy in South Africa and its modifications is race and the associated inequalities that dominate almost every aspect of the social and political reality in South Africa, and the impact of this racialization on levels of trust. The particular nature of the violence imposed by colonialism and apartheid was a violence that impacted on the ability to move, and these restrictions were predicated on the socially constructed notion of race, which is embedded in the body. This was not dissimilar to the way in which France was divided up into zones during the war years. But in South Africa, these divisions were deeply figured into the geography, the structure of the cities as they were built, and into the consciousness of the population, so much so that they still, today, impact on people’s ability to be mobile within the society – geographically, educationally and economically.

Workshop theatre and language

An element of the theatre landscape in South Africa in the 1980s that facilitated the acceptance of Lecoq’s ideas was the predominance of body-based, non-literary, performance forms and notions of collective creation that pre-existed Lecoq’s importation. Workshop Theatre in South Africa (begun in the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s) is considered to be a process that ‘foregrounds collectivity and physical making as opposed to individuality and writing’ (Fleishman, 1991: 1). Because the body is creating text through active play and improvisation, the direction of the performance is determined by the bodies of the individuals that form part of the creative collective.

The body is primary in Workshop Theatre because of a multiplicity of languages in the South African context. Currently in South Africa there are 11 official languages. To choose to perform in one or another language is not only divisive in South Africa, but it also has the potential to marginalize and exclude certain audiences. To train the body for the theatre, and to continue to explore the body in performance, is to refine its language, to investigate its reach and its ability to circumnavigate the ruptures created by the multilingual culture within the context of the colonial attachments to language. This is not to reduce the dense syntax of the body, which has complexities that include its own set of colonial attachments, and which also necessitates a process of anlaysis and decoding.

Faithfulness, modifications, new theory, rejections

On reflection, I have understood that there are four ways in which Lecoq’s pedagogy has been impacted (or not) in the transfer to the new context of South Africa and the work of Magnet Theatre in particular.

First, there are aspects of the principles that have remained unchanged in the course of the importation. At the centre of Magnet’s practice are Lecoq’s core principles that everything moves and that the body is at the centre of the theatrical experience.

In Magnet productions, bodies shift from earth-bound weight to unfettered aerialism, as in The Show’s Not Over Till The Fat Lady Sings, a metaphoric story of liberation around the central image of a fat lady who dreams of flying (1991–93). Bodies move from being contemporary dancers to slaves and back in Cargo (2007), a collaborative project with Jazzart Dance Theatre, which embodied the fragments of the buried history of slavery in the Cape Colony. And
bodies move from being long-distance swimmers to nurses to the lepers on Robben Island in *53 Degrees* (2002–03), which intersected the personal narrative of a woman returning to creative life after childbirth with the history of Robben Island and long-distance swimming. The movement is also from present to past and to imagined future. In *Omnest’bo* (2002), created in collaboration with the District Six Museum, the performers enact a community’s imaginary return to land from which they were forcibly removed under the apartheid regime. In each of these productions, central thematic images affirm the possibility of change and transformation.

In terms of Magnet’s teaching programs, the notions of the body and of tranformation are central too. Broadly speaking, Magnet’s educational processes teach bodies to move and transform, but they are also about movement in a broader sense: movement away from feelings and thoughts that imprison, movement away from the restricting confines of substandard education, movement out of the geographic and economic prisons that are the legacy of apartheid, movement towards a greater visibility of themselves, movement towards life opportunities. The 40 young people who have graduated from the Magnet Theatre training program have had a huge impact in terms of both role modeling as well as on the theatre industry itself. As a result of the Magnet training interventions, we have managed to get 16 young people into university, all of them first-time university attendees in their families. Eighty percent of the remaining graduates are currently employed in the professional theatre industry, thus ‘moving’ people out of the margin into the centre, and out of poverty into opportunity and employment.

Play embedded in the body is a liberatory tool. As a strategy for creating work, it is the dominant methodology of all Magnet Theatre’s production work and is taught as part of the training and as a means for generating projects and performance along with the notion of collective creation (*auto-cours*). Magnet Theatre gathers people together on a production whose individual identities are crucial contributors to the creative process. We have developed methodologies of collective and individual tasks which treat the performers as theatre makers, and although the final arc and structure of the production is determined by the outside vision of the director, much of the material is generated on the floor by the actor participants.

The idea of the poetic body, which I understand to be a body capable of articulating the complexity and paradox of a particular moment, has been crucial in terms of developing images that can engage young people and speak of the violence that young people want to talk about in their work. In the townships pre- and post-1994, the theatre has always struggled to find images to express the violence of experience without, through the performed event, violating the audience for a second time and idealizing the images of power associated with weapons of destruction. The question of the representation of violence was continuously raised throughout the work with the Community Groups Intervention (2002–08), the Culture Gangs project (2012–ongoing) and in the Training Program (2010–ongoing). Lecoq’s notion of the poetic body allows for an understanding of metaphor and suggestive image that exposes the core meaning of a violent event rather than the raw brutality of the action itself. *Every Year, Everyday I am Walking* (2006–14) explores the xenophobic violence that is a significant feature of present-day South African reality. In one scene, the mother and daughter find themselves in a refugee camp, where the mother is raped. The image is created with a large pair of black shoes walking over the body of the mother, imprisoning her with their weight. The moment is slow, accompanied by a repetitive, insistent, uncomfortable musical riff, and describes not the act of rape itself but the power relationship that is at the heart of the experience.
Second, there are aspects of Lecoq’s practice and principles that have been modified by the additions of my own (and Mark Fleishman’s) obsessions, preoccupations and research areas, and that have deepened and amplified the original. We have continued to focus on the body as subject, but within a philosophical framework that takes into account the development of the feminist (Butler, 1993; hooks, 1994; Scarry, 1985) and postmodernist senses of the subject: the body in relation to the void, impediments to imagination within the youth culture, the principles of transformation that moderate ‘subjectification’, and principles of independent learning. These notions form a frame for the teaching that emphasizes the liberatory act of movement as agency and the power of the particularity of individual narrative in a much more overt way. The solo mime-storyteller task, for example, becomes a crucial point in Magnet’s curriculum as an enabler for the establishment of an empowered individual voice. An intensely racialized society, political oppression, often extreme poverty of the participants, different languages of instruction and of reception (mainly Afrikaans and Xhosa), and continued high levels of unemployment and violence, all impact on notions of individual agency and intensify a focus on the development of the individual and the accompanying sense of diversity and difference.

Each training module at Magnet Theatre begins with ‘Performing Identity’, emphasising the subjectivity of the body, and the particularity of individual histories. It involves researching and answering certain questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? Who are my parents? Where do they come from? Often this provides an unprecedented moment of self-reflection and involves, for the first time, a conversation within families about their own histories, and it remains one of the most grounding, most commented on, and significantly empowering aspects of the training we offer.
Third, there are instances in which the pressures of context have been powerful enough to cause changes that have actually altered the original practice. Lecoq’s practice was fundamentally altered by the necessity to address levels of physical tension. Magnet developed strategies for physical release, exploring weight and gravity and the natural pathways of the body (Hinkel, 2010), influenced by the seven collaborative productions with Alfred Hinkel and Jazzaart Dance Theatre. Much of the tension was created by a lack of trust, by a deep history where ‘otherness’ has systematically been negotiated through violence and prejudice. Magnet also integrated the replaying of children’s games as a strategy for addressing stress and cohesion in a group.

Fourth, there are instances in which practice or principles have changed as a result of ‘rejection’. These rejections have occurred around the notions of truth and absolutes. The rightness of the teacher has been impossible to uphold in light of the hybridity of the postcolonial modern world, the diversity of culture and language, and our position as white teachers and practitioners within apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The balance has been tipped in the paradox of Lecoq’s teaching away from the notion of common origins and common humanity, to the complexity of diversity and the multiplicity of experience.

Lecoq continued to adhere to notions of humanism and universalism that have, more recently in a postcolonial context, begun to be considered particularly problematic. Humanist universalism masks ‘a canonical formation that disallows possibilities of a heterogeneous critique’ (Radashkrishnan, 2007: 18) and predetermines from a European, Western perspective what it means to be human. If bodies are ‘sites inscribed by history, cultural context, personal biography and individual disposition’ (Murray, 2003: 77), seeking commonality can be seen as an erasure, an obscuring of difference.

For example, it has not been possible to incorporate the Neutral Mask as taught by Lecoq into the training of the body in South Africa. The new context bent the teaching towards focusing on how the neutral reveals, paradoxically, that all bodies are different – ‘all the little differences that separate one performer from another’ (Lecoq, 2000: 41) – rather than ‘what belongs to everyone’ (Lecoq, 2000: 41). The postcolonial, and particularly apartheid and post-apartheid, contexts would not tolerate a European-featured mask – ‘a perfectly balanced mask’ (Lecoq, 2000: 36) – bearing the name of the neutral and excluding, through physical referencing, the majority of the students in my class, as a tool in a supposedly liberating pedagogy.

So the greatest pressure exerted on the pedagogy, in Magnet’s context, came from the inappropriateness of accepting or imposing notions of commonality – an old-style humanism, and universal truths – and this is where Magnet’s pedagogy has, by necessity, developed to make notions of difference and diversity central to the teaching process.

**Freedom and democracy**

I always say that I feel that Lecoq gave me the gift of myself as a theatre maker, empowering me with my own means of production. In South Africa, as a result of our alignment with the fight against apartheid, a commitment to equality and democracy, as well as an engagement with the discourse around art and social responsibility, Magnet was and is inspired to teach and make theatre precisely to resist oppression and to contribute to values of empowerment, democracy, equality, and the recognition of diversity. We, unlike Lecoq, could not assume that the battle for personal and political liberation had been won. The struggle for liberation is a framework that is all-pervasive and invests Magnet’s teaching and practice with an underlying dialogical structure. The task is one of situating oppositions: of doing battle with
those elements that are oppressive to the free functioning of the body and to the individual’s creative capacity. This pendulum swing has continued to create in Magnet’s teaching and production work in South Africa, as it has in the broader landscape of the country, a space of resistance and resilience – of vibrancy. The pedagogy attempts to replace the void with ‘something’, to counter the impulses that suppress and oppress life with an intensity of the living, moving, individuated body. The central cord that has been developed and sustained over 28 years of Magnet’s practice is an impulse towards freedom. Like theory (Said), the pedagogy and performance strain towards life, responsiveness, and liberation.

References