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Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

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http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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Special Section

Rossella Mazzaglia*

Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique). Teaching Creative Theatre.* New York: Methuen Drama, 2020 (third ed.), ISBN 9781474244770, pp. 232.

Abstract

The Moving Body. Teaching Creative Theatre is the third English edition of *Le Corps Poétique: un enseignement de la creation théâtrale* by Jacques Lecoq, originally released in France in 1997. This edition includes a foreword by Simon McBurney, an introduction by Mark Evans and an afterword by Fay Lecoq. It presents Lecoq's philosophy and pedagogical ideas on dramatic mime, through the account of his personal aesthetic journey and of his teaching methods. The book's structure parallels the students' program at Lecoq's Parisian school and is divided into four parts, describing the progression from the exploration of movement to its application to different dramatic territories to creation. In a very accessible language and with clear exemplifications and illustrative drawings, Lecoq shades light on a vision of mime considered as training for theatre and for life. Though its real substance is beyond words, its documentation finds in this book a reference point for theatre students and for researchers willing to learn more about Lecoq's ideas and methods. It also instantiates the idea of the expressive body that transversally influenced the performing arts in the Twentieth century.

The Moving Body. Teaching Creative Theatre, originally released in France in 1997, is the translation of *Le Corps Poétique: un Enseignement de la Creation Théâtrale* by Jacques Lecoq. First published in Great Britain in 2000, the translation is now at its third English edition, which was released in 2020. The third English edition also includes a foreword by Simon McBurney, an introduction by Mark Evans and an afterword by Fay Lecoq.

The book is structured into four parts. The first is an account of Lecoq's "Personal Journey", featuring his experience "From Sport to Theatre" and with the "Educational Journal" that is the foundation of his pedagogy, which in fact is summed up in the succeeding two parts, "The World and its Movements" and "The Roads to Creativity". These were crucial to describing both the first and second-year students' program and the activity of the L.E.M. (the Laboratory for the Study of Movement) that was added to the school in 1976. Finally,

* University of Messina – rossella.mazzaglia@unime.it

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the fourth part mentions the "New Beginnings", e.g. the transmission and the global success of his pedagogy in time.

In *The Moving Body*, Lecoq provides not simply a handbook or guide for the actor, but a clear and illustrative "description of the evolution of a philosophy and of a set of teaching methods" (xvii). He illuminates his idea of mime as an essential part of theatre training that is indebted to Jacques Copeau's vision of mime, and targeting not only actors and mimes, but also directors, playwrights and scenographers. The concepts of replay and *mimisme* concretely imply a progression from silence to voice countering the expressive limitations of pure mime; they were even found to instantiate a learning process based on embodied action that was clearly informed by Marcel Jousse's *Anthropologie du geste* (1969). In fact, the gesture encompasses both of them; movement is the main element of study, but its exploration and understanding enables the full expressivity of the actors and their appreciation of life. Throughout the entirety of this reading, Lecoq's vision leaks out of the exercises, the principles and the pedagogical progression of the school program, which consequently finds the most accurate documentation in this book.

By taking us through this journey, Lecoq also transposes the modernist idea of a universal body that modern dance pursued in a different way, by disciplining the body through codified vocabularies. The connection he builds—between the inner and the outer world of the actor—is reminiscent of François Delsarte's laws of correspondence and succession; in general this connection elucidates the idea of an expressive body constructed through formal action that gave movement a pivotal role in the renovation of theatre forms in the twentieth century. Lecoq clarifies throughout the book that freedom sprouts out of constraints in acting, reminding us of a basic assumption shared by Theatre Anthropology, too. His motion laws are analogous to Eugenio Barba's pre-expressive principles, particularly regarding the balance and tensions at the heart of the body-in-life. We can, therefore, use his words as a guiding source to see how this vision of the body is exemplified and translated within a theatre learning process.

In the foreword, McBurney provides a personal memory of Lecoq's teaching at the L.E.M: he describes how Lecoq looked as he walked along the corridors of the school, what Lecoq asked the students to stimulate their imagination—in order for them to join in a journey that would reflect back at them the contours of their own imaginations (xi)—while doing, and not discussing, "experiencing, not speculating" (xii). Even though the real substance of the training is beyond words, according to McBurney, this book provides a resource for personal investigation and a reference point for life: "Because we are in a state of conscious movement. Because we are also constantly looking to situate ourselves in the world, this book will provide a moment when we can do that" (xv).

In his introduction, Mark Evans reminds the reader that the original title was *The Poetic Body*, which he considers closer to Lecoq's pedagogical view.

In fact, "the body not only moves but also expresses, it creates; it not only imitates but also brings to life" (xvi). However, Evans' critical remark is meant to point out that the specific scope of this book is not the training for the actor, but a "training for life", which is targeted both at actors and at any other artist working in theatre. Its discourses are within a network of text and video sources including the following: the film *Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq* (1999), Patrick Lecoq's book *Jacques Lecoq, un point fixe en movement* (2016), the archive video material, *Autour de Jacques Lecoq* (2016), and further tools offered by Evans for the understanding of Lecoq's philosophy and methods. In his contextualization, Evans also suggests that Lecoq was exposed to several experiences during and after the Second World War within Europe, and more specifically in Italy, where Lecoq lived for eight years. Moreover, he he was influenced by earlier movement theorists and artists as diverse as Etienne Marey, Georges Hébert, and Gaston Bachelard besides the already mentioned Copeau and Jousse. And these names are briefly quoted by Lecoq throughout the pages of this book.

"Personal Journey" is divided into two sections: "From Sport to Theatre" and "The Educational Journey". Lecoq discovers the "geometry of movement" (3) at seventeen and, in 1941, he attends a college of physical education where he meets the person who introduces him to theatre—Jean-Marie Conty. However, the continuity between these two apparently distant fields is given by Lecoq's knowledge of movement. During his first theatre training with Claude Martin, a pupil of Charles Dullin, and a former dancer, Jean Sery, Lecoq describes his experience with a gestural language that was based on the sports he had practiced, thus discovering the connection between sports, movement and theatre. After the liberation of France in 1944, Lecoq's learning process complemented the experience of teaching, so he assumed responsibility as physical trainer of the theatre company Les Comédiens de Grenoble, directed by Jean Dasté, which Lecoq considered as "a natural extension of the gestures acquired through sports" (4). Since the beginning, teaching consequently became his research method: his pedagogical endeavors actually catalyzed the discovery of new forms, from masked performances and Japanese Noh theatre, to Jacques Copeau, whom he considered a reference point for his work, alongside Dullin. Furthermore, his Italian adventure produced an impact that was just as relevant in nurturing his imagination as the contents of his teaching illustrate.

Studying the succinct account of his Italian transit, between 1948 and 1956, readers found the evolving Italian theatre scene in the beginning of the First Republic. Lecoq is introduced to Commedia dell'Arte in Padua, and meets Amleto Sartori, who recreated the leather masks that had almost disappeared from the theatre. In fact, Lecoq is invited to the Piccolo Teatro—founded in Milan to grant theatre as a public service—by Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi. Neither the Institution the Piccolo represented, nor the political context are mentioned by Lecoq, who nonetheless shows a profound appreciа-

tion of the Italian cultural scene of the time. This is a moment of personal discovery for him. Among the various adventures he recalls, *Commedia dell'Arte* and Greek tragedy are given an essential role in Lecoq's personal journey that was brought to light by the opening of his school in Paris in 1956. That's when Lecoq chooses to devote himself completely to teaching (8). The journey also becomes the feature of his school, a "school in motion" going in two directions: "across the broad, horizontal landscape of dramatic styles" and "up and down the vertical axes, both scaling the heights of different acting levels and exploring the depth of poetry" (12).

In "The Educational Journey", Lecoq offers a brief presentation of the two-year program, which evolves through the study of improvisation and movement technique and analysis that are supplemented by the *auto-cours*. In the learning process, first comes the acquisition of physical skills, followed by their application to the "dramatic territories" and, finally, by their renovation into new work. This journey is subdivided into "A dynamic theatre of new work" and "The search for permanency". The first section deals with the students' own discovery of themselves through an observation of the external world stimulated by training, which is also meant to provide "an education in seeing" (20). Alongside improvisation, students practice movement analysis, which corresponds to the search for the immutable laws at the basis of "the human body in motion: balance, imbalance, opposition, alternation, compensation, action and reaction" (21). In this section, Lecoq unveils his broad vision of mime as "an integral part of theatre" while also combining life and art: "children mime the world in order to get to know it and to prepare themselves to live in it. Theatre is a game which merely extends this action in different ways" (22).

Part two, "The World and its Movements", is structured into three chapters that detail the issues addressed in the "Education Journal" in a progressive path, focused on "Improvisation", "Movement Technique", and "The Students' Own Theatre", referred to the *auto-cours* and based on the students' creativity. To prepare for the start of this journey, students need to put their learned behaviour patterns aside and become like a "blank page": "in this way they can be awakened to the far-reaching curiosity that is essential to discover the quality of play. This is the objective of the first year's work" (27). The progressive stages of learning correspond to the sequence of subchapters presented in this part of the book: "Improvisation", "The Neutral Mask", "Approach to the Arts", "Mask and Counter-Masks", and "Characters".

Improvisation starts in silence and includes two phases: "Replay and play" and the "structure of the play". "Replay involves reviving lived experience in the simplest possible way" (29); play (e.g. acting) comes later, through an improvisation articulated around the variables of rhythm, tempo, space, and form. Lecoq makes no secret of his defiance of the introspective modes so widespread in the actor's training. Since movement is not inherently mechanical and since imagination and memory are triggered by action, Lecoq

believes that the interior worlds of the actor should be considered. However, these are "revealed through a process of reaction to the provocations of the world outside" (30). Through a rising dynamic scale, similar to the musical scale, he rather guides students "towards the structures of the play" in order to discover the dramatic motor driving the action, which is also prior to the use of the words.

After these initial exercises, the study of "the neutral mask" is undertaken and given a central role. It implies a progression from "neutrality" to "identification with the natural world" to "transposing". The mask abstracts the action and favors the universalization of movement, thus giving birth to the poetic body—the actor's face disappears with the mask, while the body becomes more noticeable and "every movement is revealed as powerfully expressive" (39): "the neutral mask puts one in touch with what belongs to everyone, and then the nuances appear all the more forcefully" (41). In the first lesson, the students discover the object, then they are guided through the exploration of different themes. The main one is "the fundamental journey", a journey through nature involving different actions. The third phase of the work is "playing at identification" (43): sensations are the means towards a "universal poetic awareness" (45), which is at the basis of a further step within the students' learning process in which they are asked to transfer this knowledge into the dramatic dimension by transposing natural or animal qualities to their actions "in order to achieve a better playing of human nature . . . going beyond realistic performance" (45).

In "Approach to the Arts", Lecoq describes the second approach to the mask, consisting of what he calls the "universal poetic awareness", where all elements are abstracted (space, lights, colors) and the students learn to master expressivity through gestures — having no reference point in the real world — in order to transfigure emotions. These specific gestures go under the name of *mimages*, consisting of the expression of emotions and states of the characters through movement. Afterwards, the separate elements of colors, lexical words, and sounds are embodied and observed through the action as well as inscribed within the context of the arts in which they are composed — such as painting, poetry and music.

In "Masks and Counter-Masks", Lecoq describes the students' training with different masks: the neutral mask, which he considers "the mask of all masks" (54), the expressive mask, which shows the characters' emotion, and the larval mask, which is utilitarian and not intended for theatre. In a progressive ascent towards creativity, the masks are vehicles for human qualities to appear by transposing the form of acting. In order to achieve this goal, students are requested to work with masks and also to try the opposite of what the mask suggests, revealing the counter-mask — a different character beyond the mask, eventually arriving at an interplay between the two. No cultural traditions are relevant in this process, but life is observed and recreated through abstraction. Character acting is consequential to these prior studies:

restrictions encourage the invention of dramatic forms by letting the characters appear out of images that the actor, in the end, carries from stage to spectator.

In "Movement Technique", Lecoq illustrates the second axis of his teaching, which is still developed during the first year of the course and includes physical and vocal preparation, dramatic acrobatics, and movement analysis.

Physical and vocal preparation is directed towards expressivity and connects the inner motivations with the outer forms. This preparation is based on the term, "dramatic gymnastic", "in which every gesture, every attitude or movement is justified" (70) based on indications, actions, and the inward states of the actor that corresponds to the major dramatic modes: pantomime, Commedia dell'arte, and drama. Then comes 'movement analysis', which is applied to the human body and to the elements of the natural world, both material and animal. In the research on the human body, Lecoq identifies three basic movements: undulation, inverse undulation and eclosion, which are first studied separately and are secondly explored in various ways in order to expand the student's expressivity while also "researching the economy of physical action" (82). The separate movements are gradually fit into dramatized sequences that the students continue to work on in the *auto-cours*. Both the technical and dramatic contents of the movements are consequently explored. Some basic principles of theatre emerge from this path — for instance, that "the body must be disciplined in the service of play, constrained in order to attain freedom" (86). Alongside this theorization, Lecoq's gradual essentialization of movement springs out of movement analysis. He particularly abstracts and highlights two actions: to pull and to push, which make what he calls "the rose of effort" (86). In the end, he sums up all-encompassing laws of motion, which engender a dynamic point of view on performance that the students will be asked to explore in autonomous thematic sessions in the *auto-cours*, adding production, playwriting and collaborative work.

This preparation is instrumental to pursuing the "roads to creativity" that Lecoq describes in the third section of *The Moving Body*, and it is fundamental that the students are exposed to in the second year of the course. After a selection is made among them in the beginning, those continuing will start a "geodramatic exploration", e.g. an exploration of the territories leading to dramatic creation (103). A shared vocabulary is built based on "Gestural Languages", including different types of body languages: pantomime (gestural translation of words), figurative mime (representing objects and architectures), and cartoon mime (which is made of images like in silent movies) up to the higher level of *mimages*. These body languages are applied to "The Main Dramatic Territories", which Lecoq describes in a parallel order to the study program: "Melodrama", "Commedia dell'Arte", "*Bouffons*", "Tragedy" and "Clowns". Again, they are approached through direct action, with no reference to any historical or cultural reading, in order to encourage the actors' creativity and imagination. The subject that gathers them all is actually the constant search

for creative processes that the students partly need to find in themselves.

In "Melodrama", the grand emotions are studied through the universal themes of "The Return" and "The Departure", which find different potential applications. No specific performance style or mode of acting is set, as the main scope is to shed light on "very specific aspects of the human nature" (114). As Lecoq states, "melodrama is not outdated, it is of today, and is all around us, in the man waiting for the telephone to ring to hear if he has a job, in the war-torn family, in the migrant worker, etc." (114). After the body has searched for the right timing and gesture to express melodrama, dramatic texts are added to the learning practice.

The process of actualization that is intrinsic to Lecoq's pedagogy reinvents itself in the other territories. In fact, the Commedia dell'Arte that he had discovered in Italy, mainly through Sartori and the Piccolo Teatro, finds a new interpretation in his teaching, which makes use of self-made half-masks in the beginning, traditional masks as the training evolves, and scenarios in an advanced stage. Throughout the work, the Commedia dell'Arte is transformed into a de-historicized human comedy, freely employing the traditional masks on the assumption that "The *commedia* belongs to every time and every place as long as there are masters and servants which are essential to it. These timeless elements of the human comedy . . . can enable the students, who are of course 'contemporary', to invent a new theatre of their own time" (124).

How do "people who believe in nothing and make fun of everything" act? The Bouffons evolve out of this question through parody and the construction of a different, bouffenesque figure, made by altering the natural body with removable prosthetics that have the scope to emancipate the actors from inhibition so that they can, finally, push their parodies to speak the unspeakable. In fact, the bouffons deal essentially "with the social dimension of human relations, showing up its absurdities" (126).

While for the bouffons Lecoq moves from the creation of the character to the construction of the "gang", in the preparation of the Greek chorus at the basis of the Tragedy, he works on the crowds and orators he deals with in the following dedicated paragraph. He does not attempt an historical view of ancient tragedy but, consistently with his method, seeks "to reinvent the tragic form" (135), by investigating the relationship between the chorus and the heroes with a focus on the definition of the space and the use of the text, which is more relevant to the process of creating this territory than to the others. However, as for the prior areas of exploration, the text is approached through the mimodynamic method, never sitting down and discussing it but rather "working through movement" (146) to grasp its images, words and dynamics. Going beyond the specific actualization of themes and texts, Lecoq's modern approach to tragedy clearly shows in this teaching method: while the ancient Greek chorus comments on the action, his "reaction chorus" acts in response to the events, as if it were another player of a dramatic contest.

Paralleling the gradual learning practice, "The Clown" comes at the end of

the book. It frames the activity of the school standing in a specular position to the neutral mask. Its first research consists of "finding one's own clown", meaning that the actors should look for their ridiculous side, for the clowns in themselves. Only then are the "comic varieties" explored among different variations, such as the burlesque and the absurd, from which the students can choose for their final show. In the end, Lecoq consequently goes back to the individual: "While the neutral mask is all-inclusive, a common denominator which can be shared by all, the clown brings out the individual in his singularity" (159).

The author concludes his text with a short presentation of the L.E.M. (The Laboratory for the Study of Movement) and an account of the dissemination of this method by the schools' former students. Allegedly, he would have wanted to write another essay on the L.E.M, as Marina Spreafico states in her foreword to the Italian edition (2016) of *Le corps poétique* (1998), because Lecoq hints that the openings of the story in the last section are not totally exhausted. However, the major contribution of his writing lies in the overall vision of theatre. *The Moving Body* documents its intrinsic invitation to learn more about the school. Both for the actor, and for the researcher interested in Lecoq's theatre, this book is an essential read; for the theatre historian it is also a theoretical source on "dramatic mime" and on the expressive body that transversally influenced dance and theatre in the twentieth century.

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