The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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General introduction

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Mark Evans and Rick Kemp

Nothing can substitute for the lived experience of Jacques Lecoq’s training. This book captures the significance of that lived experience in the working lives of graduates of his school and many of the people who have been affected by his pedagogy in different ways. It also places the training in a wider context of influences and theatrical trends. Corporeal, dynamic, detailed, evocative and both disciplined and playful, his teaching has had a profound and extensive influence on Western theatre in the second half of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century.

Born in 1921, Lecoq founded his school of theatre in Paris in 1956, and continued to teach there until a few days before his death in 1999. His influence continues to grow as family members and former students carry on his teaching at the school, while practitioners and teachers who trained there spread his ideas around the world. The significance of this influence is evident in the stature, variety and numbers of practitioners who base their work on his teachings: Ariane Mnouchkine, founder and director of Le Théâtre du Soleil; playwright Yasmina Reza; film actors Sergi López, Geoffrey Rush and Toby Jones; director and actor Simon McBurney; directors Julie Taymor, James McDonald and Luc Bondy, to name a few; also companies such as Moving Picture Mime Show, Footsbarn, Mummenschanz, Complicite, Commotion, Peepolykus, Clod Ensemble, Theatre O, Théatre de la Jeune Lune, Umo Ensemble and Pig Iron, among many others. Schools founded on his principles include The School of Physical Theatre in London, the London International School of Performing Arts, Lassaâd Saïdi’s École Internationale de Théâtre LASSAAD in Brussels, Antonio Fava’s International School of the Comic Actor in Italy, Dell’Arte School of Physical Theatre in California, The Burlesk Centre in Switzerland, the Scuola Teatro Arsenale in Milan, La Mancha International School of Image and Gesture in Chile, Escuela Internacional de Teatro in Barcelona and The Pig Iron School of Advanced Performance Training in Philadelphia. Additionally, many studios are run by individual graduates around the world – Dody DiSanto in Washington, DC, Mar Navarro in Madrid, Paola Coletto in Chicago and Richard Crawford in New York, for example. Beyond the direct application of Lecoq’s ideas by former students is the effect of his work on those who came into contact with it in other ways. Peter Brook, for example, has a close association with the School, dropping in to watch classes and presentations; engaging Monika Pagneux, one of the school’s teachers, as his Movement Director; and casting graduates in his shows. At the time of this writing (2015), Brook’s association with
the school continues, a recent example being a work-in-progress presentation of *Battlefield* for feedback from students on summer courses before the piece opened at his Bouffes du Nord theatre in September 2015. Both of us have studied within the Lecoq tradition, either at the School itself and/or with former teachers from the School, and part of our own motivation for embarking on this project is a belief in the need for much better recognition of both the global

*Figure I.1*  Lecoq demonstrating movement exercise. © DR.ÉcoleJacquesLecoq.

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The significance of Lecoq's School (with students from at least eighty-four different countries over the last sixty years) and the value of its pedagogical approach.

Originally a teacher of physical education and a physical therapist, Lecoq developed a physical method of actor training, one that came from a tradition of movement work that incorporates Antonin Artaud, Jean-Louis Barrault and Jacques Copeau, and that draws inspiration from Lecoq's extensive experience of movement through sport. In contrast to the way in which Stanislavski's System tends to be associated with the single style of psychological realism, Lecoq's approach was drawn from an engagement with and exploration of multiple styles such as Greek tragedy, Commedia dell'arte, improvisation, melodrama, clown, bouffons, and masks of various types. His analysis of performance was founded on his rigorous understanding of anatomy and movement, and a recognition that the medium of theatre is embodied action, and only subsequently language. While this may sound like a self-evident truth in the early twenty-first century, it was a radical concept in a period in which theatre was dominated by scripted plays. It originated not only in Lecoq's professional sports training, but also in his experience as a performer, director and choreographer in France, Italy and Germany in the decade immediately following WWII.

Following France's liberation in 1944, Lecoq became a member of Jean Dasté's theatre company, the 'Comédiens de Grenoble'. Here he was introduced to Japanese Noh Theatre, and discovered masks, in particular Dasté's 'noble' mask, which was the forerunner of Lecoq's own neutral mask, designed in collaboration with the Italian sculptor and mask-maker Amleto Sartori. The ideas of Copeau, who was Dasté's father-in-law and had been his teacher, became a reference point for Lecoq's own explorations, in particular a desire to create 'theatre that spoke simply and directly to unsophisticated audiences'. This interest led to an eight-year sojourn in Italy during which he researched Commedia dell'arte, participated in setting up the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, and worked with practitioners such as Dario Fo and Giorgio Strehler.

On his return to Paris in 1956, Lecoq opened his School of Mime and Theatre and began the training system for which he has become famous. It is important to note that for Lecoq, the word 'mime' did not connote the 'mime corporeal' or 'pantomime blanche' of Etienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau, but a broader concept of physical expression and its role within our engagement with the world. This involved rigorous investigation of the principles of human movement, which for Lecoq were synonymous with the principles of theatre. Movement analysis is one of the three main pillars of the pedagogical structure that Lecoq developed for his School. The other two are improvisation and collective creativity, which Lecoq considered to be the main goal of the school. This aspect was affirmed when, after the Paris student riots of 1968, he gave his own students more autonomy in their learning process by instituting the auto-cours, sessions in which groups of students worked independently of their teachers to create short performances on given themes that they presented to the rest of the school on a regular (usually weekly) basis. This was one of the features of his teaching that led to the profusion of devised theatre companies that had their origin in his school. Another significant factor was that Lecoq, in contrast to others of the same period, did not seek to create a signature style. While his approach was rigorous and systematic, its purpose, as Lecoq often reminded his students, was to give them the tools to create a theatre that did not yet exist.

The second year of study is by invitation only – generally only one-third of the first-year students move on to the second year. The pedagogy in this year begins with an exploration of the 'gestural languages' of pantomime, figurative mime and cartoon mime to create a common vocabulary of gesture. The students then progress to explore five 'dramatic territories': Melodrama, Commedia dell'arte, Bouffons, Tragedy and Clowns. In Lecoq's view,
these different styles engage with different aspects of emotion, of spatial dynamics, and of dramatic expression, with specific and distinguishable physical traits in each style. In addition to these two years of training, students of the School and others with a general interest can enroll in the Laboratoire d’Étude du Mouvement (The Laboratory of Movement Study, LEM) to explore ‘the relationship between scenography, theatre, and their plastic representation’ (according to the School’s online brochure). A final aspect of the training was available only to a very select, invited group – the third year of pedagogy, in which a student would become an assistant teacher and develop a more profound understanding of the School’s pedagogical approach. During the time that Lecoq taught at the school, approximately forty students progressed through this stage, with some subsequently becoming employed as teachers at the School.

The School’s training has formed practitioners who represent a wide range of accomplishments and styles, from playwriting to devised theatre, and from movie naturalism to expressive movement and fine art. This suggests that there are elements of Lecoq’s work that are foundational to acting and theatre, allowing those who have experienced his training to use it as a springboard for their own creativity. This analysis is supported by the synchrony of Lecoq’s approach with recent discoveries of cognitive science about the relationship between action, thought and language. Movement and other physical experiences in the material world are the sources of metaphors that shape our conceptual thought. As thoughts are expressed in language, they use the neural mechanisms of the sensorial experience that are the source of the metaphor, evoking the original physical experience. Lecoq’s intuitive development of an approach that is in tune with cognitive developmental patterns is expressed with almost uncanny prescience:

[T]he laws of movement govern all theatrical situations. A piece of writing is a structure in motion. Though themes may vary (they belong to the realm of ideas), the structures of acting remain linked to movement and its immutable laws.5

His fascination with and analysis of movement enabled him to develop a highly sophisticated repertoire of physical exercises. Given the foundational nature of sensorimotor experience to thought and language, it is evident that such a repertoire is more than a simply physical experience for the actor, and provides a rich resource for the embodied expression of thought through gesture, image, movement and space. For students at the School, the experience of this training is often profound. Its personal legacy is a reservoir of creative inspiration; of the inter-relationship between improvisation, movement and space; of physical engagement with the world of elements, colours, materials, objects, animals and characters; and of playful theatrical collaboration and invention.

This book places Lecoq in context by describing his antecedents, influences and practice; giving first-hand accounts of how key aspects of his pedagogy have inspired graduates of the school; considering his influence within performance trends of the period; and reporting on the wide and vibrant diaspora of companies, practitioners and teachers who have put his principles into practice. The chapters are written by a wide range of teachers, practitioners and scholars from many countries, who speak in many voices. We have deliberately sought to allow each author to find the style of writing that best captures the nature of their subject matter and the quality of their experience of Lecoq’s work. We hope that this variety will prove as inspiring to read as it has been to curate.
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Notes

1 Former graduates Jos Houben and Marcelo Magni have both performed in productions directed by Brook, including Fragments, a selection of short plays by Samuel Beckett.

2 Dasté was a student at the École du Vieux-Colombier, run by Copeau and his assistant, Suzanne Bing. Bing was responsible for a period of highly influential work on the Japanese Noh Theatre, including a student production of the play Kantan. Lecoq refers to his own fascination with Noh Theatre in Lecoq, J. (2000: 4), The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre, London: Methuen.

3 The workshop set up by Amleto Sartori (1915–1962) is now run by his son Donato as the Centro Maschere e Strutture Gestuali in Padua.


5 Ibid.: 21