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Jacques Lecoq and the studio tradition

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Jacques Lecoq dedicated his life to exploring the possibilities of theatrical art. The École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, founded in Paris in 1956, was – like an archaeological dig – both the site and the means of this exploration: ‘The school itself is both exploratory and a place of exploration, a laboratory for the explorer’ (Lecoq, 2006: 114). In this, it belonged to a tradition inaugurated, as Lecoq was aware, by Konstantin Stanislavsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jacques Copeau in the early part of the twentieth century (Lecoq, 2006: 73). The explorations undertaken by these men were very different, but they all emerged as a result of training and experimentation undertaken in the laboratory environment of the theatre studio. Coincidentally, the roots of this studio tradition can be traced to Paris in 1922, just a few days after Jacques Lecoq celebrated his first birthday.

In December 1922, the Moscow Art Theatre company was performing in Paris, en route to New York. On the night of 21 December, its co-director, Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), was given a reception at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, an experimental theatre-and-school run by Jacques Copeau (1879–1949). Also present at the Vieux-Colombier that night was the English actor, director and playwright Harley Granville Barker (1877–1946). After the reception, over dinner in a nearby restaurant, the three men discussed the possibility of creating an international theatre studio, an idea which received ‘unanimous approval’ (Benedetti, 1988: 282; Evans, 2006: 29–30).

Stanislavsky and Copeau had already corresponded on this subject, and Stanislavsky had hoped that it ‘would unite all the most interesting workers in the world of theatre’ (Copeau 1990: 216). He had discussed a similar idea with Granville Barker when the Englishman visited Moscow in February 1913, and Barker had agreed to ‘send over two pupils’ to work with him (Benedetti, 1988: 220). That initiative had been prevented, of course, by the outbreak of war the following year, and the idea of an international studio would also become the victim of geopolitics: the Treaty on the Creation of the USSR was signed just over a week after Stanislavsky, Barker and Copeau met, and the division of communist East from capitalist West, which would dominate international relations for the next seventy years, began.

But the idea of an international studio did not disappear. It continued to circulate and develop in the work of Copeau and Stanislavsky and their former pupils and colleagues, and it was rekindled in various locations as the twentieth century unfolded. I will argue here, though, that this idea found its fullest and most sustained expression in the work of Lecoq's
school, and I will substantiate that claim by returning to some early articulations of studio practice and relating them to it.

**Russia 1905: Stanislavsky and Meyerhold**

The term ‘studio’ seems to have been coined in 1905 by the Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940) to describe the small, experimental theatre which he was invited by Stanislavsky to run as a satellite institution to the Moscow Art Theatre. Meyerhold had begun his career as an actor at the Art Theatre under Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943), but he left the company in 1902 after a prolonged period of dissatisfaction. He rejected Stanislavsky’s autocratic approach to direction, which, he argued, rendered the actors more or less mechanical (Benedetti, 2013: 45), and he wanted to explore artistic forms beyond the realism for which the Art Theatre had become known. Privately, Stanislavsky shared these concerns. He justified his autocratic direction only on the grounds that it was necessitated by the actors’ lack of experience, and he did not exclude his own acting from this critique (Stanislavski, 2008: 185, 243). He also refused to accept that actors must be ‘compelled for ever and ever [. . .] to serve and convey crude reality and nothing more’ (2008: 244), and he was determined to develop the company’s artistic capacity, writing in his notebook during 1902 that as ‘the author writes on paper’, so ‘the actor writes with his body on the stage’ (Benedetti, 1988: 124).

Three years later, Stanislavsky had begun to recognise the potentially productive relationship between his dissatisfaction and the ‘new ways and techniques’ that Meyerhold had begun to develop since leaving the Art Theatre (Stanislavski, 2008: 245). He offered his former colleague a group of actors and a converted barn in Pushkino for the summer of 1905, followed, in the autumn, by a theatre on Povarskaya Street in Moscow. This was the venture to which Meyerhold gave the title ‘studio’: ‘not a proper theatre, certainly not a school, but [. . .] a laboratory for new ideas’ (Leach, 2003: 51). It would contain elements of both theatre and school in that it would both train its actors and produce plays, but, unlike the theatre and the school, neither of these would constitute its goal. Instead, it aimed to produce ‘new ideas’, or, as Stanislavsky put it, ‘the rejuvenation of dramatic art with new forms and techniques of staging’ (Braun, 2006: 30).

Lecoq’s school does not, of course, entirely fulfil the first criterion of a studio as created by Meyerhold and Stanislavsky: it was not a theatre-and-school. Lecoq’s earlier work was closer to this model: he taught and directed at the University of Padua from 1948 to 1951, for instance, and then until 1956 he ran a school and collaborated on productions at the Teatro Piccolo in Milan with the director Giorgio Strehler (1921–97), mask-maker Amleto Sartori (1912–58) and writer Dario Fo (1926–). The Lecoq school, by contrast, does not serve or provide students to any theatre company, though it does retain informal links with companies run by ex-students (such as Complicite and Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil) and with practitioners such as Peter Brook and Dario Fo, who are sympathetic to its ethos. Public performances (albeit for invited audiences) are a crucial feature of the work of the school (Lecoq, 2013: 15; Murray, 2003: 61), but these are not designed to appeal to the conventional theatre, and the school has no truck with accreditation, affiliation, or any other guarantor of the adequacy of its vocational training. It is not interested in preparing its students for a career in the theatre as it is currently constituted.

However, numerous, crucial aspects of the school’s practice closely echo Meyerhold and Stanislavsky’s early expressions of their studio’s agenda. The notion of the actor’s body writing
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in space, for instance, resonates throughout Lecoq’s work, much of which emerged from his extended study of the work of the mime, whom he described as ‘an actor-author’ (Lecoq, 2006: 67). Similarly, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold’s attempts to enrich and redefine their understanding of performance by drawing on a range of styles and practices from other disciplines have their equivalents in Lecoq’s practice. Much of Lecoq’s training was consciously developed from his experience of gymnastics and sport, for instance, as Mark Evans has shown (2012). Lecoq also developed ‘concrete danse’ in response to the emergence of musique concrète, a form of electroacoustic music pioneered after the war by the French composer Pierre Schaeffer (1910–95) which stressed the importance of play as a compositional strategy. Later, in 1976, Lecoq developed a scenographic strand to his study of movement when he established the Laboratoire d’Étude du Mouvement in collaboration with the architect Krikor Belejian (Lecoq, 2013: 165).

In Lecoq’s focus on the development of the artistry and creativity of his trainee-actors, his explorations beyond mainstream approaches to training, and his use of the school as the site and means for collaboration and cross-fertilisation between artists and disciplines, Lecoq was evidently working, conceptually, within the ethos established by Meyerhold and Stanislavsky. These aesthetic and pedagogical ideas were not, however, simply a matter of personal preference. They were also expressions of an attitude to artistic practice which is clearly – though often implicitly – political.

The politics of the studio

As Meyerhold’s definition makes clear, studios represent a liminal space between the conventional categories of ‘theatre’ and ‘school’. The idea of ‘liminality’ refers to a threshold (limen in Latin), and was developed by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957) in his book Les Rites de Passage (1909). Van Gennep gives the title ‘liminal’ to the middle phase of a ritual (following ‘separation’ and preceding ‘reassimilation’), and his analysis of ritual structure was developed in the 1960s by Victor Turner (1920–83) to analyse change as a social phenomenon. Turner’s model of change aptly describes the studio as envisaged by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, which was intended as a means of changing the Moscow Art Theatre, its actors and the theatre as an art form. Turner argued that any liminal phase was marked by the emergence of a distinct “model” for human interrelatedness. Instead of society being ‘structured as a differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions’, Turner sees, in the liminal phase, an ‘anti-structure’: ‘an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated [. . .] community’. He therefore argues that ‘social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, [. . .] equality and inequality’ (Turner, 1969: 96–97). If the Moscow Art Theatre’s establishment in 1902 represented the achievement of a ‘structure’, then the 1905 studio fulfilled the role of its dialectical antagonist: a relatively undifferentiated community, in which professional hierarchies would be relaxed by the process of re-learning and reinventing theatre-making.

The power of the ritual process as defined by Turner depends upon its capacity to subvert or loosen the structures through which societies organise and understand themselves. It could, therefore, be argued either that the anti-structure of the liminal phase is a powerful corrective to the status quo, or merely a brief, superficial disturbance of it. The swift closure of the 1905 studio did not, however, serve to reinforce, for either Stanislavsky or Meyerhold, the status quo it had temporarily displaced. For both men, it was only the first phase of the work which
would occupy the rest of their artistic lives. Stanislavsky would go on to form the 1912 First Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre, and thereafter dedicated himself increasingly to his studios, of which there were five in total. When he retired from the professional stage in 1928, he maintained his studio work, stating publicly in 1935 that ‘our major task is to create a laboratory theatre […] a theatre that is the model of the actor’s technique’ (Benedetti, 1988: 361), an undertaking he pursued until his death in 1938. Similarly, Meyerhold reportedly went on to describe his theatre as ‘the 999th studio of the Moscow Art Theatre’ (Grotowski, and Salata, 2008: 38).

This process of continual revision of one’s own practice is political because it requires the artist-teacher to displace his own authority in relation to his work, so that he is also its pupil. This aspect of Stanislavsky's practice was central to the establishment in 1959 of the Teatr Laboratorium in Opole, Poland, by the director Jerzy Grotowski: Stanislavsky’s ‘systematic renewal of the methods of observation, and his dialectical relationship to his own earlier work make him my personal ideal’, Grotowski wrote (1969: 16). Following Stanislavsky in spirit, however, required Grotowski to depart from his practice: ‘I continued his research and did not just repeat what he had already discovered’ (Richards, 2003: 105). Elsewhere, he went so far as to argue that, having absorbed the influence of a master through dedicated practice, one could only become a ‘true disciple’ by betraying him. This betrayal is necessary, he argued, because it ‘emerges from faithfulness to one’s own path’, and it is only by following that path that ‘the technique of creating your own technique’ can be developed (Grotowski and Salata, 2008: 39). In turn, numerous ‘true disciples’ of Grotowski’s work emerged from the 1960s, forming institutions usually known as ‘theatre laboratories’, of which Odin Teatret (founded by Eugenio Barba in 1964) and Gardzienice (established by Włodimierz Staniewski in 1977) are the most well-known.

The relationship of these laboratories to the earlier studio tradition is complex (Schino, 2013: 192–221), but they all shared a commitment to creating ‘a place where knowledge of the actor’s art grows, not where this knowledge is applied’ (Schino, 2013: 49). Likewise, Lecoq’s account of the development of his pedagogy emphasises continuous learning from experience and particularly from failure. He recalled that his approach to theatre clowning emerged from his students' ‘terrible, ridiculous’ failure to make the audience laugh when he first attempted to teach it (Schino, 2013: 154) and warned his students that ‘It’s very hard to stop and question oneself when things are working well’ (Murray, 2003: 126). Lecoq’s response to the civil unrest of the student uprising and general strikes in Paris in 1968 is a case in point. He embraced their challenge to authority (including his own) and argued that the events of that year ‘confirmed the school’s vocation’ (Lecoq, 2006: 118). This was most concretely expressed in the creation of the auto-cours, a self-taught class in which students prepare performances, based upon themes given by their teachers, to be shown and critiqued at the end of each week (Murray, 2003: 59–60). Lecoq clearly saw this responsiveness to the shifting demands and contexts of training as crucial: ‘If the school doesn’t move it dies. […] Continually, other things are happening, other things are being discovered […] – what is important is that all these themes are adapted in order to reflect today’s world and to shed their old names’ (Lecoq, 2006: 121).

Paris 1913: Copeau

Jacques Copeau began his career in the theatre as a critic, but he felt increasingly compelled to intervene in a theatre which he saw as lifeless and clichéd. His proposed reforms were to
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be founded upon pedagogy: ‘nothing will exist’, he wrote, ‘as long as a school does not exist’ (Copeau, 1990: 35). He therefore set out to create a parallel theatre-and-school named, after its location, Le Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier (‘the old dovecote’). Here, he aimed ‘to try to give back brilliance and grandeur to this art’ of the theatre (Katz, 1973: 434) by ‘a radical remedy, a purgation’, rendering the stage ‘naked and neutral’ (Paterson, 1984: 40). The resulting bare stage or tréteau nu was flexible (allowing the rotation of productions in a wide variety of genres) and projected beyond the proscenium arch (enabling direct contact between the stage and auditorium). It was a place for the art of the playwright to ‘join with’ the art of the actor (Copeau, 1990: 117).

Prior to the theatre’s opening in 1913, the company spent ten weeks at Copeau’s country house, training intensively in gymnastics, improvisation and reading dramatic texts (Evans, 2006: 10). At this time, Copeau had never acted, so his approach leaned to the intellectual. It was up to the actor Charles Dullin (1885–1949) to help him to find, in John Rudlin’s words, a ‘synthesis of the verbal and the physical’ (Rudlin, 1986: 13). This early work at Le Limon would define key aspects of Copeau’s practice. He brought, for instance, the study of texts together with the practice of improvisation, blending a consciousness of form with the ability to be spontaneous. This endeavour required both flexible and expressive bodies and alert and imaginative minds, which could create performances such as Copeau’s portrayal of Molière’s Scapin, described by the critic Ramon Fernandez both as a ‘very lively dance’ and ‘a re-birth of the ideas of Molière’ (Paterson, 1984: 42). Copeau’s work also aimed to generate an ensemble of actors who would be capable of creating new forms of performance, or, in his words, of ‘a recasting of the means of expression corresponding to the thing which they proposed to express’ (Copeau and Pronko, 1963: 187).

To this end, Copeau, along with the actress Suzanne Bing (1887–1967), used the Vieux-Colombier school to experiment further with actor-training, incorporating mime and animal exercises to enable ‘intellect and poetic invention’ to be ‘slipped into purely physical exercise’ (Copeau, 1990: 49). But probably the Vieux-Colombier’s most original contribution to actor training was in mask work (Evans, 2006: 28). Copeau considered that the mask gave the actor a double consciousness: it takes possession of the actor’s body, but by virtue of its separation from the actor, it also requires the actor to experiment with its incorporation. Masked performance at the Vieux-Colombier school was also part of Copeau’s exploration of neglected or unknown forms of theatre, such as the Commedia dell’arte and the Japanese Noh, which was explored with notable success in a student production of the play Kantan directed by Suzanne Bing (Evans, 2006: 79–80; Rudlin 1986: 49). These experiments were not intended to imitate or revive lost or foreign forms, but to reinvent them and thereby to renew the contemporary theatre. The overall effect of Copeau’s remodelling of the Vieux-Colombier stage and the training of its actors was recalled by his nephew, the actor, director and teacher Michel Saint-Denis. He remembered ‘an acting area [. . .] designed for physical acting’ and ‘a great variety of staging’ as well as a symbiotic relationship between the space and the performances of actors who were ‘constantly animated from within yet magnetized by the audience and the surrounding air [. . .] body and voice translating physically the poetic contents of the play’ (Saint-Denis and Baldwin, 2008: 28).

Lecoq met Copeau in Grenoble in 1948 while working with Jean Dasté (Copeau’s son-in-law and a pupil in the Vieux-Colombier school), and he trained with actors who had been pupils of Dullin. He was therefore fully aware of the lines of influence which flowed from Copeau’s work (Lecoq, 2006: 38–40, 98) and into his. Copeau’s simultaneous liberation and exposure of his actors in a space which recalls a sporting arena is closely related to the methods
of the Lecoq school, which, in 1976, made its permanent home in Le Central on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Denis, a former boxing gym. Like Copeau and Saint-Denis, Lecoq emphasized the essential significance of the audience. Their presence is crucial in the creation of play (‘le jeu’), a central principle of the theatre he aimed to facilitate: a state ‘when, aware of the theatrical dimension, an actor can shape an improvisation for spectators using rhythm, tempo, space, form’ (Lecoq, 2013: 29).

However, this apparent expression of similarity also contains the marks of difference. For Lecoq, the improvising actor stands at the centre of the theatre, whereas for Copeau, nothing could displace the playwright from this position. Until Copeau’s decision to disband the Vieux-Colombier and move to rural Burgundy with a group of close collaborators, his work situated the playwright at the heart of the rejuvenation of the theatre. It was only with Copeau’s increasingly frequent absences that his group (who became known as Les Copiaus, ‘the little Copeaus’) began to place ensemble improvisation at the centre of their work (Evans, 2006: 34–35).

Furthermore, Lecoq’s use of the verb ‘to shape’ to describe the creative actor signals the crucial role played by physical forms not only in his teaching of movement, but in his intellectual and imaginative life. Copeau’s prioritising of the text betrays some latent mind-body dualism in his work, which is echoed by Saint-Denis’ description of actors ‘translating physically the poetic contents of the play’. Lecoq, however, understood knowledge as fundamentally physical: ‘I have discovered that the body knows things of which the mind is ignorant’, he wrote, making embodiment fundamental to understanding rather than a translation of it (Lecoq, 2013: 9). For Lecoq, body and mind are both expressions of a psychophysical continuum of experience through which the human being is in continual dialogue with his surroundings, a process known as ‘mimodynamisme’ which is addressed by other chapters in this volume.

For Lecoq, then, ‘the profound quest is for movement [. . .] how the world moves organically’ (Roy and Carasso, 1999). And while this echoes both Stanislavsky and Copeau, who saw nature as the essential creative force and situated their studios, where possible, in rural locations, it does not parrot them. Copeau, for instance, adopted the ‘natural gymnastics’ developed by George Hébert (1875–1957) into his training, which was based – as much of Lecoq’s work would be – upon the activities of ‘pulling, pushing, climbing, walking, running, jumping, lifting, [. . .] swimming’ (Lecoq, 2006: 37). But Lecoq did not follow this path from allegiance to Copeau. He chose these methods because they resonated with his own participation in these activities. As Mark Evans observes, we only need watch Lecoq’s mime of the action of a boatman in Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq to appreciate the depth of his feeling for movement, which was evidently deeply grounded in experience (Evans, 2009: 61).

Furthermore, it is revealing that, when he was questioned about his appreciation for nature, Lecoq was particularly keen to discuss crystallography, whose geometric forms he called ‘nature’s decision’ (Roy and Carasso, 1999). Lecoq’s collection of crystals remains in a cabinet in his office in the school to this day, and we might observe that he was fascinated by them because crystals represent a liminal space between the abstractions of geometry and the concreteness of rocks, and between the decisive forms of poetry and the dynamic improvisations of performance. This fascination with the exploration of the spaces between settled categories is typical of Lecoq’s work, as his argument for the necessity of what he called ‘combinations’ demonstrates: ‘Only by going beyond the frontiers, passing from one territory to another and overlapping them, can true creativity be nurtured and new territories come to
light’ (Lecoq, 2013: 162). Lecoq’s teaching repeatedly generated such overlaps. Ideas from new artistic movements surrounding his school’s urban setting were combined with embodied experiences drawn from rural imagery to enable a shared poetic sense to emerge among his students. Contemporary cultures were overlapped with theatre history to generate new forms of expression. These processes also activated and explored the psychophysical space of the body, the pedagogic space between training and experimentation, and the creative space between freedom and discipline. In this, Lecoq’s work belonged quintessentially to the studio tradition, but it was also unique to him.

We have seen, however, that Lecoq rejected a fundamental tenet of the tradition of practice that I have outlined here: that a studio should combine pedagogy and artistic production. This contrasts strongly with, for example, Peter Brook’s Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale, founded in Paris in 1970 with similarly intercultural and research-oriented aims. But, where Brook’s company alternated closed periods of experimentation with public performances, Lecoq argued that it was necessary to have a choice between teaching and performing (Lecoq, 2013: 8). We might expect this decision to have isolated Lecoq and limited his capacity to have an impact upon theatre-making more widely, but I would argue that the reverse is true. By investing his creative energies in teaching and research, he was more widely influential in the art form than he could have been as a theatre-maker alone. Furthermore, by resisting inflexible definitions of his work, and by remaining open to new influences and relinquishing control of his school while retaining authority within it, Lecoq ensured that it not only sustained the transitional, enquiring and unfixed state of a studio, but became the twentieth century’s most significant incarnation of that ideal.

References


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