

Chapter 4
French Foundations of Physicality
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Introduction

On 14 June 1940, Paris fell to Nazi Germany. Although two million Parisians had already fled the city before the tanks rolled in, it was still a shockingly swift collapse and the cause of deep national humiliation. French cooperation was essential to the Germans' success, so when France signed an armistice with them at Vichy, a puppet French state was installed, dividing the entire country into occupied and unoccupied zones. The new Vichy government was seen to collaborate directly with Hitler, who gave his invading army powers to confiscate property, make arrests and carry out interrogations at will. Meanwhile, General Charles de Gaulle and the Free French movement of exiled French citizens continued the fight against both Nazi and Vichy rule. Back in Paris, under the threatening presence of the Germans, regulations imposed by the Nazis severely restricted freedom of movement. Basic needs such as food, electricity, and heat were scarce during some of the coldest winters on record. Even though Paris was not destroyed by Nazi rule, four years of hardship, fear, and brutality led to the progressive, vibrant cultural life once associated with the city being stifled into a gasp of silent despair.

Curiously, French theatre was not completely interrupted by the turbulent events of the Occupation. As David Bradby (1991) points out, Parisian theatres were thriving at the time. Cultural life was indeed openly encouraged, but it is important to note that a complex system of oppressive censorship ensured that theatre producers dared not take any political stance or innovative creative risks. Commercial productions then prioritised the certainty and security of the past over the present. Such a cautious approach led to a trend for historical costume

dramas and literary theatre that ‘looked back to mythical or historical models of heroism’ (Bradby 1991: 20). This tension is beautifully embodied in the ground-breaking French film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Children of Paradise, 1945), directed by Marcel Carné.

The film was produced under extreme shooting conditions. Indeed, real-life complexities of making the film under German Occupation captured metaphorically the prevailing tyranny and haunting melancholy of Nazi rule (for an in-depth account of the complex history surrounding the film’s production, see Shambu 2001). For instance, in order to circumvent the Vichy directive that a film could not exceed ninety minutes, *Les Enfants du Paradis* was produced in two parts, totalling three hours. Originally a Franco-Italian co-production, the Italians pulled out when Allied forces invaded Sicily. Fortunately, Pathé took on the financial responsibility and the film was completed over the course of two years. Being Jewish, both the set designer Alexandre Trauner and the composer Joseph Kosma had to develop their work in total secrecy. Actor Robert Le Vigan, who was part of the original cast, was forced to leave the production and flee the country due to being sentenced to death for collaborating with the Resistance. Interestingly, two of the film’s leading actors, Étienne Decroux (1898–1991) and Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–1994), played pivotal roles in the milestone explored in this chapter.

Immersed in this context of existential crisis, Parisian gymnast, swimmer, and track and field event athlete, Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999), was studying in the areas of both education and sport. Despite the stifling constraints of German Occupation, Lecoq persevered in sports therapy training and rehabilitation work with adolescents and people with disabilities. As a young man himself learning about the body and movement, Lecoq professed an early poetic awareness of his experience of sport when training at the Roland-Garros Stadium in Paris: ‘it was the pure poetry of athletics which attracted me the most: the contraction or elongation of

the runners' shadows thrown by the sun slanting across the stadium when the rhythm of running sets in' (2020: 3).

The constellation of working connections and friendships Lecoq made during the German Occupation brought him into contact with pioneering figures and influences that directly and indirectly contributed to the regeneration of post-war French Theatre. Notably, while studying at the Bagatelle College for Physical Education in Paris, Lecoq met Jean-Marie Conty, an international French basketball player, responsible at the time for shaping and delivering the national physical education programme. Conty's own friendships with French ground-breaking creative forces were instrumental: in particular with writer, dramatist, artist, actor, theoretician, and theatre director Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), who endeavoured to purge theatre of its increasingly classical and 'bourgeois' leanings and who was inspired by Balinese theatre and dance as well as mask work. The actor and director Barrault, mentioned earlier, sparked Conty's interest in the relationship between physical education and dramatic expression. Barrault was an early collaborator with Decroux who had studied with Jacques Copeau and Suzanne Bing at their theatre school, before eventually setting up his own **school** in Paris. Referring to the unique yet short lived connection between Barrault and Decroux, Thomas Leabhart defines their Corporeal Mime as an attempt 'not to recreate a recognizable reality or evoke a yearned-for past, but rather to explore movement possibilities' (2019: 16). These interweaving connections and initiatives led to the founding of an organisation titled L'Education par le Jeu Dramatique, headed by Conty, in collaboration with leading dance and theatre enthusiasts including Roger Blin and Marie-Helene Dasté (1902–1994). Much later on, in 1947, Lecoq was to be employed there as a teacher.

Because theatre was forced to comply with the Nazi authorities during Occupation, many French playwrights and actors joined the underground movement or left France

entirely. For instance, actor Louis Jouvet toured Latin American countries for four years rather than be subjugated to the creative restrictions imposed by the Vichy Government or the Gestapo. Back in France, internationally renowned Jewish mime artist Marcel Marceau, once one of Decroux's leading students, was known to have worked with the French Resistance for a secret relief group smuggling Jewish children from occupied France to neutral countries.

Alongside these endeavours, a unique opportunity was slowly emerging for theatre-makers and teachers such as Lecoq to tap into a discreet yet momentous shift towards regionalisation and the decentralisation of culture in France. This expansion of culture was to challenge and subvert the constraints of Occupation, contest fixity of thought, and confront audience complacency. The stage was set for a new era of experimentation, 'a kind of improvised theatre of mime and movement' (Bradby 2002: 84). Invigorated by the emergence of travelling companies, theatre spread to the French provinces and in particular, the 'unoccupied' zone of France. Bringing into play this underlying groundswell of events, Lecoq was to undergo an immense and diverse set of experiences that were to have huge repercussions in his thinking about creative practice and shape his approach to performer training.

Interrogating Received French Training Legacies

The desire to categorise a practitioner, theorist, or teacher as the inventor or owner of a particular approach or method is not uncommon. That said, the new challenges and opportunities of twenty-first-century actor and performer training offer an invitation to critically reflect on training lineages in the spirit of what anthropologist Tim Ingold conveys is 'about allowing the past once more to feel its way to the future' (2017: 5). While there are clearly exercises and principles that Lecoq initiated and honed over the years, his evolving pedagogical ethos can be traced back to encounters with key practitioners and teachers

connected to the milestone of German Occupation. These connections reach even further back to key pioneers in French theatre before the Second World War. In the words of Mark Evans, ‘Lecoq’s ideas were informed by a range of rich influences, experiences and opportunities’ (in Lecoq 2020: xix). Such dimensions have been interrogated in detail (Evans and Kemp 2016, Kemp and McConachie 2019, Murphy 2019), highlighting in particular the key influences of Jacques Copeau (1879–1947), Jean Dasté (1904–1994), Michel Saint-Denis (1897–1971), and Charles Dullin (1885–1949). Alongside this well-documented male lineage, it is important to heed Cass Fleming’s (2020) warning that all too often the central contribution of female practitioners and teachers in French actor training historiographies has been obscured. The current chapter seeks to redress this imbalance.

Jacques Copeau and the French male lineage

Well before the German Occupation of France, French theatre was experiencing a period of creative stagnation caused by an apparent lack of artistic direction and the increasing demands of commercialisation. In response, French writer, actor, director, teacher, and literary critic Jacques Copeau openly rejected and challenged what he described as the star system of actor-celebrities and the ‘disease’ of ‘artificial’ and ‘bourgeois’ commercial practices dominating theatre in France at the time. His derogatory term for this malaise was *Cabotinage*: ‘the falseness of the “ham” actor, the use of superficial technique and empty histrionics’ (Evans 2018: 11). Copeau’s intense desire to revitalise the social and moral responsibilities of theatre led him to search for alternative sources of inspiration and purpose. His ambition for the rejuvenation of European theatre is rigorously documented in a select number of publications drawing on Copeau’s own writings (Rudlin 1986, Evans 2018, Pitches 2007, Nixon 2024). Alongside his deep fascination for the spirit of youth and the creative freedom of play, Copeau championed the case for reconnecting theatre to what he

felt were ‘the “true” traditions of Greek Drama, Noh theatre, Molière, Commedia dell’arte’ (Pitches 2007: 49). These long-established theatre practices served as touchstones for Copeau’s pioneering manifesto for change. Undeniably, as Evans suggests, ‘Copeau brought to the theatre of his time a new vitality, purposefulness and energy; an energy based on the actor’s physical skills, on a vision of the role of theatre, and on an instinctive feel for the rhythmic and structural demands of a play’ (2018: 1).

Mime, **improvisation**, and masks were to become for Copeau key agents of change for reclaiming the body’s central role in theatrical creation. He was also committed to the ethos of a new kind of theatre company, an ensemble of performers, collectively dedicated to both contemporary writing and classical revivals. In 1913, Copeau co-formed the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris and his company toured a wide-ranging repertoire of plays by Molière and Shakespeare, as well as contemporary works. Evans maintains that all of these elements combined were also to have ‘a profound influence on the founding principles of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the early 1960s’ (Evans 2018: 2). Part of Copeau’s resolve involved bringing together the work being developed by other contemporary pioneering figures in theatre at the time, such as Konstantin Stanislavsky in Russia, Edward Gordon Craig and Harley Granville Barker in the UK, and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Adolphe Appia in Switzerland. For Copeau, in their diverse ways, this new wave of European practitioners proposed an essential renewal of theatre which in turn would necessitate a re-visioning of actor training.

Clearly, Copeau did not work alone. When considered, however, within the generally accepted male canon of twentieth-century French theatre and training narratives, Dullin, Juvet, Dasté, Saint-Denis, and Decroux are all cited, quite rightly, as close associates who were central to the development and dissemination of Copeau’s vision for a ‘popular theatre’, in which the body was the primary impulse. This lineage of male collaborators (**patrilineal**

tradition) is compellingly conceived by Cass Fleming, designed by Paul Ayre (2020) in Figure 1.

Linear and Paternal Narratives

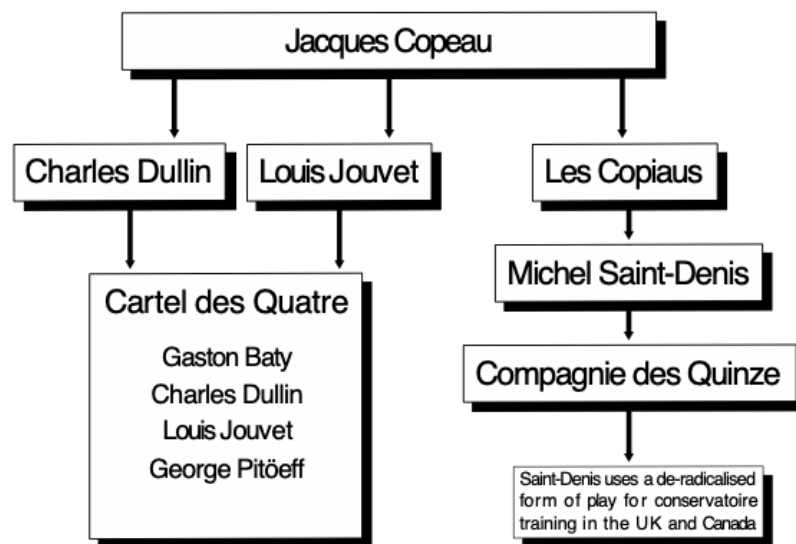


Figure 1. *Linear and Paternal Narratives*, by kind permission of Cass Fleming and Paul Ayre (2020).

Reclaiming the women in the histories of French theatre and training

What is less known, however, is how French actress Suzanne Bing (1885–1976) and Copeau’s daughter Marie-Hélène Dasté, nee Copeau (hereafter Dasté), in particular, as well as other female influences, have contributed key developments and breakthroughs in the evolution of a new set of embodied theatrical forms and training practices, leading to the extraordinary work of movement director and teacher Monika Pagneux (1927–2023). Moreover, each of these women has played a significant role in Lecoq’s own pedagogical developments, as well as the much broader landscape of embodied theatre training.

Working closely with Copeau between 1913 and 1929, Bing began by playing a number of lead roles in the Vieux-Colombier Theatre Company (1913–1924), of which she was a founding member, and later in Les Copiaus company (1925–1929) and La Compagnie des Quinze (1929–1935). Bing's contribution is especially remarkable in her role as pedagogue at their Vieux-Colombier School. Through improvisation, experimentation, and play, Bing evolved an innovative curriculum for developing a new kind of actor for the company and for the evolving collective vision of what the future of theatre could be. In a ground-breaking analysis of Bing's contribution to the French tradition of physical theatre training, Fleming brings to light the importance of Bing's endeavours (2020). Working closely with Dasté, she travelled together with Copeau to Switzerland to meet Jaques-Dalcroze at his school. Aspects of Jaques-Dalcroze's innovative embodied approach to experiencing music (**Eurhythmics**) were subsequently incorporated into their own evolving training approaches through Dasté and Jessmin Howarth (1892–1984). Howarth, an English musician, dancer, and choreographer in her own right, had studied with Jaques-Dalcroze and then went on to work with Bing, Dasté, and Copeau in Paris, before studying with philosopher/mystic, composer, and dance teacher George Ivanovic Gurdjieff (1867–1949). In 1918, during Bing's two-year spell in New York with the Vieux-Colombier company at the Garrick Theatre, she also collaborated with American psychologist and educator Margaret Naumburg (1890–1983), who was in the process of developing a play-based pedagogical approach at her school for children, embracing elements of the educational principles developed by Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870–1952). All of these encounters and contributions were to feed into the developing pedagogy of the Vieux-Colombier School and company.

Significantly, while Copeau refers in his writings to Bing, his one-time partner, as an important contributor to *his* work, it is remarkable how little the cross-fertilisation and

pedagogical innovations developed by the women involved in this process have been acknowledged in the development of French post-war theatre training. For instance, despite Bing single-handedly teaching the first cohort at the Vieux-Colombier School, Fleming points out that she was never to hold any economic power in their school or theatre companies, ‘nor was she ever given any job titles that reflected the significance of her work, and this is problematic in relation to the history of modern French theatre and mime’ (Fleming 2020: 367). Consequently, a second diagram (Figure 2) also conceived by Fleming and designed by Ayre, presents a fascinating alternative narrative of connections. Far from a rigid linear set of boxes representing the passing down of knowledge, this diagram captures a kind of constellation of interconnectedness in which the women are revealed as integral to the established network of male practitioners, directors, and teachers associated with French physical theatre. Correspondingly, the women’s contribution to its progression and expansion as we know it today is finally acknowledged.

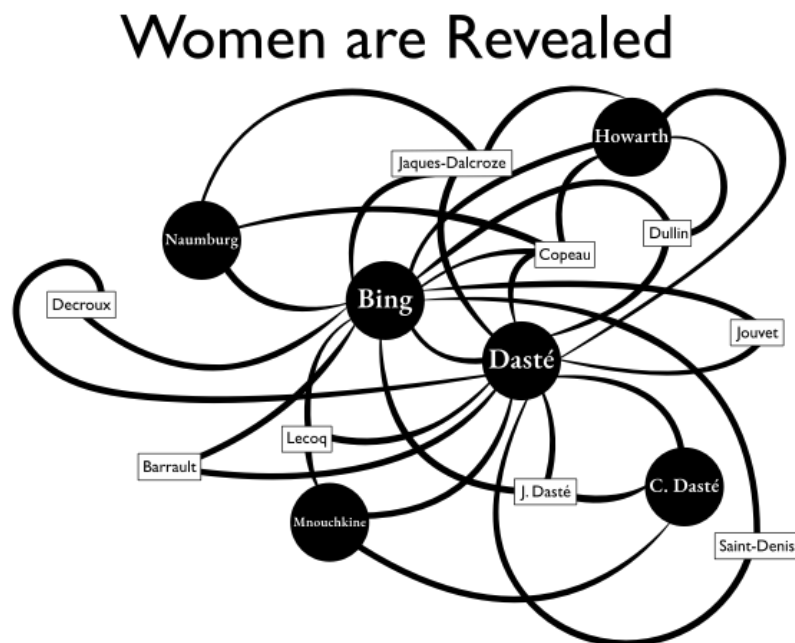


Figure 2. Women are Revealed, by kind permission of Cass Fleming and Paul Ayre (2020).

Post-war France: a groundswell of innovation

Building on these collective encounters, the new post-war French government set up a national department of youth movements and popular culture. The involvement of progressive young theatre makers in this initiative developed an active dynamism for reimagining what performer training could be. They helped to articulate a new popular culture manifesto as a vibrant political force for enhancing community life and as a dynamic means of sustaining a collective aspiration for post-war freedom. Central to this radical new vision was the need for the decentralisation of culture. This was manifested in an increasing interest in regional open-air festival theatre and the growth of young itinerant companies dedicated to reaching a new and more diverse public. Henry Schnitzler writes that, as a consequence, theatre became distinguished ‘by a remarkable spirit of experimentation and a firm determination to break away from the conventions of a past whose last vestiges were disappearing before everyone’s eyes’ (1949: 17).

In the last year of German Occupation and as part of the cultural work of the Resistance, Lecoq attributes his deepening fascination for theatre to his involvement with Travail et Culture (Work and Culture), a progressive socialist organisation whose mission was to create cultural opportunities for working class people. Evening classes in song, dance, mime, and movement were at the forefront of this initiative. Their collective efforts made crucial cultural inroads for expanding theatre’s presence beyond Paris after Liberation in 1945. According to Lecoq, ‘throughout this heady period of post-war freedom’ (2020: 4) his company, Les Aurochs, joined others to form Les Compagnons de la Saint-Jean. Together they produced ‘large-scale festive events’ (4), re-enacting historic war narratives – to celebrate France’s freedom from Nazi control. At this time, Lecoq and his fellow theatre makers were taken on by Jean Dasté and Marie-Hélène Dasté, to join Les Comédiens de

Grenoble, where Lecoq made his professional debut and also took on responsibility for physical training. It was here that Lecoq came to know of Copeau's work. Significant encounters and alliances such as these, along with the entangled cultural and historical influences these people brought to bear in the process, ensured that Lecoq's journey from sport to theatre was well and truly set in motion.

During his time with the Dastés and their associates, Lecoq discovered a rich seedbed for his evolving interests that were later applied and developed in his own school. While Lecoq refers to Copeau and his students Jean Dasté and Dullin as the reference points for his work (2000), what is less known yet equally important is how Bing's and Marie-Hélène Dasté's pedagogical explorations into the world of masks, Commedia dell'Arte, Japanese Noh theatre, as well as the practices of embodying animals and even clowning, were to become essential principles of Lecoq's pedagogy and that of his contemporaries.

Essential Touchstones of Lecoq's Pedagogy

After the Second World War, Lecoq left France for Italy, where for eight years he worked with Italian actors and directors including Dario Fo, Franco Parenti, and Anna Magnani. During his prolonged stay in Italy, Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi invited Lecoq to launch a theatre school at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. Performing also in the provinces, Lecoq discovered and refined the improvisational and theatrical principles of Commedia dell'Arte once adopted by Copeau, Bing, and the Dastés. He also met Italian sculptor Amleto Sartori, with whom he collaborated to reconfigure and re-introduce leather Commedia masks to a contemporary theatre audience. It was also with Sartori that Lecoq developed his research into the **neutral mask**, based on the noble masks developed by Bing and Copeau. In 2003, I participated in Sartori's mask-making summer school in Italy, where I saw all the neutral mask

prototypes originally modelled on Lecoq's own face, before they finally settled on a male and a female mask (Figure 3).

In 1956, Lecoq founded his school, École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq, in Paris, which over the years has become an international magnet for theatre training. The reasons students from all over the world go to his school are as varied as the trainees themselves. In my case, I first heard about Lecoq and his school from John Wright, one of my tutors at Middlesex University in the early 1980s. Together we had been exploring the neutral mask, character masks, and movement. It was an approach to theatre-making that invited curiosity, creative exploration, and making personal and collective discoveries; all dynamics that activated my embodied imagination before I was even aware I had any. Not long after, I made the decision to study at the school in Paris (see Nixon 2016 and 2024).

The overarching aim of Lecoq's school is 'to produce a young theatre of new work, generating performance languages which emphasise the physical playing of the actor' (Lecoq 2000: 18). It is important to note here that the training is not uniquely intended for actors playing a role. As a school for dramatic creation, Lecoq's pedagogy extends more widely to creative practitioners including writers, theatre directors, theatre-makers, and artists. The essential touchstones of the pedagogy involve *Le Jeu* (play), *Disponibilité* (openness), and *Complicité* (a state of involvement). These three interacting principles enable students to engage with the movement of possibilities and to exploit the opportunities of the present moment. For Murray and Evans, these 'qualities were not 'invented' by Lecoq, but were harnessed, deepened and practised by him as the necessary bedrock for almost all live performance' (2020: 515). Play in Lecoq's terms relates broadly to developing in students the capacity for exploration, improvisation, embodied imagining, invention, and the transformation of reality into creative action. From this perspective, play requires a specific state of being, defined by Lecoq as *disponibilité*, an outward looking sensitivity of paying

close attention, not to oneself, but rather to the situation being played or experienced. This is an important distinction as it points to an activity in which the relationship between the body and the external world is paramount. Murray and Evans describe the '*disponible* actor' as 'open and receptive to the human and material environment with which they engage on stage'; 'always in the moment and aware of the theatrical possibilities of the moment' (2020: 517). The third principle of Lecoq's teaching approach is *complicité*. Often translated as collaboration, this quality is generally associated with a playful relationship between performers or performer and audience. In this spirit, the term *complicité* is also the title of the international touring theatre company founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Fiona Gordon, Marcello Magni, and current Artistic Director, Simon McBurney. Based in London, the original founding company, some of whom studied or taught in Paris, describe their mission as creating 'work that strengthens human interconnection, using the complicity between performer and audience that is at the heart of the theatrical experience' (www.complicite.org).

Along with the key principles of openness, play, and collective creativity, Lecoq summarises the first year of his school as a completion of three embodied journeys. Firstly, 'observation and the rediscovery of life' using the neutral mask; secondly, 'raising the level of play' through expressive masks; and finally, exploration of the 'poetic depths of words, colours and music' (Murray and Evans 2020: 97). For Lecoq, the interaction of these components confirms that to understand the world, we must first embody it. Through a process of '**identification**' with the natural elements, materials, colour, light, sound, animals, and plants, the student is guided to a space where reality encounters a different dimension, which he names as a 'universal poetic awareness' (Lecoq 2000: 47). This fundamental principle, he asserts, exists in us all and constitutes 'the common heritage, out of which will spring dynamic vigour and the desire to create' (47). By this process the

essential conditions are awakened in the actor to make a shift from a body that merely moves *through* space, to a body that *moves* and *is moved* by space. Following the emergence of a collective and embodied understanding of the world that surrounds us, the second year of the school involves applying this approach to a range of devising processes and theatrical styles.

The Neutral Mask

Lecoq first came into contact with the neutral mask through the ‘noble mask’ exercises he experienced when working with the Dastés, who, as already mentioned, explored and developed this teaching approach with both Copeau and Bing. Indeed, Evans attributes neutral mask work with drawing together ‘many of the elements of Copeau’s teaching’, rooted in ‘starting from the simplest place possible’ (2018: 73). Individual exercises and group themes – generally developed over a period of approximately four weeks – aim to provoke in each student an embodied engagement with the world, ‘a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict’ (Lecoq 2020: 36.). It has also been described as a ‘a return to zero’ (Pascetta 2016: 257) and as a means of sensitising each actor to the space around them. All senses are awakened to the freshness of beginnings and in Lecoq’s words: ‘When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama can be inscribed’ (Lecoq 2020: 38).



Figure 3. The female neutral mask by Donato Sartori, reproduced by kind permission of La Mancha, Chile.

The guiding theme of Lecoq's work with neutral mask is titled *The Fundamental Journey*. This exercise, undertaken over several sessions, invites students to individually navigate a range of imaginary landscapes such as the sea, beach, forest, mountain, valley, stream, plain, and desert. Through the simple act of embodied imagining, they journey through a virtual world, drawing physically on the human movement categories defined by French physical educator Georges Hébert (1855–1957). His pioneering 'natural method', developed in the early twentieth century and explored at the Lecoq School, 'analyses movement under eleven categories: pulling, pushing, climbing, walking, running, jumping, lifting, carrying, attacking, defending, swimming' (Lecoq 2020: 74–75). Placing an emphasis on bodily awareness and receptivity in this way, the natural world is first experienced as an activity grounded in calm and ease, and then tested in more challenging weather conditions. Importantly, for Lecoq, these actions not only heighten physical awareness for the purposes of acting, but also provoke each student's creativity. As McBurney, one of the founders of *Complicité*, writes of his own experience as a student, this journey 'reflected back at us the contours of our own imaginations and the geography of our human frames' (in Lecoq 2020: xi).

For Murray, the use of the journey metaphor can be traced back to Lecoq's experiences 'as a young man growing to maturity during and immediately after the Second World War' (2003: 59). Acknowledging this milestone, Lecoq recalls the deep influences of working with the Dastés at that time: 'In *L'Exode* [Exodus], a performance using mask and mime created by Marie-Hélène and Jean Dasté, every actor wore a "noble" mask, which we now call the neutral mask' (2020: 4–5). The theme of Exodus or journey from one country of origin to another arguably echoes the departure of Parisians in response to the impending Nazi Occupation of France in the Second World War but is also mirrored today in the desperate attempts by refugees to escape from war, natural disaster, or persecution. The theme of departure is a central narrative in Lecoq's pedagogy, initiated through the neutral mask work in the first year, and then reappearing as a motif around the collective theme of exile in melodrama, or tragedy during the second year. Interestingly, while Lecoq developed his engagement with theatre at a time of global conflict, he did not impose his own political views on his students. Rather, his teaching opened students up to the multiple resonances and repercussions that emerge from an encounter between human and non-human matter, putting us back in touch with the immediate world around us, and provoking us as actor-creators to devise new work that responds to that call. In our *disponibilité* or availability and openness towards an embodied dialogue with what surrounds us, we become sensitised to 'otherness', which in itself has broader political implications as a social activity.

The French Physical Tradition in France and the UK

Historically, it has been presumed that the French legacy of actor training in the UK has drawn on approaches to the French wave of actor training introduced by Copeau's nephew, Michel Saint-Denis. Profoundly influenced by Bing and the Dastés whilst studying at the Vieux-Colombier School, Saint-Denis moved to Burgundy with Copeau in 1924 to become a

member of Les Copiaus. He is credited with subsequently having formed the successful La Compagnie des Quinze with colleagues including Bing, who contributed with her vast experience as an actress and also her innovative approaches to performer training. In the early 1930s, Saint-Denis moved to London, where he went on to become a successful director in the UK. He also co-founded the Old Vic Theatre School and was one of the original artistic board members of the Royal Shakespeare Company (see Gordon 2006 and Evans 2009).

Lecoq's more recent contribution to the international dissemination of French physical theatre is no less important. In his words: 'My method aims to promote the emergence of a theatre where the actor is playful. It is a theatre of movement, but above all a theatre of the imagination' (2020: 104). A related yet under-explored performer training approach developed by the renowned international movement teacher Monika Pagneux has made its own impact on embodied performer training. Born in Germany, Pagneux moved to Berlin after the war to study modern dance with the German dancer and choreographer Mary Wigman (1886–1973). In Berlin, she worked with Circus Knie and met Marcel Marceau who suggested she train in France. In 1953, she travelled to Paris to work with Decroux and then studied at the Lecoq School, where she went on to teach movement for fifteen years. In 1980, Pagneux left the School to establish an international training studio with fellow teacher, playwright, and director Philippe Gaulier, once a student and teacher at the Lecoq School and founder of L'École Philippe Gaulier in France. Ten years later, having developed and honed her own pedagogical approach and reputation, Pagneux chose to work independently. Like Lecoq, she invites students to experience other ways of 'knowing-feeling-thinking', enticing theatre-makers into creative action through play and improvisation (Nixon 2024).

Pagneux's pedagogical approach to teaching movement is distinctive in that it also encompasses the pioneering work of Israeli physicist, engineer, and judo practitioner Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984). His Awareness Through Movement method® (ATM®), well

documented in his own books, has been applied to a wide range of movement-related practices including dance, sport, musicianship, and acting. For Feldenkrais, our experience of movement is richer than feeling or thought, yet we become easily trapped in self-limiting brain patterns which assume that there is only one way of doing. He claimed that both movement and imagination have the potential to ease these compulsive and fixed modes, opening up a space in our neural system for new learning to occur. Central to the ways in which Pagneux applies Feldenkrais in her work is its facility for awakening the sensations of difference through play, exploration, and discovery.

In 2006 and 2007, I attended two workshops in Barcelona led by Pagneux. In the 2012 film *Inside/Outside* by Robert Golden about her teaching in Barcelona with the same group, she points to the key influences on her work:

- German dancer, teacher, and choreographer Mary Wigman whose company Pagneux joined as a dancer (1947–1952);
- Lecoq, with whom she was a student between 1960 and 1963, and then a teacher at his School;
- Theatre director Peter Brook whose International Centre for Theatre Research (CIRT) Pagneux joined and then became movement director for between 1973 and 1976;
- Moshe Feldenkrais.

Summing up these influences in the video, Pagneux says: ‘Wigman taught me that “we are music”, Lecoq “how to observe”, Brook to “see how the invisible becomes visible” and Feldenkrais “how to engage the whole body, the running through the body ”’(Murray 2023: 568).

Being fully present on stage, exploring qualities of attention, ease of action, lightness of touch, being open to uncertainty, and experimenting with the dynamics of space and rhythm, are all dimensions of Pagneux's work that chime with the French foundations of physicality discussed in this chapter. Indeed, during her time as a teacher at the Lecoq School, she introduced the Feldenkrais method to the curriculum, tuning students into the unfolding dimensions of *le jeu* or 'play'. Drawing on a specific exercise from my encounters with Pagneux, I offer an example of her practice to illuminate her approach. It is important to note that what was exciting in each workshop was her capacity to adapt, improvise, and reinvent her working process according to the individual dynamics and unique circumstances of each group. As Pagneux mentioned in our workshops, her role was 'to follow "fresh impulses that arise" creating from what she sees, hears and senses in the room' (Yen 2015: 253). Rather than attempting to align her approach to a fixed recipe or set of rules, the following account is based on my particular experience, acknowledging, as Murray does when discussing Pagneux, 'that as humans we have different intelligences and disparate ways of knowing the world' (2023: 572).

Suggested Practical Exercise: Stick Play

While stick work is not unique to Pagneux by any means, I have attempted to capture the infinite ways in which her invitation to play invites individual and collective curiosity about the aspects of creative practice participants are focusing on in any particular moment.

Stage 1 – Feldenkrais Exercise

Preparation for play involves Feldenkrais movement sequences for what Pagneux terms as 'waking up' the body: exploring economy of movement, lightness, feeling, sensing and thinking as an interconnected experience, and accessing awareness in a way that

resonates, reverberates through the entire body. Examples of his exercises are in his books available in the resources section of the Feldenkrais Guild website listed in Suggestions for Further Reading below.

Stage 2 – *Complicité*: Playing *With*

Facing your partner, gently place a bamboo stick length-wise between you on the floor. Allow your eyes to meet and without discussion, sense the moment together for making contact with the stick using your middle finger (typically the longest finger of your hand). Maintaining a light responsive touch can you both lift the stick off the floor without dropping it? With *complicité*, gradually explore the possibilities of raising, lowering, stepping over, and moving under or around the stick. Once you both feel comfortable with these experiments, how might you move the raised stick through the space? Play with levels, speed, shape, direction, and stillness. Feel free to change hands when required. How does the rest of your body engage with the stick and with your partner? Be curious. What happens to your breath as you work jointly? How might the stick be an extension of the complicit relationship emerging between you? Can you sense aspects of your partner's inner world through the stick? How does the relationship between you both adapt and perhaps change over the course of your exploration? This stage can be extended further to groups of three, four, five, etc. Standing in a circle with the bamboo sticks now placed lengthways between each person, how can you pick up all the sticks together? What needs to change in you and amongst you with added people? How might rhythm, eye focus, and exploration need to adapt in these new circumstances? There are endless variations of this exercise and it is interesting to note the change in physical engagement, if partners move from working with one stick to two at the same time. This is about *complicité*: working together,

offering options, responding sensitively, accommodating and listening to the stick and, by extension, your partner(s) with the entire body. I might use variations of this exercise when directing or teaching Greek Chorus. There are an infinite number of applications.

Stage 3 – Dramatic Tension: Playing *Against*

Beginning again from the same starting point as Stage 2, introduce another dimension to the game. How can you catch your partner out so that they drop the stick? If this happens immediately, we discover that the game is over. Introducing the notion of challenging each other, elicits tactics, qualities of action, changes in breath, physical tension, the nature of play, and brings variation of rhythm to the relationship. This is a helpful exercise when explored through the context of scene work. Adapted to a scene, how does introducing an objective, need, or desire to make your partner drop the stick alter the relationship? If the stick is dropped, can you hold that moment in inhabited stillness or what Lecoq and Pagneux term as *Point Fixe* or fixed point? A sculptural image may emerge that expresses the life-full dramatic tension of the moment.

Pagneux's musical terminology of *major* and *minor* might emerge to express those key moments where positions of power, personality shifts, and changing circumstances and conditions might alter between the scene partners, bringing the scene to life. Another option might be to explore what happens if the physical stick is removed but imagined as if it is still there. Progressively, the apparent empty space might transform into an expression of the tensions and relationships between you.

New Milestones

UK actors, directors, and teachers including Steven Berkoff, David Glass, Peta Lily, and Simon McBurney discovered Lecoq's school early on in Paris or came to experience his work through workshops when Lecoq visited the UK in the early 1980s. His influence is also felt ~~with~~ **by** many well-documented practitioners and companies such as Footsbarn Theatre, Moving Picture Mime Show, Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil, the Swiss mask company Mummenschanz, and UK's Complicité. Over the years, an international diaspora of educators, actors, and theatre-makers have continued to develop, expand, and adapt this training to wider global and socio-cultural contexts. For instance, La Mancha Theatre Company and the International School of Image and Gesture, Chile; Amy Russell, founder of Embodied Poetics; actors Toby Jones and Geoffrey Rush; as well as the international reach of renowned teacher Norman Taylor, who was first a student and then taught for many years at the Lecoq School. Many other international practitioners who have so far enjoyed limited exposure in the UK are successfully disseminating the legacy of their training in new and innovative ways beyond Europe, towards theatres of the future (see Nixon 2024).

To suggest that changes in art tend to emerge in times of crisis is perhaps to oversimplify artistic experimentation and innovation. The forces that shake up or create the environment for theatrical renewal are deeply entangled with geographical, political, and cultural contexts, as well as the dynamic between what has gone before and the particular people involved at any one time. Lecoq's thinking about theatre did not appear instantaneously, neither did he magically conjure up his teaching approach. Yet it is clear that the Nazi Occupation of France during the Second World War accentuated the need to challenge the complacency of what theatre is and what it can do. Lecoq's participation in this historical moment introduced him to a unique network of practitioners, teachers, and theatre lineages that not only triggered his interest in theatre, movement, and creativity, but also

prompted an approach to actor and performer training that invites students to re-engage with the world, not through passive observation, but from a real desire to know and fully experience what is out there. Recently, the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq announced its relocation from Paris to Avignon (2023), marking a new milestone and a new chapter of possibilities rooted in the French impulse for embodied theatre training and creative practice.

Key Terms

Complicité (complicity)

A cornerstone in Lecoq's pedagogy, referring to a form of playful understanding between performers, between performers and audience, as well as between performers and the world. As a quality, complicity involves developing the ability to be in play with the individual and collective theatrical possibilities of experimenting, listening, improvising, imagining, and creating.

Disponibilité (openness)

An essential disposition in Lecoq's pedagogy for developing the ethos of play. This quality of openness is an invitation to experience the world in a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no inner conflict. For instance, neutral mask exercises designed to activate the physical sensitivity of paying close attention, are intended to free the body of excess tension and inhibition so that the student becomes more flexible, adaptable, and available to creative possibilities.

Eurhythmics

A musical pedagogy based on bodily movement developed by Swiss musician and educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze in the early twentieth century. Originally intended for children, this educational approach is intended to reveal the embodied connections between music and physical awareness. Music is felt and experienced in a way that develops the active qualities of listening, rhythm, structure, musicality, and expression. As the chapter highlights, Eurhythmics informed the teachings of Suzanne Bing and Marie-Hélène Dasté.

Identification

Lecoq's pedagogy begins with the conviction that to understand the external world, students first embody it through the enactive process of mimesis or in his term 'identification'.

Mimetic identification is not about physically illustrating or describing an object, element, matter, or animal, but rather delineates an embodied engagement with the felt rhythms, currents, and vibrations of animate life. Through this embodied activity, the body's gestural vocabulary is expanded and then, as Lecoq explains, students share a vocabulary of collective physical experience, which forms the foundations of theatrical creation.

Improvisation

The unplanned or unscripted spontaneous invention of performance in the present moment.

Improvisation can be an unstructured or semi-structured kind of intentional play of embodied consciousness, a quality of inventiveness that operates through a process of openness, curiosity, and discovery. Its long theatre history can be traced back to Commedia dell'Arte (see Chapter 2). For Lecoq, the study of Commedia develops the freedom to play within and around a tight structure of archetypal characters, plots, and physical humour. Improvisation can generate new material for devised performance and also enliven an existing play text.

Le jeu (play)

The notion of play is central to Lecoq's pedagogy. Combining the embodied qualities of *disponibilité* and *complicité*, *le jeu* refers to the playful disposition at the heart of theatrical creation. Play refers to a kind of relational movement, inviting the actor to explore, discover, and interact with each other and the work. In the 'playing' of the unpredictable processes of theatrical creation: experimenting, imagining, testing, forming, discarding, reforming, and refining, something new can emerge into being.

Neutral mask

The neutral mask ~~is~~ provides a foundational learning experience in Lecoq's pedagogy for anchoring students in the primacy of direct experience and for sensitising the body to the world around us. Originating from Suzanne Bing and Jacques Copeau's 'noble mask', Lecoq's use of the neutral mask is about disrupting habitual ways of feeling, seeing, hearing, and doing. By gradually letting go of certainty, the neutral mask invites the wearer to reconnect with sensation, calm, and receptivity to the world and its creative possibilities.

Mime

A theatrical technique often understood as the silent art of imitation and the virtuosic gestural illusion of storytelling. The term is generally associated with Étienne Decroux and his student Marcel Marceau. Lecoq's understanding of mime refers to an embodied activity whereby our bodies play at *being* the world, bringing it to life with renewed freshness. Through a process of being *with* the world, we can then transform these discoveries into the creativity of performance (see 'identification' above).

Patrilineal traditions

An expression that describes societies where the organisation of family relationships is connected through the father's line. These historical inheritance systems have often led to men primarily serving as heads of almost every important social, cultural, and political institution, to the exclusion of women. Similarly, historical studies around the French traditions of physical theatre are dominated by the French male lineage.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For general and up-to-date information about Lecoq's school, see the official website of the Jacques Lecoq International Theatre School: <https://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com/news-facebook/?lang=en>.

For a key text by Lecoq and a sense of his way of working, see Jacques Lecoq's *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre* (London: Methuen, 2020). See also his *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

For details about Moshe Feldenkrais's approach, visit the website of the International Feldenkrais Federation (IFF): <https://www.feldenkraisguild.com/page/international-feldenkrais-federation>.

For an overview of Lecoq's legacy and its impact on contemporary theatre practice, see Ellie Nixon's *Imagining Bodies and Performer Training: The Legacies of Jacques Lecoq and Gaston Bachelard* (London: Routledge, 2024).

For insights into Monika Pagneux's work, see Robert Golden's film *Inside Outside: Theatre/Movement/ Being* (London: Robert Golden Pictures Limited, 2012).

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