

A black and white photograph of Jacques Lecoq. He is a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is holding a light-colored, featureless mask in his right hand, pointing it towards the viewer. His left hand is raised, palm facing forward, with fingers spread. The background is dark.

THE MOVING BODY

(Le Corps poétique)

TEACHING CREATIVE THEATRE

JACQUES LECOQ

with Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias

translated by David Bradby

with a foreword by Simon McBurney

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Teaching Creative Theatre

by

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Translated from LE CORPS POÉTIQUE by David Bradby

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FOREWORD

Jacques Lecoq was a man of vision. He had the ability to see well. This vision was both practical and radical. As a young physiotherapist after the Second World War, he saw how a man with paralysis could organise his body in such a way that he could re-learn to walk, and taught him to do so. To actors he showed how the great movements of nature correspond to the most intimate movements of human emotion.

Like a gardener, he read not only the seasonal changes of his pupils but constantly seeded new ideas. During the 1968 student uprisings in Paris, when the pupils proposed the idea that they might teach themselves, he introduced the practice of *autocours*. This was a period of time in which groups of pupils collectively explore their own response to the week's work by devising a short piece of theatre to be presented before Jacques and the class. The growth of this idea took such a strong root that it remained central to his conception of the imaginative development and individual responsibility of the theatre artist. Like an architect, his analysis as to how the human body functions in space was linked directly to how we might unravel the structure of drama itself. Like a poet, he made us listen to individual words, before we even formed them into sentences, let alone plays.

What he offered in his school was, in a word, preparation – of the body, of the voice, of the art of collaboration (of which theatre is the most extreme artistic representation) and of the imagination. He was interested in creating a site to build on, not a finished edifice.

Contrary to what people often think, he had no style to propose. He offered no solutions. He only posed questions. When I last saw him, six months before he died, in his house under the shadow of Mont Blanc, to talk about a book we wished to make, he said with typical modesty: 'I am nobody. I am a neutral point through which you must pass in order to better articulate your own theatrical voice.'

I am only there to place obstacles in your path, so that you can better find your way around them.' As a result, we were constantly engaged in finding other ways of seeing. Constantly challenged to look again. Constantly alert to what is unexpected in the chaotic ever-changing patterns in nature and in our own natures.

'*Tout bouge*', ('everything moves'), was the title of his lecture demonstration, but was also a central tenet of his teaching. And so when I pick up this book, I am at once delighted to be reminded of the tone of Jacques's voice and also acutely aware of him observing me. Suggesting at once that an idea, a phrase, an observation that is made here has less to do with, God forbid, an instruction manual, but is more a perspective on his constantly shifting teaching, caught in words, at one specific moment in time.

Jacques was a man of extraordinary perspectives. But for him perspective had nothing to do with distance. For him there were no vanishing points, only clarity, diversity and – supremely – coexistence. I can't thank you, but I see you surviving time, Jacques, longer than the ideas that others have about you.

Simon McBurney 2000

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jacques Lecoq was born on 15th December 1921 in Paris. As a young man, he was attracted by sports of all kinds. He joined a gymnastics club at the age of 17 and then studied at a college of physical education. During the German occupation of France he joined with a group of young enthusiasts who sought to use gymnastics, mime, movement and dance to express opposition to the prevailing Fascist ideology. This led him on, after the liberation of France, to develop experimental performance work in which movement and theatre combined. In the first section of *The Moving Body*, entitled 'Personal Journey' he describes the countries he visited, the artists he met and the theatres he worked in during his formative period in the ten years following the end of the Second World War.

In 1956 he founded his own school in Paris, and the rest of the book describes the development of the school, setting out the methods of teaching which he developed there. Word gradually spread about this unorthodox training, whose method was to apply the laws of movement to dramatic creation and to different acting traditions, including masked performance, tragedy, melodrama, commedia dell'arte, clowning and *bouffons*. All of these terms took on special meanings through his teaching, and have acquired fresh life through the work of his pupils all over the world. He continued to take classes right up until the day before his death, on 19th January 1999. The École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq continues his teaching, under the direction of his wife Fay Lecoq, at 57, rue du Faubourg St. Denis, 75010 Paris, France.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

In addition to publishing numerous articles and interviews, Jacques Lecoq edited one other book: *Le théâtre du geste* (Paris: Bordas, 1987). A collection of articles in English about his work is due to be published late in 2000 by Harwood Academic, edited by Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow under the title *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre* (volume 42 in the 'Contemporary Theatre Studies' series).

In 1998/9 two 45-minute films were made with Jacques Lecoq by Jean-Noël Roy, Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias, entitled *Les deux voyages de Jacques Lecoq*. As well as passages in which Lecoq talks of his work and inspiration, these films include scenes in which his students can be seen working on several of the exercises he describes in *The Moving Body*. There are also interviews with actors and directors such as Dario Fo, Ariane Mnouchkine, Luc Bondy, Simon McBurney and many others. The film was a combined production by La Sept ARTE, On Line Productions and ANRAT and was first broadcast by ARTE in Spring 1999. An English-language subtitled version may be had on video-cassette by applying to ANRAT, 13 bis, rue Henry Monnier, 75009, Paris, France. Tel: 01 45 26 22 22; Fax: 01 45 26 16 20; e-mail: anrat@wanadoo.fr

In the 1960s, Lecoq made 26 short comic films under the title of *La belle équipe* for the ORTF. These are now lodged at INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel), where they may be viewed by appointment. A selection of them is also held at the Maison Jean Vilar, 8, rue Mons, 84000 Avignon, France. Tel: 04 90 86 59 64.

The school also possesses in its archives a large number of videotapes recording the vast majority of Jacques Lecoq's courses spread over the two seasons of the teaching cycle.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The original French text of Jacques Lecoq, Jean-Claude Lallias and Jean-Gabriel Carasso is characterised by clarity, lightness and an absence of complicated phraseology; I have tried to match these enviable qualities in my English translation. I have avoided technical terms when everyday words will serve as well, but, in a few cases, the special meaning attached to a French term requires that it be translated by an unusual English word. This is especially true where the French term is itself a neologism. The few examples of this kind can be listed here:

- (1) *mimage* (a neologism) is translated by the same word, containing as it does both 'mime' and 'image'.
- (2) *bouffon* is also translated by the same word, since the English 'buffoon' is too limited in scope. The French word suggests a grotesque comic while retaining overtones of medieval mummers and licensed court fools such as the one who accompanies King Lear in Shakespeare's tragedy.
- (3) *Jouer* and *le jeu* are key words for Lecoq. They can be translated by many different words in English: to play/play; to act/acting; to perform/performance are all appropriate in various cases, but the noun 'play' can be confusing since in English it also designates a written drama. As the notion of playing is so central to improvisation, and since improvisation has a central role in Lecoq's teaching method, I have translated *jeu* and *rejeu* by 'play' and 'replay' wherever possible, sometimes substituting 'acting' or 'performing' for 'play' where the sense required it.

I have used the masculine pronoun to apply to both males and females; similarly, words such as 'actor', which are not gender-specific, refer to men or women.

All the terms to which Lecoq attaches special meanings appeared in the original French text in *italics*. For this translation, I have provided a glossary of these terms, and an asterisk before a word in the text refers the reader to the glossary. In addition, Lecoq's original italics are often kept, as they represent key words in a paragraph.

To my wife, Fay Lecoq

I

PERSONAL JOURNEY



FROM SPORT TO THEATRE

I came to theatre by way of sports. At seventeen I discovered the geometry of movement through exercising on the parallel and horizontal bars at a Paris gymnastics club known as *En Avant*. The movement of the body through space demanded by gymnastic exercise is of a purely abstract order. In doing these physical movements I discovered extraordinary sensations which could be carried over into everyday life. On my way home in the metro, I would go over them in my mind. I would then sense all the rhythms perfectly, far more than in reality. I used to train at the Roland-Garros Stadium. I would run up for the high jump, then spring with the sensation of clearing a two-metre bar. I adored running, but it was the pure poetry of athletics which attracted me most: the contraction or elongation of the runners' shadows thrown by the sun slanting across the stadium when the rhythm of running sets in. This physical poetry had a powerful effect on me.

In 1941 I attended a college of physical education,¹ where I met Jean-Marie Conty. He had been top of his year at the Ecole Polytechnique, was an international basketball player, had piloted planes for the Aéropostal company with Saint-Exupéry,² and was in charge of physical education for all of France. His friendship with Antonin Artaud³ and Jean-Louis Barrault⁴ led him to take an interest in the links between sport and theatre. It was thanks to him that, during the German Occupation, I discovered the theatre

¹ The college attended by Lecoq was at Bagatelle, on the outskirts of Paris.

² Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, well-known author of novels which celebrated the exploits of pilots employed to fly dangerous routes in the early days of aviation. He is also, incidentally, the author of a children's story, *Le Petit Prince*.

³ Antonin Artaud, actor, director and visionary, author of many volumes on the theatre of which the best known is *The Theatre and its Double*.

⁴ Jean-Louis Barrault, director and actor who enjoyed a reputation in the post-war French theatre similar to that of Sir Laurence Olivier in England.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

Jacques Lecoq is one of the great names of contemporary theater. An inspiration to untold numbers of performers and theater practitioners, he expounded both a philosophy and one of the truly original methods of performing. As a young physiotherapist after the Second World War, Lecoq learned how the physical body is organized. His fascination with commedia dell'arte and other forms of movement led him to found first the Theater School of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, and then the International School of Mime and Theater where he worked tirelessly until his death in 1999. Lecoq's workshops and master classes became legendary, and changed the face of international theater. In *The Moving Body*, translated into English for the first time, Lecoq shares his unique philosophy of performance, improvisation, masks, movement, and gesture. Neutral mask, character masks and counter-masks, *bouffons*, acrobatics, commedia, clowns: all the famous Lecoq techniques are included here. *The Moving Body* is the written legacy of a great theatrical imagination.

JACQUES LECOQ was born in Paris in 1921. He taught until the day before his death in 1999.

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