Lecoq was always clear that his School was primarily a school for theatre artists; performance for film was not part of the curriculum. Nonetheless, a number of graduates have established very successful careers within film. This chapter will look at the relationship between Lecoq’s teaching and the film work of several graduates in order to investigate how, why and in what ways the translation into film has been so effective. The film actors and makers interviewed for this chapter all studied at the Lecoq School; they include the director Julie Taymor (Lecoq School, 1969–70; films include Titus Andronicus, Frida, The Tempest, Across the Universe), and the actors Geoffrey Rush (Lecoq School, 1975–77; films include Shine, Shakespeare in Love, The King’s Speech, Pirates of the Caribbean, Quills, The Life and Death of Peter Sellers), Toby Jones (Lecoq School, 1989–1991; films include Infamous, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, Frost/Nixon, Berberian Sound Studio) and Sergi López (Lecoq School, 1990–92; films include Dirty Pretty Things, Pan’s Labyrinth, Western, Harry un ami qui vous veut du bien).

In his book Acting in the Cinema (1988), James Naremore quotes Julia Kristeva’s statement that ‘Before the voice and the script is the anaphora: the gesture which indicates, establishes relations and eliminates entities’ (Naremore, 1988: 23). This idea is similar to Lecoq’s notion of a mime du fond, a profound sense in which gesture comes before speech and words. For Lecoq, the student actor learns, during their time at the School, how to play with the elements of voice, gesture, space, objects and movement so as to create meanings and affect people. In film, the frame of the screen, cinematic composition through angle, depth, repetition and alignment, and the editing process fulfil a substantial part of this function, as each element creates meaning through rhythmic interplay and the juxtaposition of images. In this context, the challenge for any actor is to understand what is left that is demanded of him or her, and to be able to attune their skills to the frame that the screen provides. Lecoq’s training arguably develops a more nuanced sense of composition through the work on space than other training approaches tend to do, building an awareness that is also of value in work on film. As Geoffrey Rush states in relation to his own film work, there is real value for the actor in understanding how the frame of the shot helps construct character:

Like with ‘Pirates’ [Pirates of the Caribbean, 2003], in I think the first shot, I am way up the back, barely introduced and the rest of my ship is all seen and the monkey
lands on my shoulder and you see the full restoration costume. It gave me, for a guy that's not terribly big, a real sense of gravitas, flamboyance and vanity . . .

(Rush, 2015a)

**Film as a medium**

One of the central themes of Lecoq's teaching is the notion of transformation; Julie Taymor recollects that, for her, the experience of the School 'was more transformation than anything' (2014). Transformation for Lecoq is based upon the rhythm and dynamics of space and movement, the ways in which movement allows images to blend, elide, flow into each other and dissolve. The mask is a paradigm for this process; it demands certain changes in the wearer's body, rhythms and movement, yet at the same time it reveals, through its presence, the very transformation it enables. For Taymor, this seems to have made her transitions between theatre and film particularly fruitful. In part this is due to her interest in performance that captures this kind of quality for film, and in part it is due to her understanding of the mechanics of filming and their relationship to these concepts: 'Midsummer's Dream is a film of theatre, but people who have seen it say, “My God, it’s a complete hybrid of cinema and theatre because of the camera movement and framing”' (Taymor, 2014).

Toby Jones recognises that the structure of the School's pedagogy and the emphasis on students preparing their own work also offers useful learning in relation to the particular work patterns and challenges of film acting: 'On the film set it's incredibly useful to have been trained in this way because the economics of a shooting schedule often results in little or no rehearsal – so often your rehearsal is in a hotel room on your own' (Jones, 2014). Working in this fragmented and isolated way creates challenges for the actor, who, with assistance from the director, needs to determine the style of the project and an appropriate response in terms of their own performance:

I think in a way the Lecoq School helps you with that. The understanding of style, knowing that style shifts with every single project not between genres but with every single project. Every piece has its unique stylistic language of movement and design.

(Jones, 2014)

Taymor's films are distinctive through the striking use of visual imagery, objects, choreographed movement and gestural language. The 'style of project' is thus clearly established and requires from the actor a definite and appropriate degree of physicality. Her ability to translate the world of her theatre productions into film is built on her success as a director in communicating 'the style of project' to those she is working with, and in establishing working methods that support this. The visual clarity of the piece enables it to communicate widely and to clearly establish the dramatic, scenic and visual language it is employing.

In contrast to Taymor's use of visual imagery and gesture, most American films are rooted in a kind of naturalistic melodrama – melodrama in the sense of an emphasis on character and emotional impact. Jones recognises that Lecoq also respected melodrama as a dramatic territory, and that consequently the training touches on some of the performer's challenges in relation to such a style:

Lecoq talked about 'filling out' melodrama, making sure it was 'full' enough not to be embarrassing.

(Jones, 2014)
Sergi López also comments in relation to melodrama and film acting, ‘In cinema, the distance and scale can mean that, like when you wear a mask, you can really engage a lot of your body, you can explore things that are, for example, demonic’ (López, 2015). The implication being, perhaps, that Lecoq graduates are, through their training, more comfortable in moving between different performance registers.

Jones finds much in the Lecoq training that is helpful in relation to the specific demands of film as a medium: ‘how to be economic with space, with story, with emotion [. . .]. The idea of being available to whatever happens’ (Jones, 2014). He values what he learnt through Lecoq’s work on melodrama, clown and even larval masks: ‘just that sense of timing that you learn with larval mask, the sense of [. . .] how to tell a story in its simple possible form with the shift of your body, the shift of the head’ (Jones, 2014). For López, it is the way that the Lecoq training develops and emphasizes the observation of nature and the world that bridges the fields of theatre and film:

I think cinema is about the size of the frame; so that, with a big frame, you know, to think something is enough. [. . .] so it is therefore about looking at nature and allowing that process to transform something inside of you. To transform the nature you see and experience into your body, and there it continues to move inside your body however small and reduced in scale.

(López, 2015)

For Rush, the performance qualities required for both film and theatre relate to the physical languages he developed whilst training with Lecoq: ‘Shape, silhouette, locomotion, impulse, colour, from the centre of gravity to the finer telling details of corporeal extremities is what is meticulously explored in providing the theatrical essence of expressed psychology’ (Rush, 2015b). He relates how:

I find and try to amplify imagery in a text. The Marquis de Sade is a demented peacock; the surgical precision of suit-making informs the whole psyche of Harry Pendel in The Tailor of Panama; a predatory, ubiquitous, silent stealth is at the physical and moral core of Walsingham in Elizabeth; the weight of the world of Tudor show-business squashes Henslowe into his flat-hatted, balloon-trousered resilience in Shakespeare in Love; pleasurable observation and identification of the muscular dynamics of 5 year olds at play provided the challenge and required tasks in The Small Poppies.

(Rush, 2015b)

For Rush, ‘these were all strong images of identification with the intrinsic task based on movement within a character [. . .] to find the non-psychological dimensions from a pragmatic physical basis that helped shape the characters’ identities’ (Rush, 2015b).

Space, objects and the actor

Lecoq’s training gives the student actor a strong sense of how the performer relates to space and to objects within the space. Space is conceived of not simply as a social environment, but as an element that has its own dynamic qualities, its own rhythms and its own expressive potential. Taymor, in both her film and her stage work, seeks to create spaces for the performer to inhabit that are expressive of the tensions within the heart of the drama she is presenting.
Jones also recalls how Lecoq’s teaching reinforces the sense in which, ‘a stage is a charged space in which everything is the text, absolutely everything’ (Jones, 2014), an understanding which resonates with the semiotics of filmmaking. For the actor within such spaces, Lecoq training builds an awareness of the value of understanding that any action creates a reaction and creates something that you have to be aware of. Much of the first year at the school is concerned with attuning the actor to thinking of the body in space. How the body is changed by the space it is in but also, vice versa: how the body might actually transform that space through breath and movement.

(Jones, 2014)

For stage work, this awareness enables actors to transform the stage space and the objects within it in front of the audience. Taymor recalls classes at the School in which we would take brooms, hats, any kind of objects and find the personality of that object. [. . .] [W]e would manipulate these objects like puppets. This was my first real introduction to the possibility of object puppetry and it was great because again, you were looking at the abstraction of the sculpture and finding personality in those sculptures.

(Taymor, 2014)

Transforming a space with the minimum of resources relates directly to the central principles of the School. It is also an ability that actors increasingly have to draw on in the context of ‘green screen’ and computer-generated imagery (CGI) work. In such instances, the actor needs to ‘be aware of how you can empower the space knowing that a lot of CGI experts are going to come in and create most of it for you’ (Rush, 2015a).

Within filmmaking, such an imaginative approach to objects and space enables a director such as Taymor to extend the physical world of the film beyond the actor’s performance into the environment designed around them: ‘You design a costume which has a specific shape which the actor has to embody and project; that is how they find their character’ (Taymor, 2014). Geoffrey Rush, in an explanation he gives of the way that he starts to approach building a character, uses similar references drawing on his time at the School:

For me the costume is the top-to-toe external mask of a character, not a mask for hiding but revealing. It is an exo-skeletal projection of a character’s inner life. It will occupy three dimensional space. Initially it will establish a figure in a landscape. It will dictate a character’s centre of gravity, their movement, their contradictions, their ornations, how they command or retreat from the given space.

(Rush, 2015a)

He reflects on his role in the Pirates of the Caribbean films (2003, 2006, 2007, 2011), commenting that, ‘Barbossa’s hat suggested vanity, power, ostentation, an older generation. I always think in terms of the hat as like the mask work we had done at Lecoq’ (Rush, 2015a). Likewise, he used Henslowe’s hat in Shakespeare in Love (1998) to achieve a particular characterisation:

I played that entire film being shorter than Joe Fiennes because I found this little kind of crap brown stink bug without even thinking of his psychology. I just wanted in wide shots for that to be part of the mask.

(Rush, 2015a)
As with the mask work, the use of objects, puppets and spatial design enables filmmakers such as Taymor to play at the threshold between the human and the non-human, and to layer meaning in provocative and revealing ways. Film as a medium is capable of blurring the boundaries between the body as body and the body as object – close-ups can examine objects, gestures and body parts as if they have a life and a significance of their own. At its worst, this fetishizes and objectifies the body; at its best, it provides a canvas on which the suitably trained actor can use the body as a mask through which to portray not only character, but mood, rhythm and style.

**Gesture and film**

Although film acting is more commonly associated with psychological realism than physical expression, there are few successful film actors who do not have a strong physical presence on screen and an ability to express meaning powerfully through gesture and movement. As has been argued above, Lecoq’s training builds an embodied awareness and a strong sense of the body’s expressive potential. For Taymor, this kind of awareness and understanding is of enormous value:

That’s very important to me. Good physical actors. Anthony Hopkins immediately understood the concept of using the most profound image; the first image that you see in ‘Titus Andronicus’ is the hand; he puts his hand on Lavinia’s head and makes an ideographic3 gesture there and of course, later, she has his hand in her mouth. I used these physical, visual ideas and used them as motifs.

(Taymor, 2014)

An actor trained to be alert to the movement of their own body, the movement of the camera, and to the rhythm and dynamics of the scene or shot brings a very valuable skill to the process. Jones argues that:

One associates the Lecoq school with companies of actors using any and every part of their bodies dynamically to create new spaces with each other, and of course in film you may well be working on your own with a camera looking at you, observing you and the dynamics are very different. But the relationship of counter-time and counter-point, and being aware of where the movement in the scene is, remains just as relevant; in fact it’s just a different language to describe it. I found it natural to know that if there’s movement of the camera or movement of the lens or movement inside the lens, that my motion in relation to that is very similar to the kind of exercises that we set up in Lecoq. That the call and response, time, counter-time, rhythm, counter-rhythm, fixed point, all of that stuff is what the Director is choreographing when he’s talking about what he wants to happen in this next shot.

(Jones, 2014)

For Lecoq-trained actors, this awareness of the dynamic potential of movement comes ultimately from the work on neutrality and the neutral mask. A central part of the first year of the training, the neutral mask work enables the actor to establish a fundamental understanding
of the ways in which the body engages with its environment, which underpins the rest of the training. Neutrality is where action is performed without attitude:

I spend a lot of time working out how a character performs everyday actions without any attitude at all. [...] And trying to work out what is their 'neutral', what is them doing a humdrum activity (walking, washing, closing a door, lying down ...) without any attitude at all. And I think that is frequently useful, because often a simple movement will be the only way you can convey attitude, or add story when it comes to filming a particular scene. Knowing what the notional neutral of a character might be provides a kind of default setting on which construct attitude through rhythm, physical tension and breath. (Jones, 2014)

The training at the School develops precision in movement and an understanding of how to analyse movement. Training in the first year at the School involves movement analysis tasks that break down large and small movements into numbered sequences. This is clearly something that Geoffrey Rush refers back to in his own work:

When I did something like 'The Tailor of Panama' I spent 6 weeks working with a tailor in Panama, Ernesto, who didn't speak any English. I said, I think somewhere in the film they want to see me marking up a suit with chalk, a piece of tailors chalk, and the magical little bit of wood that is so medieval. And it is all to do with the eye, the co-ordination of that. I practised and practised and practised; and I probably got it down to a 150 movements. (Rush, 2015a)

**Breath, rhythm and movement**

The two conscious things that I use all the time are [...] this very complicated idea of neutrality; and the other one is just a general focus on breath. (Jones, 2014)

Film has the ability to pick up the smallest and most intimate of movements made by the actor. Lecoq links breath and movement on a physiological level – as a sportsman, he understood how important the coordination of breath and movement could be – but also on a theatrical level. An understanding of breath can bring depth and detail to the movement quality of an actor's work, most particularly when the cinema screen can project these movements to a scale such that they become even more evident and expressive. Jones comments that: ‘Somehow it’s not words but it’s breath that is the putting in and out of tension into the body’ (Jones, 2014).

Jones is acutely aware of the ways in which the rhythm and dynamics of breath communicate for both the actor and the audience. The use of breath as a tool to develop a profoundly physical understanding of character comes through clearly as he describes how he would ask himself:

Does the character, on its simplest level, breathe in when a door opens to see someone or breathe out when a door opens? These little negotiations are incredibly useful,
because in a good film script all the words will be being used for other purposes, supplying different and sometimes contradictory information. 

(Jones, 2014)

At this level, the film actor’s performance is about behavior not just of humans but behaviour in the world, and rhythm in the world, and movement in the world. Awareness of the tempo of a scene or the set in which the scene takes place and making decisions about correspondence and counterpoint.

(Jones, 2014)

Movement, action and gesture, as well as their rhythms, their dynamics and their connection to breath, are revealed as central to the actor’s ability to communicate on screen. As López has stated above, movements, generated from the actor’s engagement with their environment, are what connects the interior and exterior of the actor, and the Lecoq training links scale, speed, rhythm and frame in ways that are entirely appropriate for working in film.

I think that in film work where you’re often working in tiny spaces where it might be only your hand in shot, and you might have a shot of you writing. Well even there, there is a little rhythmic negotiation from the moment that someone says action, about what time your hand comes into the frame, how you pick up the pen and how you start writing; and can you convey a thought in that little negotiation . . .

(Jones, 2014)

Likewise, López speaks about how eloquent even the smallest movements of the eye can be: ‘In the cinema, one has the impression sometimes that you act only with your eye, very small movements just with your eye’ (López, 2015). What large and small movements, as well as breath, all share is rhythm; in the world of film, the rhythm of these movements is also measured and makes its effects in relation to the rhythms of the mechanics of filmmaking: ‘You might do nothing, in effect you might be completely immobile, but the movement of the camera can give you a sense of internal movement’ (López, 2015).

Collaboration

I do remember the improvisations where one person starts a machine and then the next person, and the next person, etc. I think they are about how to work together but also how to create abstraction and space; how to carve out space. I’m sure that’s part of the composition of people together.

(Taymor, 2014)

Although the job of the film actor can sometimes be a lonely one, film is also a medium that requires a very high level of teamwork – with a large number of people contributing to the realization of the end product.

On a good film set, on a fully functioning film set, there will be organic collaboration, everyone will be feeding into these charged moments of simulated reality. [. . .] [W]hen it is working well you do get a good taste, like a good week at auto-cours.

(Jones, 2014)
Lecoq's use of auto-cours, a part of the course in which students collaborate and devise their own work, helps students both to find their own creative process and to become finely attuned to working creatively with others. It is a process that emphasizes and values improvisation, play and exploration. Rush talks about how pressure can sometimes make such a way of working productive: ‘That kind of auto-cours process sort of entered into that film [The King’s Speech, 2010] because I shot most of my stuff for that film in four weeks because I had another “gig” coming up’ (Rush, 2015a).

However, while Lecoq graduates are encouraged to be very good collaborators, such skills do not always fit comfortably into the hierarchical structures of the film industry. In Toby Jones’ opinion, it would be very rare to find any actor who trained at Lecoq who entered not just the film world, but entered the theatre world, the mainstream theatre world, and had settled seamlessly into its conventional hierarchies [. . .]. At the School auto-cours promoted group collaboration. Yes it was often ‘survival of the fittest’, of ‘the best idea’ but these were also experiments in autonomy, of actors writing and directing themselves. The weekly assignments tested the limits of democracy in the creative process. (Jones, 2014)

Sergi López agrees that the school encourages the student to develop ‘a creative eye, an eye for the opportunity to create’ (López, 2015). This creative and collaborative approach is not simple and straightforward – ‘Like in the auto-cours, you can find yourself working with someone who is not in accord with you’ (López, 2015) – and whilst some films allow space and time for creative collaboration to take place, this is clearly not always the case.

At the Lecoq School, collaboration is not just about how you create theatre, it is also part of the spirit in which the actor performs with other actors and the audience – something Lecoq refers to as complicité. As Sergi López states:

Complicité [. . .] is important because one is never alone; you never act on your own. Acting is not something that just happens in your head, it is about interplay with others. The other actors also contribute to a good rhythm. For me that is essential – not to play just for yourself.

(López, 2015)

Although, in film, the actor cannot experience the same complicity with the audience as is possible on stage, López believes firmly that ‘When things are fresh, improvised, when one finds things organically, I think that is important in film’ (López, 2015). The effective film director can make use of this quality offered by the performer, and, as indicated earlier in the chapter, can frame, edit and locate the action in ways that can enhance the audience’s experience of these qualities of the actor’s work.

Conclusion

Although the Lecoq School clearly identifies itself as a school of theatre, the training is not prescriptive: ‘It is not a technique. It is a method of observation of, and inspiration through, nature’ (López, 2015). The School, through a process of what Rush refers to a ‘synaesthetic discovery’ (2015a), creates artists who go on to work in the form or genre best suited to the
skills and talents they have discovered during their studies. A distinctive feature of the School is its ability to provide students with an embodied knowledge that can underpin creative work in a wide range of fields. Lecoq also offered, as a teacher, a hugely perceptive insight into what might work for each student and where their creative journey might be taking them. Sergi López recalls his anxiety in asking to have a week out from the School in order to take part in a film project, only to find that Lecoq's response was not what he expected:

He said to me, ‘Yes. Cinema is good for you.’ He had an eye for what might be good for students. His approach is exceptional for that – it is not a formula, where you do this that and the other and it works. It is rather a matter of looking, of asking yourself questions, to always have a creative attitude. Each time you re-invent, you re-imagine – that is Lecoq.

(López, 2015)

A strength of Lecoq's teaching is that the emphasis on embodied learning creates a deep memory of the training, which was evidenced in the interviews with all of the respondents: ‘I can actually even do one movement I learned from Lecoq still, it’s in my body, which is the very famous one where you’re pushing the stick to move the raft’ (Taymor, 2014). The training is a lingua franca amongst anyone who has been there and who continues to work in theatre (Jones, 2014); remarkably, this shared language does not become a barrier in situations where it is no longer shared. Instead, the former students interviewed here clearly identify and value the openness of the training at the School. They also highlight the value and importance for the film actor of the deep understanding of gesture and movement that the School provides. For Lecoq, mime was about ‘an identification with things in order to make them live’ (2000: 22), and in this sense, those students working in film bring with them the same spirit in order to bring alive the cinema’s particular world of things.

Notes

1 Despite the fact that Lecoq did not teach approaches to film acting, he did make several short films in the early part of his career (for example, the twenty-six short films he made in the 1960s under the title La Belle Équipe). The closest Lecoq came to referencing film directly in the curriculum might be the storytelling and cartoon mime exercises explored in the second year (developed as a successful performance style by Moving Picture Mime Show).
2 See, for example, the vast wooden eye at the centre of her design for the film of Stravinsky’s opera Oedipus Rex (2005).
3 Taymor developed this idea of the ideograph from her work with Herbert Blau, but the idea of distilling images down into short movement sequences that encapsulate the physical and emotional core of the character and/or situation also has associations with Lecoq’s pedagogy.
4 Rush (2015a) points out that this is particularly so for the actor engaged to provide voice for a character in an animated film.
5 This exercise is called ‘le passeur’, or ‘the waterboatman’. It is one of the exercises that make up the Twenty Movements taught in the first year at the School. It is discussed in detail in Evans (2009: 60–63).

References

Rush, G. (2015a) *Lecoq and Film* [interview with M. Evans], 27 February 2015.
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