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## ***Dear Jacques ... Lecoq in the Twenty First Century***

Dear Jacques

This is the letter<sup>i</sup> I might have written to you years ago, perhaps after several very congenial meetings with Fay and Pascale when I was researching the book I wrote on your work in 2003. I am delighted to be included in this collection of essays which together are a testimony to your enduring influence, and the affection and respect in which you are still held, fifteen years after your death.

I hope, that you will forgive me if, in this imaginary dialogue which I am constructing, I misrepresent you, or do a disservice to your ideas, imagination and hopes for theatre. You once said that ‘if the School doesn’t move it dies’ (Lecoq 2006: 121) and your restless thinking about the body, its movement and preparing students for a theatre still to be invented is a testament to this sentiment. What drives my letter are curiosity and speculation about how you would find and react to the landscape of western theatre and performance during the second decade of the twenty first century. Of course, this immediately seems a preposterous proposition suggesting that western theatre is one single thing, instead of multiple forms and shapes. I write from a perspective of someone who has made and taught theatre in the UK for the last thirty years and who now lives and works in Glasgow, a city you know well, where Fay grew up and trained and where on at least two occasions you ran workshops and a LEM<sup>ii</sup> master class.

Let me try to convey a sense of the current theatre landscape, at least from a British perspective in 2015. Of course, commercial and much of repertory theatre is still driven by the literary play text on the one hand, and the musical on the other. The established canon of great classical playwriting remains our centre of gravity, but this is a citadel which, if not actually under serious attack, certainly is subject to skirmishes from contemporary playwrights on the one hand, and devised theatre and performance on the other. Of the former, the work of writers such as Jez Butterworth, Martin Crimp, David Greig, Tanika Gupta, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Gregory Burke has been seen on

our various national and regional stages. However, it is interesting to note a small measure of apparent uncertainty and defensiveness within the field of playwriting as recently evidenced by playwright and academic, David Edgar. Edgar organised a series of seminars and talks at Oxford University in February 2015 under the title 'Is the playwright dead?' In promoting this event Edgar claimed:

... there has been a shift of opinion against playwriting, in favour of collective methods of theatre. The very activity of playwriting has been attacked as individualistic, undemocratic and even immoral.

(Edgar 2015)

Of the diverse companies whose names are linked to devised theatre, those you will remember from the 1980s include: Complicite, Forced Entertainment, Robert Wilson, Trestle, Odin Teatret, DV8, Footsarn, Shared Experience<sup>iii</sup>, Mummenschanz, Elevator Repair Service and the Wooster Group. Although inevitably there are groups no longer with us, it is perhaps remarkable just how many companies have kept going, and often without the security of regular grant income. Such longevity from the 1970s or '80s testifies to resilience, a commitment of spirit, an enduring belief in collaboration as well as a smart and resourceful 'entrepreneurialism'. Clearly, ever since the inclusion of 'auto-cours' after *Les evenements* of 1968 your school has played a very significant role in driving and enabling collaboratively authored ensemble theatre. So, in many senses the landscape of theatre remains tangibly recognisable from that period when you were still teaching and leading the School at 57, rue du Faubourg St. Denis.

Whilst I do not have space here to detail the cultural and economic changes which have impacted negatively on theatre making and performing over the 16 years since your death, suffice it to say these have been significant and worrying. It has become more and more difficult for young artists and theatre-makers to survive off state benefits when they are not actually working. Signing on and off for unemployment or welfare benefits between projects or jobs has become much harder. This would not be new to you, but you might be surprised and dismayed by how much more difficult it is today for all but the

most recognised companies and individual artists to keep afloat. I would also note the increasing globalisation of the theatre economy, both in relation to the mobility of artists' labour across the western world but also, for recognised middle and large scale companies, the globalisation of the markets in which their productions may be performed and seen. The effects of such globalisation are complex and need to be distinguished from the resolute but playful spirit of diversity and internationalism which your school has always promoted and celebrated.

So much for a general 'scene-setting'. I would like now to identify two related developments over the last 15 years in theatre and performance-making, which largely – but not exclusively – can be positioned within the field of small and non-mainstream production. Neither of these developments will be totally new to you, but you might be surprised at the pace and ubiquity of these trends. I am sure that many of the students who have graduated from the School over the last twenty years are part of this contemporary theatre landscape. I am referring to site-specific and immersive theatre and to forms of performance that utilise mixed media, which means an engagement with digital and social media technologies as a central feature of their dramaturgy.

Let me try to explain the most significant qualities of these developments as I understand them. If pressed, I might identify theatre productions staged outwith the conventional spaces of the proscenium arch or black box studio as the most interesting innovation of the last 15-20 years. Of course, performing theatre beyond the auditorium has a deep history (Commedia dell'Arte for example) and 'site-specific' is a catch-all expression covering a variety of practices. Indeed, theatres (black box or proscenium) are as much 'sites' as a forest or a derelict car factory. Fiona Wilkie's phrase 'non-theatre locations' (Wilkie, 2002: 149) certainly establishes where such performances are *not* staged. Students, often for a whimsical mixture of motives, seem hungry to experiment with staging work beyond formally designated theatre spaces. I imagine that your fundamental interest in the dynamics of space and its relationship with actors would dispose you well to the attempts behind these various sited practices. I'm thinking of UK companies like

Punchdrunk, Wrights and Sites, the work of Mike Pearson and Cliff McLucas, Grid Iron, Frantic Assembly and Wildworks. And there are many more. At base, work which is flagged as ‘site-specific’ seems to announce the special attention it is giving to its location and how it is (more than usually?) alive to the specific nature of the space and place chosen. I have just re-read your penultimate short chapter on L.E.M. in *The Moving Body* and am reminded vividly of the importance you attach to ‘living spaces’ (Lecoq 2000: 155) and the way they will shape – compose even – the actions and behaviours of people who enter into them. When you write:

We introduce a preliminary sensitization of the body to the spaces it inhabits, first in a neutral state and then in dramatic expression. We work through replaying built spaces so as to be receptive to our initial physical impressions ... This is yet another way of developing the profound sensitivity of the body towards the observation of reality.

(2000: 155-6)

I sense that you are engaging with the very challenges that any company undertaking site-specific work has to wrestle with. James Yarker of Stan’s Café is saying something very similar when he asks: ‘What is special about this space (the theatre) and how does this speciality add to the quality of what we are doing?’ (Yarker 2007). Your emphasis on the body’s sensitization to site seems to be more specific than Yarker’s, who is referring as much to the total construction and dramaturgy of the piece in question. I know, however, that your ‘enquetes’ (enquiries) where first year students undertake an investigation of what you called a ‘milieu’ – a hospital, a race course, a park etc. – pays tribute to the concept and possibility of site-specificity even if students did not actually perform in such places. I have no doubt that young companies embarking on performance work in ‘non-theatre locations’ would benefit hugely from your teaching on the dynamics of space and objects. Work like this also seems to offer a quite radical re-think about spectator participation and the politics of a popular and inclusive theatre. Although the socio-political realities of these different eras are immense it would be interesting to compare how the dramaturgies of work such as this might have played out with your

‘theatre activism’ immediately after the war when you worked with Gabriel Cousin in *Travail et Culture*<sup>iv</sup> and the company you set up, *Les Compagnons de la Saint Joan*.

Often integrally related to site-specific performance are practices which have come to be signed as ‘immersive theatre’. I doubt whether the term, ‘immersive’ was in currency when you were still teaching, and of course all effective theatre is ‘immersive’ in one way or another.. I fancy the phrase only has a 21<sup>st</sup> century currency even if the modes of audience engagement it describes can be traced back many decades. At root, immersive theatre necessitates that audiences break with the normal protocols of spectatorship and therefore almost always requires them to be mobile and leave their seats. Indeed, it is likely there are never any seats in the first place. Josephine Machon argues that immersive theatre:

... requires a personal abandonment of everyday boundaries. Such performances can offer lawbreaking conditions to roam free, take risks, be adventurous. They are specifically designed to immerse the individual in the unusual , the out-of-the-ordinary, to allow her or him, in many ways, to *become* the event.

(Machon 2013: 28)

Immersive theatre practices have their roots (or routes) within and beyond theatre which you would recognize: festivals (possibly religious), carnivals, pageants, ritualistic Eastern dance dramas, the provocations of Commedia dell’arte and other forms of street entertainment, western conceptual and installation art, and the *Happenings* of the sixties in Europe and north America. Of course, immersive theatres don’t only replace the seated experience of theatre in an auditorium or black box studio with the demand that spectators simply move about to see the work in question. They also (and as importantly) invite different forms of emotional, visceral and sensorial connection to the work. This may mean a complete blurring and breaking down of conventional distinctions between performer and spectator. Here the inheritance of some of those high modernist and avant-garde practitioners comes into play: Artaud, the Dadaists and Surrealists, for example. On

re-reading the *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (2006) I can't help but notice your (implicitly affirmative) references to Artaud: 'Antonin Artaud understood the mobile human body like no other champion of the stadium could' (2006: 84); or when you write of your post-war work with Education Par le Jeu Dramatique (Education Through Dramatic Performance) you testify to the greater influence of Artaud (and Dullin) over Copeau in this vocational school (2006: 99). I remember, too, that you include a rather startling poem by Artaud called 'Priere' in *The Moving Body* (Lecoq 2000: 122). Whilst Artaud's preoccupation with the work of performers' bodies on stage would absolutely accord with your own concerns I suspect that your pedagogy would not necessarily fully affirm Artaud's ritualistic and ecstatic 'theatre of cruelty' (Artaud 1994).

I have a strong sense, too, that your pleasure in experimentation combined with a broad and flexible commitment to a 'popular theatre' might well dispose you to appreciating the best of these immersive practices in 'non-theatre locations' I'm referring to a disparate range of practices under the umbrella of immersive and site-specific theatres where the range of acting or performing modes is multiple. At one end of the spectrum we can still identify conventional forms of representational acting – character transformation, psychological motivation, disguise, story-telling and so on – but we are as likely to find the performer as tour guide, demonstrator, activist, urban explorer, lecturer and often playing 'versions of themselves'. I see no reason why your determination to prepare the body-minds of young actors as sentient, open, alert and *disponible*<sup>v</sup> is any less relevant for these latter tasks than it is for traditional representational theatre. In describing Forced Entertainment's approach to acting, Richard Lowdon uses this phrase, suggesting the porosity of much contemporary acting between representing and 'being themselves' (Forced Entertainment DVD promoting *The Coming Storm*). The influences that shape these practices are as likely, it seems, to come from Performance Studies, oral history, cultural geography, community practices and visual and conceptual art as they are to find their lineage in theatre or literary drama. I guess this provokes reflection on how you defined the purpose of your school. Apart from your intriguingly ambivalent and increasingly critical relationship to 'pure' mime - 'Che bello! Che bello! Ma dove va?' (Beautiful! Beautiful! But where's it going?) (Agostino Cantarello quoted in Lecoq

2006: 99) – your School, it seemed to me, was always more of an art school than a conservatoire for training actors in any narrowly vocational sense, more a place of creative invention and transformation than interpretation (2000: 162), however technically skilled. The emphasis you placed on enabling students to make ‘the new young theatre’ (Lecoq 2000: 161) suggests an openness to these immersive forms of contemporary performance.

I suspect you might have more ambiguous views about the other field of development I identified earlier, namely performances which harness digital and other technologies for their realization. The speed, scale, portability and diversity of digital kit offers a complex extension to, and interaction with the pulsating heart of traditional theatre forms, namely spectators seated in an auditorium watching live bodies at work on stage. Digital technology offers up possibilities around the projected image in ways almost unimaginable even 20 years ago. Today, projection within live performance not only provides complex multi-screen opportunities for showing found, pre-recorded or live (from outwith the theatre) material simultaneously with the action on stage, but also the projection of that same live action on to screens, set and indeed performers’ own bodies. Within this technological framework cameras trained on the audience itself provide virtual ‘mirrored’ projections back into the performance space. Play with these possibilities sometimes seems wearily ubiquitous in work shown in small scale theatre venues. In the most successful of these strategies – see examples below - the act of seeing and looking becomes beguilingly more complex than ‘simply’ watching live bodies on stage. In addition to the possibilities of visual projection digital technologies offer myriad options in relation to special effects and to the manipulations of voice and sound. However, it is perhaps where the harnessing of digital technologies meets strategies which radically change spectators’ active engagement in the work that some of the most provocative and radical developments have taken place during the last 15 years. Here, companies such as Blast Theory, Gob Squad and Rimini Protokoll extend notions of spectator participation into new territories of immersive performance using mobile phones, headphones (conveying instructions, stories, information and so on), lap top



computers and various recording devices. This is how Rimini Protokoll describes a piece, *Remote X*, made in 2013:

Hordes of people who have never met in the real world swarm out on virtual treasure hunts when playing online games. In "Remote X" we're a horde of people wearing radio headphones, swarming out into the real city. A synthetic voice in our headphones (of the kind familiar from GPS navigators or airport announcements) directs the movements of our swarm. Binaural recordings and film scores turn the cityscape into a personal film; artificial Intelligence explores unknown territories, mustering human activity from a remote...

(Rimini Protokoll 2015)

In the examples and scenarios identified above I sense that what many of these companies and artists are presenting you would feel removes or deflects spectators' engagement with the live body doing a job of work 'on stage', and hence diminishes the essential and primary experience of theatre itself. Clearly the technical skills and dramaturgical possibilities of digital performance did not figure in your School's curriculum, but, of course, 'Lecoq alumni' such as Complicite in some recent productions – *Mnemonic* (1999), *The Elephant Vanishes* (2003) and *A Disappearing Number* (2007) – have imaginatively harnessed digital projection. Whether your School prepared students for the world of digital technology in performance seems at least in part to miss the point since your project was as much about *preparation* – body-mind, corporeal and dispositional – as it was for the particular 'dramatic territories' (Lecoq 2000: 105-154) of theatre. I expand on this point below.

Over the last 15 years I have written and reflected on your teaching, your research and more generally on what has been labeled as 'physical theatre'. I suspect you never used this term and I imagine you probably found it superfluous and unhelpful. In the 1980s and 90s in the UK at least there was considerable excitement, energy, and, some might say, overblown hype, about the arrival of *physical theatres*: the physical theatre 'turn' as

academics choose to characterise this development. Regardless of the terminology it seems indisputable to me that your work has made a hugely important contribution to changing our awareness of the actor's body, its movement and gesture in constructing sense and meaning in theatre. Although the mainstream of western theatre remains rooted in psychological realism and the canon of "great play writing" your teaching has helped to alter the way we now understand, receive and make theatre, and how actors might best be prepared for both life and theatre with fluent, articulate, and *disponible* bodies. Although you taught the great 'dramatic territories' (Ibid) it seems so clear to me now that your school was not primarily about the training of actors, but far more about equipping artists, theatre makers and performers with a set of dispositions and sensibilities which opened up and nurtured the imagination. Much of your teaching seemed to be about generating a focused but always playful *quality of attention*. A quality of attention not tailored narrowly to specific genres and modes of performance, but as a condition of invention for any creative artist. A quality of attention to space, to the dynamics of movement, to objects, to nature and perhaps, above all, to the interaction between performers themselves and between performers and their audiences.

I am trying to identify these qualities of your pedagogy because, if I am at all right, then, as Simon McBurney wrote in your obituary 'I see you surviving time' (McBurney 1999). These qualities, dispositions, skills even, seem to me as appropriate for 21<sup>st</sup> century theatre making as they were four decades ago when your School first moved to Le Central in the rue du Faubourg St. Denis. The immersive and site-specific theatres I wrote briefly about earlier have (amongst other modes of performance) been assembled by theatre academic, Hans-Thies Lehmann under the umbrella term of 'Postdramatic Theatre' in a book which was published in German during the year of your death, and 7 years later in an English language edition (Lehmann 2006). *Postdramatic Theatre* seeks to account for a diversity of performance practices which have broken with both Aristotelian dramatic forms and protocols on the one hand, and Brechtian *epic* tendencies on the other. Lehmann suggests that there is a range of contemporary theatre, which does not necessarily exclude plays, that deliberately transgresses the rules and expectations of traditional drama, especially around the project of acting, of narrative construction, of the

dominance of the literary text, of audience behavior and relationships and, indeed of the *work* of art, the *work* of theatre in the contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Although many of us find Lehmann's proposition a (largely) productive way of trying to identify significant trends in contemporary theatre, my sense is that you would be impatient and probably irritated with much of the analytical and theoretical writing around postdramatic theatre. Nonetheless, I sense you would remain intrigued by many of the practices described by the term, primarily, perhaps, because Lehmann sees postdramatic theatre as a schooling in *sensation* – and hence the body.

As I have said in this letter, I feel certain that your movement analysis, your engagement with identifying the dynamics of space, your insistence on the presence of play, *complicité* and *disponibilité*, and what your friend and translator, David Bradby<sup>vi</sup>, called the 'essential subversiveness' of your teaching ... 'a pedagogy of freedom, refusing to accept conventional boundaries of any kind' (Bradby 2002: 92) remain completely germane to the tasks of making and performing postdramatic theatre. All this suggests to me that there is little in your teaching, and the philosophy that shapes it, which would dispose you in principle to outlaw the developments I have identified above. I think your profound belief that all human beings share what you call *le fonds poétique commun* (*universal poetic sense*) would place you at odds with many of those literary theorists who, from the 1960s, have resisted notions of the 'universal' arguing that such formulations militate against understanding and accepting difference. And here I sense a sharp point of variance with performance makers whose work is driven or led by theory, in contrast to the corporeal actions (including words) which your pedagogy suggests should always be the 'force fields' of theatre making. Moreover, I feel sure you would be greatly unmoved and unimpressed by a 'fundamentalist' rejection of the universal, and sharply point out that 'all bodies are different but they resemble one another through what unites them' (Lecoq 2000: 41). I would add to this your comment – which I often quote with considerable pleasure - about neutrality and the neutral mask: 'of course there is no such thing as absolute and universal neutrality, it is merely a temptation' (Lecoq 2000: 20).

I have to end this letter now, Jacques but I must thank you for bearing with me to the end, if indeed you have not already lost patience! What confirms my belief that your teaching and thinking are as completely germane in 2015 as they were in 1965, 1975 or 1985 is when at the end of *The Moving Body* you write about the need for *combinations* and attack the notion of ‘purity’ in theatre making. This almost more than anything else for me confirms the enduring relevance of your thinking and your life’s work. You write:

The idea of ‘pure’ theatre is dangerous. What would ‘pure’ melodrama Amount to? Or ‘pure’ tragedy? Purity is death! Chaos is necessary to creation, but ‘chaos’ must be organized, allowing each person to put down roots and develop his own creative rhythms.

(Lecoq 2000: 162)

Merci bien, Jacques,

Simon

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<sup>i</sup> Thanks to my friend and colleague Carl Lavery for advice and help in constructing this letter to Jacques Lecoq.

<sup>ii</sup> L.E.M., translated as the Laboratory for the Study of Movement, was set up by Lecoq in collaboration with an architect, Gregor Belekian in 1976. Today L.E.M. is taught by Lecoq’s daughter Pascale and a team of teachers. For Lecoq, L.E.M. was a research laboratory and with students he investigated the dramatic possibilities and movement dynamics of objects and living spaces.

<sup>iii</sup> Shared Experience began very much as a devising company, although in recent years its work has been driven more by the play text albeit with a strong measure of physical invention.

<sup>iv</sup> *Travail et Culture* was a left wing organization which undertook cultural work on behalf of the Resistance in the final year of the German Occupation of France in 1944/5 and during the years immediately following the end of the war. Les Compagnons de la Saint Joan was a group of artists who put on carnival and festive activities to mark key moments in the post liberation period such as the return of French survivors from the Nazi concentration camps (Bradby and Delgado 2002: 84).

<sup>v</sup> *Disponible* has no direct translation in the English language, but the closest is an openness, an alertness and a generous susceptibility to others, to objects and to the opportunities presented in making and performing theatre.

<sup>vi</sup> David Bradby was a much respected pioneer of Theatre Studies who died in 2011. He was particularly a scholar of French theatre and edited Lecoq’s *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (2006) and translated *The Moving Body* (2000).

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