'BAUHAUS BAUHAUS BAUHAUS’
Hammersmith Palais, London, 1981. Punks, Gothic punks and skinheads crowd the space in front of the stage, chanting. Not from enthusiasm for the movement that integrated Modernist architecture, crafts and design, but for the post-punk band that borrowed its name. Simon, Neil and I walk on stage playing invisible bagpipes. This was how we had started our street clown act for the past few months, with varying responses, but overall earning enough money to live.

‘BAU-’
A stunned silence in which our vocal bagpipe version of ‘Scotland the Brave’ wafts through the beery atmosphere. Then a howl of outrage from several thousand throats. As we complete the song and begin our first numero, the howl becomes a roar. Hmmm. So it’s not just that they dislike bagpipe music then. This is confirmed when they start throwing things – coins, ice cubes.

This was our first date on tour with Bauhaus, and it wasn’t going well. The reaction was not in the range we’d encountered in the street, where we’d experienced everything from scorn to hilarity. Nothing in Simon’s coaching had prepared us for violent hatred. As I watched his left foot being grabbed by some skinheads at the edge of the stage and the ensuing tug of war as Neil kept hold of his right arm, I reminded myself of the precepts he had taught us. ‘Play together.’ ‘Accept everything.’ Looking up, I saw, as if in slow motion, an object larger than the coins and ice cubes rising in an arc from the crowd. Given the unpredictable mood of the Palais clientele, drinks were served in plastic containers; and as the object came closer, I could see that it was a plastic pint mug, miraculously staying vertical enough to contain most of its beer. It hit me on the chest. What to do? I looked down at the beer spreading across my jacket, looked front again, thought ‘Accept everything,’ and raised my arms in celebration of being a good target. Momentarily, the howl changed to a staccato sound that could, on reflection, be considered laughter, before an ironic cheer greeted the assimilation of more plastic cups into the hail of coins and ice cubes.

This was my introduction to the style of theatrical clown pioneered by Jacques Lecoq. Simon McBurney, who later founded Complicite, had coached Neil Bartlett (now a
theatre director) and me from what he had learned at Lecoq’s school, and we had created a twenty-minute street show, touring around the UK before being invited to perform with Bauhaus. At our first (and only) gig with them, in a heightened state attained through obedience, bewilderment, hyperventilation and adrenaline, I had hit upon some of the key qualities of clown – simplicity, naivety and playfulness. Unwittingly, I had employed some fundamental elements of technique: the ‘point fixe’ (using stillness to contrast and thereby clarify movement), ‘articulation’ (the movement of the head to show the focus of attention), ‘one thought at a time’ (matching physical actions to thought units) and the unexpected (celebrating being hit by the beer). All in the context of a truly epic flop.

Lecoq originated these features of theatrical clown in the early 1960s with Pierre Byland, then a teacher at the school. Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux, former teachers at the school, continued to teach the style when they established their own influential studio in Paris in 1980. This was where I received my formal training in clown, after the coaching from Simon McBurney that had led to the Bauhaus experience. I also trained with Pierre Byland, Italian playwright and performer Dario Fo, and the Colombioni brothers (a pair of Italian clowns from a circus family), and have performed and taught the style in various contexts over the last thirty years. In this chapter, I’m going to explore how Lecoq’s experimentation and teaching has not only given birth to a form of comedy, but also continues to influence multiple evolutions in the professional world and the teaching of Gaulier, among others. I undertake this project with some hesitation, wary of over-intellectualizing an essentially practical activity. Clown offers the most concrete example of Lecoq’s pragmatic philosophy of ‘what works and what doesn’t work’, because the desired outcome is laughter. When there’s laughter, it’s working. When there isn’t, it’s not. As with all of Lecoq’s work, it can only be fully understood through lived experience. But . . . we love to talk about the nature of our work. So I offer these thoughts in the spirit of the animated conversations that occur after classes, rehearsals and shows in bistros, pubs, bars, cafes and restaurants around the world.

Lecoq began exploring theatrical clown as a dramatic territory in the early 1960s. As his wife Fay describes it:

One day in 1962 Pierre Byland asked him ‘Mr. Lecoq, I would really like one day to become a clown,’ and he answered ‘Well, why shouldn’t you? Let us experiment.’ So they started working, for three or five days, maybe a week, trying to see how to approach the theatrical aspect of clowning, not just the round circle and the white nose [sic].

(Wisniewski, 2013a: 93–94)

The story emphasises a theme that has become evident throughout contributions to this book – Lecoq’s willingness to experiment and to be responsive to the creative enquiry of those in the school. This spirit was allied to a desire to discover principles – ‘les permanences’ – that underlie external manifestations of style. Thus, in his exploration of clown, Lecoq rejected the traditional routines of circus: ‘The reference to circus, which is bound to surface as soon as clowns are mentioned, remains marginal, in my view [. . .]. Apart from the comic register, we took no external models, either formal or stylistic’ (Lecoq, Carasso & Lallias, 2001). In another statement, Lecoq points to one of the essential features of the style that he developed: ‘I distinguish between theatre clowns who are in dramatic situations and circus clowns who guffaw, who fool about. Theatre clowns are stronger than that’ (Lecoq in
Roy & Carasso, 2006). To discover the principles that inform clown work, Lecoq utilised both experiment and organisation. Avner Eisenberg, a well-known exponent of this style in his persona as Avner the Eccentric, says:

Lecoq’s approach was very scientific and, in a sense, evidence-based. He would say, ‘Look, this works, and you can see it, and you can try something else.’ He was very good at making lists and codifying things, and that really appealed to me. [. . .] He organized it. It was a whole system [. . .]. It comes from beginning principles, starts from the breath. (LeBank & Bridel, 2015: 58)

The scientific method of experimenting through trial and error applied not only in Lecoq’s initial exploration of the style, but also in the way in which he created the conditions for learning. Recognising that the most valuable feature of clown was a unique individual persona rather than the routines and skills of traditional circus (juggling, unicycling, musicianship), he found ways of developing this through experiences that exposed the vulnerability of the performer. Through failure, ‘le bide’ – the flop. As Fay Lecoq recounts:

He developed his own pedagogy of how to bring out the clown features in us all, as we are all clowns within ourselves, but we all try to take that out. And he said that one of the things they held was le bide, the flop. You do things you really know how to do, but you play a flop. You try to do a comic number and it flops. And it is the moment when a student, even in an improvisation, comes to sit down saying, ‘My God, I just messed everything up, I am hopeless’, and that is when the real clown comes out.

(Wisniewski, 2013a: 93–94)
Mark Saunders, a Lecoq graduate (1977–79) who now teaches at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, says:

When it came to the clown stuff, there was that frustration of the hit and miss, getting it one day and then, just seeming to go, you know? And that's part of the lesson, you know, you need to fail, you need to fail, it's a bitter lesson. You can't assume you're going to be funny to start off with.

(Amsden, 2015: 249)

Even those who had minimal experience of studying with Lecoq acknowledge the value of failure. David Shiner is one of the most celebrated of American clowns, part of the 'New Vaudeville' generation in the 1980s:

I'd heard of Lecoq. I went to one of the workshops there; I didn't particularly like it [...]. I was very arrogant. 'I'm a street artist, I don't need to study.' Stupid! I wish I had, I'd have saved myself a lot of time [...]. It's absolutely vital that you crash and burn. A lot. If you avoid failure, you're not going to make it [...]. Because like all clowns I have to go full steam ahead knowing that when I put it in front of an audience, it may not work. The first time, the first couple of times. So can I stay the course?

(LeBank & Bridel, 2015: 166–167, 175)

The value of failure not only lies in training, in allowing the student to discover a clown persona that is rooted in their own personality, but also in performance, taking the risk to allow the audience to be an element in the composition of a show. This is anathema to the approach of the more traditional circus clown, where polished routines have to be ‘fail-safe’ before being put in front of an audience. As English circus clown David Konyot says: ‘I don’t put myself in a situation where I can fail. I can’t remember ever truly failing because I never put myself in that position . . .’ (LeBank & Bridel, 2015: 110). Circus tradition proposes that there are three types of clown; white face, Auguste and character. Although Lecoq eschewed the influence of circus, in many ways his approach could be seen to be one that develops character clown through the identification of a persona based on physical and personal traits, similarly to performers such as Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy from an earlier era. As Fay Lecoq points out:

It is not a role to perform; it is yourself, you performing yourself, really, letting yourself go, loosening up the hidden part of yourself and giving it out to the public. For example, we had a girl, a tall girl with very skinny legs who was always in a long skirt. Lecoq said: ‘No, if you want to be a clown, put on a mini-skirt, and a silly little hat. Show your skinny legs.’ Really, physically, when you see that image you laugh at the person, and it helps. Also, in one of his classes he made them walk, try to find the way of walking, their own personal way of walking. [...] There is a very interesting photo of him walking behind one of the girls, imitating her, the same rhythm, the way she was walking (see figure 44.2).

(Wisniewski, 2013a: 93–94)

In addition to the ridiculous persona that arrives from the accumulated discoveries of improvisation in clown classes, technique is required in performance. The following quote
from René Bazinet distills the combination of ‘flop’, persona and technique that are combined in this style of clown:

Failing is my business. [. . .] People laugh when you are wrong. But you have to sell it. You have to pretend you don’t know you’re wrong. So you have to be a good actor. You have to be able to lie: ‘I don’t know. I don’t see the banana peel right there in front of me.’ I think the more personal you are with your own shortcomings, the more universal you become.  

(LeBank & Bridel, 2015: 72–73)

Bazinet’s comment about personal shortcomings highlights another characteristic of this style of clown – that the material generated through improvisation bears an intimate relationship to the clown persona. Well-developed clowns have defined personalities that are often close to those of the performers. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between the everyday persona of a performer and his or her clown. While Lecoq worked on drawing out the clown persona that was, in Fay Lecoq’s words, ‘you performing yourself’, he insisted that ‘students must be prevented from becoming too caught up in playing their own clowns, since it is the dramatic territory which brings them into closest contact with their own selves’ (Lecoq, 2001: 149). This apparent paradox bears some examination.

In Lecoq’s process, action, improvisation and spontaneity are used to develop a clown character, with reflective or analytic thought discouraged in the studio. However, the process often stirs reflective questions about ‘who’ the clown is. A useful way of addressing the phenomenon of persona is to think of ‘traits’. The approach originated by Lecoq encourages the trainee clown to focus on certain ‘traits’ of his or her personality, and to de-emphasize others. So the performer is encouraged to play with optimism, naivety and mischievousness, and avoid pessimism, anger or defiance. These qualities can arise in class as the trainee clown
Clown – trial by errors

is challenged to lose the dignity attached to his or her everyday persona, and as René Bazinet points out:

As soon as you defend your personality, you’re not really funny. You’re just defending your whatchamacallit, the carbon copy of your life. You’re not real anymore. As soon as you defend it, you know you’re not real because you’re defending it. After all, you don’t defend the truth. If the sky is blue, you don’t have to get nervous about defending the blue sky. But if you’re defending it, well, you’re not a clown yet because you’re still hanging onto your personality and proving to everybody that it’s a good one.

(LeBank & Bridel, 2015: 68–69)

Lecoq’s encouragement of a naïve persona has strongly influenced the teaching of Philippe Gaulier, who is now as strongly linked with the style as Pierre Byland was in its early days. Gaulier set up a studio in Paris with Monika Pagneux after the two left Lecoq’s school in 1980, where they taught together until 1987. Gaulier moved to London in 1991, where he ran his school until 2002. In 2005, he moved back to France, initially basing his school just outside Paris at Sceaux, moving to Etampes in 2011. In addition, he gives short courses worldwide, predominantly in clown and ‘bouffons’. It was on one of these short courses in London in 1984 that I first experienced Gaulier and Pagneux’s teaching before attending their school in Paris. Some measure of their influence on UK theatre is indicated by the course participants, which included co-editor Mark Evans; Improbable Theatre’s Phelim McDermott; director, author and teacher John Wright; performer Peta Lily; performer and teacher John Lee; filmmaker and TV director Annie Griffin; actor Peter Lovstrum; comedia performer and teacher Olly Crick; and Royal Court director James McDonald as a pedagogic assistant (see figure 44.3).

Following Lecoq, Gaulier places naivety at the core of his idea of clown:

The clown doesn’t know that the reason that the audience is laughing is not because of his funny joke but at his stupidity, his amazing foolishness. When there is a misunderstanding, confusion, the clown is born. Definition of a clown routine; a nincompoop gives advice to a numbskull who made a number out of it.

(Gaulier, 2015a)

While many of Gaulier’s recorded or written comments on clown and performance are elliptical and embellished by diversions within distractions, some of his statements make clear the distinction that he sees between his approach and that of Lecoq. Referring to himself in the third person, he says:

The theories on the theatre of J. Lecoq focussed on the idea of movement, the thoughts of the young rebel P. Gaulier were based around Le Jeu: the games which nature, animals and humans organise . . . Philippe Gaulier teaches Le Jeu, the pleasure it engenders and the imaginary world it unveils, bang, bang, just like that.

(Gaulier, 2015b)

Gaulier is being somewhat mischievous – play (‘le jeu’) is, after all, a central feature of Lecoq’s pedagogical philosophy; “Be quiet, play, and theatre will be born!” that could be our motto’ (Lecoq, 2001: 35). Gaulier’s flippant tone belies a significant observation about the value
of play in stimulating the imagination, a concept that is supported in some applications of research from cognitive science to performance (McConachie, 2011; Kemp, 2012). As those who have trained with Gaulier testify, a spirit of play is essential; its lack is the most frequent reason for the call of ‘Suivant!’ (‘Next!’) – the signal for an improvising student to sit down
and be replaced. Play is central to the persona of the clown and the creating and performing of material, always conducted in collusion with the audience by making eye contact and seeking to make them partners in the game.

This approach is different from the separation of fictional circumstances and audience that Stanislavski-trained actors seek to maintain in pursuit of psychological truth. As clown director Cal McCrystal observes, ‘The only real truth is that there’s a thousand people in the room, and if you’re pretending that there aren’t, you’re not being truthful’ (Amsden, 2015: 69).

Working as Physical Comedy Director on One Man, Two Guvnors (National Theatre, 2012), McCrystal sought to integrate his Gaulier clown training with the more traditional direction of Nicholas Hytner: ‘One of the things that I insisted on, and Nick Hytner was very suspicious of, was the actors playing to the audience, not just in front of them, but playing to them...’ (Amsden, 2015: 273). McCrystal trained with Gaulier in the late 1980s and early 1990s (and briefly with Byland), performed in Gaulier’s show Au but du tunnel (1992), frequently directs clown company SpyMonkey, and has worked with Cirque du Soleil. He is forthright about the robustness of Lecoq’s style of clown within other stylistic contexts and the value of ‘playing with’ the audience:

It’s certainly something that bothered Nicholas Hytner. The thing that I insist on seeing, is that you don’t just see the character on stage, you want to see the actor having fun, playing [. . .]. So therefore, coming out of character is the most natural thing in the world. In One Man, Two Guvnors, fortunately, some of it was absolutely written in. That a couple of the actors spoke to the audience, the Francis Henshall part in particular. [. . .] I think the most important thing, and I tried to explain this at the time, is that; it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter; the audience will turn on a dime. If one minute, you’re sobbing your heart out, your character’s sobbing your heart out, and the next minute you turn to the audience, and say ‘I do this abnormally well, don’t I?’ it doesn’t matter. The audience will be heartbroken watching you sob, and then you’ll say something like that, and they’ll laugh.

(McCrystal, 2015: 275)

McCrystal’s personal career trajectory from fringe shows to mainstream success exemplifies the growing influence, recognition and success of the style originated by Lecoq and Byland in the early 1960s. Byland himself continues to teach and perform, both with his own company, Les Fusains, and with Footsbarn Theatre, a company originally formed by Lecoq graduates in the late 1970s. He describes what he now creates in shows such as Sorry (Footsbarn, 2010–14) or Cadavre Exquis (Compagnie les Fusains, 2008 and 2011) as ‘le nouveau Clown’ – a style that rests on a loose thematic narrative and incorporates elements of other styles as needed (such as melodrama, puppetry or gipsy equestrianism).

This particular evolution of the clown style is accompanied by multiple variations from companies such as Jammy Vu, Spy Monkey and the Right Size, to name but a few. The work of The Right Size demonstrates how the influence of the clown style can extend beyond the normal realm of independent companies. Founders Hamish McColl and Sean Foley both trained with Gaulier in 1987 and are best known for The Play What I Wrote (2001–03), winner of Olivier Awards for Best New Comedy and Best Actor in a Supporting Role (for the Lecoq-trained Toby Jones). Following the disbanding of the company in 2006, Foley has achieved success as a comedy director while McColl has scripted the film comedies Mr. Bean’s Holiday (2007), Johnny English Reborn (2011) and Dad’s Army (2016). Further examples of the spread of the style into mainstream theatre can be seen in the work of Complicite and its founder.
members. The company’s early comic show A Minute Too Late (1984) was revived in 2005 with its original cast of Lecoq graduates Simon McBurney, Jos Houben and Marcello Magni, and played to sell-out audiences at London’s National Theatre. Houben and Magni have also applied their comic skills to some of Samuel Beckett’s short plays in Peter Brook’s production Fragments (2006–15), although Houben is careful to point out that while ‘Beckett is violent, fantastic, very funny . . . [he] is not funny in the sense of a clown performance’ (Wisniewski, 2013b: 107–08). Houben (who directed most of the shows by The Right Size) has taught at L’École Lecoq since 2000. Some of his comments on this experience and on his own work offer an insight into the durability and flexibility of the style initially developed by Lecoq and Byland:

How to teach clowns remains a very big question. It is not easy and there are not many good teachers around. I speak really from a position – what a struggle that is, how hard that is, how much work you need to do constantly, constantly [. . .]. Each day that I teach there, each hour that I teach there, again I put myself in a laboratory situation and we discover together and again through them [the students] and with [them]. You have to do it in the spirit that Jacques did it as well. Rediscover . . . life! And that life moves is obvious, everything moves but movement is not a prescribed or qualified style. The style follows what the artist observes and what constraints he sets himself to render that observation.

(Houben in Moore, 2012)

Houben’s own process echoes both Lecoq’s spirit of exploration and also his desire to identify principles that inform a style. Interested in the principles of slapstick humour, he created a workshop (‘Make ‘em laugh’) in which he investigated the question: ‘How does one construct something that is always funny and that does not rely on the inspiration of the moment or the personality of the performer?’ (Houben in Moore, 2012). From this workshop grew his comedy lecture/demonstration The Art of Laughter, which at the time of this writing (2015) continues to tour internationally. He is also preparing a clown show called Marcel with Marcello Magni that will premiere at the London International Mime Festival 2016.

Houben’s constant experimentation and his desire to identify foundational principles reflect the pragmatic philosophy that he learnt from Lecoq. At the same time, he is very much following his own creative path. As he says:

People who graduate from the school of Lecoq do not do what the school trained them to do. One of the reasons is that they do not follow one pattern, they follow many variants of the school – variants, yes, this is the word.

(Wisniewski, 2013b: 99)

The few examples I mention above are drawn from the many teachers and performers worldwide who developed their work as a result of Lecoq’s extraordinary gift for discovering and communicating the essential ‘motors’ of performance, the particular dynamics that drive distinct styles. In the case of clown, this ability has not only defined a style, but also given it flexibility and adaptability, inspiring many different expressions of pedagogy and performance that continue to evolve.
Notes


2 Gaulier, Pagneux and Byland had all been key teachers at Lecoq’s school, with Pagneux focusing on movement and Gaulier and Byland teaching dramatic styles (les territoires). Gaulier and Byland also performed together in a legendary clown show called Les Assiettes, which involved breaking 200 plates. Sometimes this took two hours, sometimes less than an hour. The variable duration was caused by the amount of laughter, an indication of the fragile and unpredictable nature of clown.

3 René Bazinet trained both with Lecoq and separately with Philippe Gaulier when Gaulier left L’École Lecoq to start his studio with Monika Pagneux. Bazinet has worked as a street performer, as a solo clown and part of a double act, and for an extended period with Cirque du Soleil, creating and performing Saltimbanco and Quidam.

References


