

The Paradox of *Physical Theatre*

by Giovanni Fusetti (2007)

Physical Theatre ... what a bizarre concept!

The idea that theatre can be non-physical it's actually a nonsense. The only non-physical theatre possible is radio drama. And even that is somehow not true, because radio performances involve the voice in vary dynamic and dramatic ways. Can that be defined "physical"?

Is voice movement?

In the moment in which an actor enters the stage, his body is there. Even if he does not move one finger and he simply delivers his text, his body is there and the audience is watching it.

This definition of Physical Theatre carries in itself the germ of a war, based on the old separation of body and mind.

Let's see how that happened.

As we saw in the historical part, Lecoq's work was the culmination of a long series of brilliant theatre minds who explored different ways to reconnect theatre with the body.

Lecoq's contribution to the story was his pedagogic talent, that brought him to devise a full training program and to set it into the frame of a school, where a pedagogy could live and develop. In doing so he created a field of pedagogical excellence where many have been able to experience a life changing journey.

Since its beginnings, Lecoq School has been an international setting, attracting students from all over the world, with a prevalence of European and English speaking countries.

Between the 60's and the 80's a growing number of theatre artists who trained at the Lecoq School, went back to their country and started making theatre applying the principles they learnt at the *Ecole*. The type of work that they produced was so peculiar, innovative and creative that the theatre scene found itself in the necessity to find a definition to this particular way of theatre making.

It's interesting to notice that this need to define it as *physical* happened in British theatre, where the influence of Lecoq's work has been the strongest.

In no other country his approach has had more influence. The word *Physical Theatre* came to life, to define a movement based theatre in which the physical skills of the performer and his creative use of space are dominant on the other elements of a more conventional theatre, like the text, the set and the directing.

The preference of Lecoq trainees to create and devise their own work, rather than using existing texts, led very soon to a kind of opposition between Physical Theatre as being actor-creator based and the other existing theatre being based on texts by authors.

So if one is physical what is the other one?

The names reveal the nature of this contraposition. In English speaking countries we find, *Traditional, Text Based, Conventional, Classic*, but the most curious of all is the well diffused *Straight Theatre*.

In this duality *Physical* versus *Straight* we find the explanation of this useless and damaging conflict.

If we analyze the words we see that *straight* refers to a linear thinking based on structures and ideas, well expressed by texts. While *physical* involves a more fluid and dynamic approach, based on the body movements, which are rarely straight but they mostly follow curves and spirals.

The problem of this opposition is that it hides the real issue.

What is specific about Lecoq approach is not the body, but the body in space. His most defining principle is that the essence of theatre is the body in its relationship with space. So movement in itself is not the focus. The focus is the movement in space.

Movement in space means relationship, interaction, play: *le jeu*.

That's why masks are absolutely fundamental in this work. Masks are movement structures that project the body in theatrical space and create play... and poetic space.

If we take away the space we still have physical work, but we don't have play any more.

Meyerhold's Biomechanics, being very physical and based on movement, doesn't involve the space. Grotowsky's work, with a very intense use of the body, doesn't project it into space: it expands the inner space until it includes the audience, but there is no play in the sense of "le jeu".

That is why talking about “physical theatre” doesn’t really make sense, because it hides the real innovation of Lecoq’s work which was to reconnect the actor’s body with the theatrical space. This approach has amazing consequences in the very essence of the theatre action.

One of the famous sentences that Lecoq used to say to his students was: “Most of all, you need not to have ideas”. In the language used at the school, “*psychologique*” meant something that was just in the thinking of the actor and did not have any relation with space and therefore did not have any projection into space, or “*envoi dramatique*”, dramatic projection. I think this concept could be better expressed with the word *ideological*, rather than *psychological*.

The implication of this perspective is that if an action doesn’t involve space it doesn’t exist on stage. It’s not theatrical.

In a theatre world often very committed to intellectual contents, ideas and intentions, this approach can be almost unbearable. The necessity of silence is very hard to accept if one believes that his most important contribution to art is his own ideas.

In pedagogic practice, the first experience that touches this core issue is the Neutral Mask, a unique tool to open the actor’s sensitivity to space. In the rigorous practice of this Mask, the students learn to be silent and to listen to the space, as their first form of practice.

Another big issue connected with this split is the idea that movement simply involves gestures of the body. Nothing can be more false. Stillness is movement as well as acrobatic.

In thinking like this we create the necessity of defining another form of theatre that can express the world of the brain, with all the words and the texts. And here we are in the core of the split: physical versus straight.

Now, words are movement, text is movement, ideas are movement, everything moves. There is no difference between inside and outside. Only a continuum of variations. A change in mood changes the space, as much as a physical gesture, sometimes more.

The difficulty of going beyond this split is that in doing so we need to face a core split of our entire civilization, from ancient Greece onward, with her split consciousness between matter and spirit, body and logo.

This is a tremendous epistemological act and we could explore millions of pages to recover the traces of this in the history of many discipline, from physics to theology, from psychology to anthropology, from ancient esoterism to quantum mechanics, from economy to ecology.

This would go far beyond our humble task of theatre makers, but we need to know what the struggle is about. It's about the priority of experience towards theory. A character is defined first by his actions. On stage what I generate with my actions in space and what the audience perceive, comes first, well before my idea about my act, the director's intent and the audiences intellectual knowledge.