

The Pedagogy of the Poetic Body

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Introduction

SW : The contribution that Jacques Lecoq made to theatre is more often than not misunderstood or under - estimated in Britain. Perhaps this is not surprising, given how little he wrote about his work. He was also primarily a teacher rather than a director and, as a result, we hear very little about his vision or philosophy of theatre.

For me, the crucial idea in Lecoq's pedagogy is that of theatre as a poetic medium, of the body as a poetic body.

GF: This is the central idea in the work of Jacques Lecoq. The actor-performer is an artist and first of all a poet. His language is the body. Lecoq's pedagogy trains the body of the performer to be able to become a poetic instrument.

At the basis of this "poetry of the body" there is **mime**.

Lecoq wanted to recover the real meaning of the word *mime*, which is a very old word; mime means **imitation of the reality of the world**. A mime is, first of all, somebody who can take an impression of the world in his body and then represent it through gestures. This is the most ancient practice of representation of the humankind: the mime of life.

The performer must feed himself with the rhythm, movement and dynamic spaces of nature, and then he can use them in his poetical vision. The body is trained to represent life, and to transform it into poetry, which is based on synthesis and transposition.

Lecoq used to say that his work was based on *les permanences* – or **permanent elements**. For example, the sea is horizontal and the tree is vertical. Between them there is a dynamic, a basic dynamic of the space in nature, and we can all agree with that.

We talk about the rhythm of the sea as being different from the rhythm of the fire – the fire will strive towards the vertical but is condemned to stay on the ground, whereas the sea has this amazing ritual, going on and back forever. We can all agree with these movements and we can all embody them

and, by this embodiment, we can find our way of dealing with the vertical and the horizontal.

Then, because each individual brings a different sensitivity, the individual poetry will rise. My tree is not the same as your tree, because I've been through a different life, and it is impressed in my body.

Jacques Lecoq "planted" his pedagogy into a two year school. In the first year the students take a journey, with the neutral mask as the real beginning. The journey is to observe and embody life and nature, and then to transpose these forms into theatre. This is what Lecoq called **the mimo-dynamic approach to creation**.

For example, by taking on the dynamic of fire I can express excitement, by embodying a liquid which falls down I can express sadness, by being air I can express anxiety.

Everything starts from the body. We do touch human emotions, but in a way that philosophically is quite peculiar, because it states that the reality outside is more real than the reality inside. First you discover the world, then you discover yourself. This is a very pre-modern, and somehow ancient approach to art.

In the second year, when the pedagogy focuses on theatrical languages, all these ideas and laws of rhythm, movement and space are applied to writing and creating theatre, discovering different theatre genres.

SW: So the performer is in a state of responding, reflecting, reacting...

GF: Every action has a reaction. The real talent of the performer is not to act but **to re-act**. It's about the ability of the actor to respond, rather than imposing his idea or opinion.

Movement is not an opinion, life is not an opinion – it's an event. So as an event, art, and theatre in specific, should have this humility to listen to reality and to transpose it into poetical forms. Within the poetical forms, the personality of the artist comes out, in the way he treats these elements of poetry. But it's not about him, it's about his relationship with the world.

SW How would you define Le Jeu, a fundamental element of Lecoq's world, which is rather difficult to translate into English.

Le jeu is an extremely important concept: it has at least two big areas of meaning. One is the **ability to react**, the attitude of the performer of reacting to everything that happens on stage. There is a relationship between the body and the space where it exists. The actor is one element of the stage and exists in relation to all of the other elements: space, the other performers, objects, time, optics, music, design... Everything is in relation to everything else. *Le jeu* means the relation between every element on stage, so that all the elements play together.

But there is also another area of meaning, that is the **pleasure of the artist**. The performer must enjoy the event, and if he doesn't enjoy it, somehow it doesn't work.

And this close connection between the relation and the pleasure is extremely important and brings us to a very vital vision of stage, as a micro-cosmos where life can be represented and therefore celebrated in a process based on the pleasure of playing.

SW: So how is mask work helpful to this idea of le jeu?

GF: One of the main tools from the beginning of the journey is the Neutral Mask, then there are the larval masks, expressive masks, Commedia masks. **A mask is a structure of movement**. Everything is a mask: every theatre event is a mask. A character is a mask, a costume is a mask, the clown is a mask, the red nose is a mask. A mask is something that reveals a body that is other than the body of the performer. It's a shape, and I would say it's an energy field. Lecoq never used the word 'energy'. He always said this was a very doubtful word, probably because of how the word is used by the New Age movement and other spiritual paths. He would say *le jeu* or he would say *the level of tension in the body*. But he very rarely used the word 'energy' without a little sarcastic smile! He was very anti-Guru.

Masks are moving structures that have an immense pedagogical value, and Jacques Lecoq has been the main person responsible for the renaissance of masks in modern theatre, both in the training of the actor and in performing. And very few people know that.

Space

SW: For me, one of the most extraordinary things about Lecoq was his understanding of space as one of the richest dramatic resources we have available to us. Each passion, narrative, word, piece of music, colour has a different relationship to the space it occupies; each space has a dramatic territory.

GF: To explain this, we need to go back to the main lines and trajectories of space: the horizontal, the vertical and the diagonal, which define a tri-dimensional space, therefore the reality. What defines a space is the relation between these three dimensions. A neutral space is calm. In neutral space nothing is pulled, nothing is pushed – there is a calm. So we could represent it as a state: the state of the neutral mask, who is there, purely in the present. There is no distortion of these lines. It is almost a meditative state, similar to a spherical space, where there is pure movement: no *déséquilibre*, no imbalance.

Then we can take these three lines and start to play with them. If it is the **vertical** which dominates, we come into a space where the relationship between the low and the high becomes fundamental. This is the space, for instance, of Greek Tragedy, where the human being in the tragic story has to deal with destiny, with fate and the gods, while he is on the ground (earth).

In Greek Tragedy, the hero and the chorus are caught into this greater design than the individual; and the individual can stand up and fight or fall down and die, which is usual for the hero at the end of the story. So the play is between how high I can go before falling down, and how far I can fall. There is a scale of tragic events. So, this notion of verticality, for instance, can be applied: in the style of acting, in the way the performer uses vocal work, the way the text will be delivered and can also be applied to the way the space will be designed – and here we go towards scenographic research. If music is there, we can ask “what happens to the music when the vertical is pushed? What kind of instrument should be used?”

If we put some motion in the vertical, we find the **spiral**. The spiral belongs to the world of bouffons, satire and grotesque, where the space is distorted. The distortion is typical of bouffon style and what the Greeks called Satiric Drama. The Satyrs were the ones who attacked this vertical space, and by distorting it they could take the piss out of it. Representing this connection between the high and the low in a way that, being distorted, was basically funny, they would play their mocking rituals. That’s the origin of all grotesque, where the shapes are pushed so much to distortion that we can see what is underneath. In fact the ancient iconography represents the satyr at the entrance of a cave (*cripta-grotte*): the vertical goes in the ground and starts turning like a corkscrew and pulls out the underneath.

On a **horizontal** level, we move towards clown, the poetry of falling over. As opposed to the hero, who is standing up, the clown will fall over. The gag of falling over, or slipping, always works, because it’s the fundamental letting go of the clown, who just trusts the results of lying down: the clown can never fall lower because he’s already fallen. It’s the dynamic opposition to the hero

who is always trying to stand up and eventually dies because of this; the clown can't die because he's already dead. He's already accepted death. In French it's *le bide* – the notion of the performer onstage with an act that doesn't work, playing with this disaster. This becomes a source of poetry and individual catastrophe: the poetry of ridiculous.

Melodrama works with the diagonal, and the tension is not between the high and the low, but between sides with different rank, in other words between different drives of the individual and the society. Melodrama is about love and betrayal, justice and injustice, about social heroes who fight for the rights of everybody. There is always a sense of justice; it belongs to human events and not to outside events like God. And it's about social and personal responsibility, while in tragedy there is something that is beyond the individual choice. So melodrama is expressed in the plexus. The breath. A melodramatic performer has a way of playing the space on the **diagonal**: big movements which are mainly horizontal, but within an oblique dynamic, due to the many tensions between different levels of horizontal/human elements. He is wide, wide in the sense of movement and counter-movement: I go away with the hand in one direction and with my chest in the other. I look one way and my hand's going the other way. A melodramatic character will say "Ah, I love you but I have to go to my family". While the tragic hero would say "I love you and I'll die", and everybody will die with the hero in a crescendo of deaths. The end of a Melodrama is a restoration of justice: either the evil type will die for the triumph of the goods, either the victim will be overwhelmed, but some sort of human justice will always come in the end, and it will always be clear who is bad and who is good. The end of a tragedy is the complete disaster: death for the hero, often in horrible ways.

Laws of movement

SW: Lecoq has been criticised as taking a rather tyrannical approach to 'laws of movement'

GF: Lecoq believed that a good piece of theatre must work dynamically and that this goes beyond personal taste. This notion is extremely important. As a critic, I can say: "I might not like this piece, but it works", or "I like this, but it doesn't work". In the experience of a director and an author, this is fundamental: to separate the personal taste from something which is an artistic quality, given by a specific knowledge and mastery of the laws of movement. Dynamic rhythm, relationship with the space, emptiness and fullness, variations, scale and *équilibre* between everything and its opposite.

SW: *I have heard critics outraged by the idea that there is a right way for red to move.*

GF: In the French language we use the word *juste*, which is closer to *true* than to *right*.

It's something you can't really prove. This work is practical. If you put 100 students together and you say "now move like blue", then "move like yellow", you can see that there is a generic dynamic understanding of this colour which is the same. Everybody will agree physically that blue is slower than yellow but there's no way you can prove this scientifically.

SW: *This is why I think it is important to regard Lecoq's work as symbolic. A symbolic work, a poetic work. If you take Lecoq's vision as the truth then of course you are going to run up against philosophical problems. It is a system which works to its own rules, it is a version of the truth, a way of looking at the world. On the other hand it is an extremely flexible and versatile system - a web of meticulously thought-through metaphors. You could compare it to the rules of counterpoint in music which do not exist outside Western culture, and are at first sight highly restrictive and rather arbitrary. But they are also extremely subjective and have inspired a huge range of very different music from renaissance church music through Bach to Schoenberg and even Philip Glass. Lecoq wasn't interested in discussions about semiotics or sexual politics ... these ideas weren't relevant to what he was trying to teach.*

GF: Lecoq's world, is somehow out of time. When we are there, inside this work, we could be in old Greece or in the Renaissance and we'd still be doing the same exercises, we would be asking the same questions.

Intellectuals had problems with this pedagogy; and Lecoq had problems with intellectuals. He was very critical, sometimes even extremely hard with University people, reproaching them their attitude to filtrate and manipulate the work with their ideas and theories and for their own personal agenda. For him, the only way to understand is to just do it.

So, do you think that it is dangerous to discuss Lecoq's work in an academic context?

GF: It is very dangerous, because it is a completely practical work, in the sense that it's really understandable only through practice. Through **experience**.

SW: But surely Lecoq was not anti-intellectual, he just realised that in the moment of performance you have to put ideas on hold - you have to be intelligent with your body. This idea of Lecoq as an anti-intellectual concerned with only with stupid clowns, petit personage etc, to me points to an ignorance in english theatrical culture about the ability of physical/visual expression to carry intellectual meaning. People generally are rather unaware of the power of the body to articulate poetic language. I think this is because here the text is so dominant. And because Lecoq didn't value text above everything else, he was seen as not interested in classical theatre.

GF: Lecoq was not at all anti – text. On the contrary he had great respect of the “great texts” and the authors. He applied the same laws of movement to language as he did to everything else. He just did not believe that text was the most important element of theatre.

A good text is full of movement, and it carries a series of events that are dynamic before being literary.

My understanding is that what Lecoq saw in most of theatre, was that it was mainly concerned with ideas. Ideas were paramount and the stories were not actually alive in the moment of representation.

‘Representation’ means exactly this, *to make present again* – and often when you tell a story that somebody else wrote, there’s a danger of serving the author and the literary value of the text, or the purposes of the director, and not serving the dynamic structure of the story.

SW: And for Lecoq, the idea is: to understand something, you embody it. And that's as true of language as it is of nature.

GF: The actor must feel the text as a dynamic event. What is his rhythm? Does it go down? Up? How does it fill-in the spaces? When is it narrow? When is it wide? Is there a scale of dramatic events? How and where does the story come from? Is it a story about gods? Or about humans? About feelings? About drama? To whom is the story told? From these questions comes the notion of styles and physical genres. Every text, every author has a different embodiment. The body of Shakespeare is different from the body of Beckett, and so with Cervantes and Pirandello. Different texts come from different areas of the body. So each embodiment is peculiarly different; and if we don't think about that, the text becomes dead. “Literature in costume”, as Arianne Mnouchkine said.

Text never took priority at the school, it was always just one of the stories that an artist could tell in theatre.

SW: In England the debate around Lecoq is often “How can we apply these techniques to text based theatre,

GF: I think the idea that theatre is divided into two families is false and has led to a tragic wound. The very common idea that there is physical theatre, which all starts from the body, and there is straight theatre, which starts from the text is false and even absurd. Theatre is mainly a spatial event, and actors occupy space with their body. They need it, in order to be there and eventually to be able to speak.

People who are now reflecting about these pedagogical questions, tend to agree that there is a need for reconciliation of these two elements: **the text and the body**. Lecoq trained actors need to be more aware of how to work with text and text based actors need to be more aware of their body.

But there is a lot of traditionalism, conservatism and fear on both sides; I think Lecoq himself, to some extent, was very conservative around his work and never really, as far as I know, accepted any real, full-scale investigation of text in his work. At least not at the school while I was there, first as a student and then as an assistant and a teacher. I think this is a space of further investigation for all the people who've been somehow inspired by his work.

SW: Lecoq once said that the theatre that he was preparing his students for was a type of theatre that did not yet exist. Lecoq's training was in many ways a provocation to create. It was a school for theatre makers, not simply for performers .

But many students of Lecoq when they return to London have no way to integrate their training into the British theatre culture where the director, who often has no knowledge of this kind of theatre craft, doesn't know how to use them to their full potential.

GF: A Lecoq-trained artist will be very frustrated if he feels that his creative talent is not taken into account. This is a classic criticism to Lecoq students, that they are unemployable, they are too anarchic, and care too much about them having fun on stage, putting everything below this notion of playing. So they have no literary respect, and no respect for the role of the director as someone who can decide everything.

And the Lecoq trained actor who wants to work in straight theatre needs skills that Lecoq does not focus on. The Lecoq training is not an exhaustive actor training. It has always been an *École de Perfectionnement* – a training school for people already in theatre, who already have some form of training, who want new tools. For example, voice-work, is something that has to be done elsewhere.

SW: There is a lack of understanding about the poetic possibilities that a Lecoq trained performer can bring to theatre. In London, Lecoq - trained actors tend to get called when there are parts for animals or monsters, or for multiple parts in a chorus piece. I see that these performers are very frustrated by the lack of opportunity for them in the current theatre culture.

GF: This is why it is not surprising that many people from Lecoq's do not go into straight theatre but form their own companies. And many of them go into devising their own theatre: mask theatre, puppets, street theatre, pantomime, clown, very physically creative performances. Inventing theatre, rather than playing into existing theatre.

SW: Or they find directors to work with that understand their language, Simon McBurney and Arianne Mnouchkine being obvious examples.

SW: Lecoq's work was so attached to his school. After his death it is difficult to imagine what will become of his pedagogy.

GF: There is a difference between his pedagogy and his school. His pedagogy is much more vast and undiscovered: it's an immense map of territories. The school was an application of his pedagogy, and in many senses a reductive embodiment of a huge vision. There is a very interesting gap between these two elements: the vision and its embodiment. I know there are many people, former teachers, former pupils, even simple sympathisers of Lecoq, who are developing his work and exploring areas that he didn't really explore, but just discovered and put on the map.

Jacques Lecoq ran the school for more than 40 years. He was always evolving and revolving and questioning himself about his work. People from all over the world knew they could go there to learn something very precise and at the same time very broad from this man. He was a *point fixe* in a world of movement.

His school has been a place of retreat. For me, Lecoq had some elements of an **initiator** – a wise man who stepped out of the world to create a school where you could go to discover this amazing knowledge. And then go back into the world.

He taught about mask and counter-mask, about the need of dynamic oppositions: and as a true master, Lecoq was himself a very dynamic man, therefore with his own contradictions

He was a king, with an immense power over everybody else in his kingdom, where everyone was in the position of *élève* to him, even people

who had worked there a long time. But at the same time he pushed the freedom of creation of every single person there, to an extreme extent, that provoked tremendous artistic evolution in each one.

And I'll always be extremely grateful to this man for the value of the experience that he gave me.

SW: Lecoq reminded us that we are alive and in relationship to the world. He woke us up. Showed us how to be more present. In a world becoming more and more virtual, this lesson in embodiment is a profound and urgent one for theatre and non-theatre people alike.

GF: He told us that the real reality is far more important, rich and inspiring than virtual reality. Or, in other words, that Life is more important than what we think of it.