Moving Bodies: Jacques Lecoq and Drama Education in Australia

Lynn Everett
University of New England

Abstract

This article explores Jacques Lecoq's pedagogy of theatre training and considers its usefulness as an approach for secondary school drama teachers. Lecoq's principles and practice can be successfully applied in drama education to develop skills in theatrical creation and performance. The four pillars of Lecoq's integrated approach — movement, improvisation, creation and stylisation — are explored in terms of their suitability for the drama classroom. The pedagogy is seen to offer a viable alternative to the 'Stanislavski method', primarily because its theory and practice are grounded in a paradigm of embodiment rather than Cartesian dualism. The proposition that Lecoq's practice is valuable for secondary drama education is supported by the testimony of Australian Lecoq graduates who have conducted pre-service and in-service teacher training, student workshops and Theatre-in-Education programs.

Lynn Everett *is a lecturer in drama education at the University of New England, Armidale. She is also a community theatre artist with recent projects including an environmental cabaret, a multi-arts youth project and a folk opera for the Australian Maritime Museum. Her research interests focus on drama and environmental sustainability, popular theatre and movement-based theatre pedagogy.*

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Moving mountains: from cognitive to embodied knowledge

What we teach as 'Drama/Theatre Education' in schools is embedded in the broader socio-cultural complex. Decisions about syllabus, pedagogy, curriculum content and even day-to-day teaching practices are impacted by, and impact upon, multiple ideological sites. The work of drama teachers is not simply determined by educational bodies but by the dominant paradigms of society as a whole. When we teach, direct, perform or write about drama/theatre education, we operate from a particular set of assumptions about the body-mind relationship and the nature of knowledge. While the Cartesian paradigm has shaped our understandings of the body in drama and theatre education as it has in other cultural spheres, the last hundred years have seen a shift away from the body/mind dichotomy towards a re-integration of the corporeal, manifesting in a new paradigm of

'embodiment' which positions body, mind, culture and environment as mutually determinant. This paradigm shift has profound implications for many areas of scholarship, including drama and theatre education.

The concept of 'embodiment' has steadily been gaining currency as a theoretical, practical and methodological concept in educational research (Bresler, 2004). It encourages a radical reappraisal of traditional understandings about how we teach and how students learn. The term 'embodiment' has been defined as the 'integration of the physical or biological body and the phenomenal experiential body' so that instead of a separation of body and mind there is a 'matrix of body/mind worlds, a web that integrates thinking, being, doing and interacting within worlds' (Varela *et al*., 1991)**.** Rather than positioning the mind as a separate metaphysical conception, embodied theories view all cognitive processes as being grounded in bodies that are physically situated in time and space. The human processes of conceptualisation, perception, sensation and psycho-motor activity, continuously and simultaneously co-evolve with each other and with aspects of the world. What we have come to think of as the operations of the mind are physical processes that unfold in a dynamic way, thoroughly grounded in the body patterns of movement and action, mutually coalescing with the body and its surroundings. From this dynamic perspective, the mind is in the body, the body is in the mind and the body-mind is in the world. This view positions all knowledge as being incorporated and embedded in biological and cultural activities, which profoundly shape all our experience (Bowman, 2004:29-50).

While drama/theatre educators have long been aware of the body's central position in the construction of knowledge, this awareness has frequently been articulated within Cartesian dualism and the exigencies of the body/mind split. Putting aside education for the moment, the theory and practice of theatre itself has been significantly impacted by Cartesianism. In the late 19th and early 20th century this manifested as a privileging of the written script and the spoken word over the physical text. A higher value was attributed to interpretation of a written script than creation of original material. Interpretation relied on the supremacy of the mind and the 'rational' analysis of the text. The value placed on interpretation was also related to the rise of the director, which in turn privileged hierarchical rather than collaborative processes of rehearsal and performance. Psychological realism became the dominant acting style and the 'Stanislavski system' the dominant approach to actor training. The ascendancy of psychological realism and the written play-script resulted in the suppression of many popular theatre traditions, and manifested as 'an assumed polarity between internal and external and between Realism and style' (Zarrilli, 2002:243). But while Stanislavski himself sought to integrate the body in his approach, what became popularly known as the 'Stanislavski system' or 'method acting' was deeply embedded in an ideological view that positioned the body as separate from and controlled by the mind (*ibid*.:242).

Since the 1960s, however, there has been a significant shift in terms of the role of the body in theatrical practice and process. This shift is apparent in many of the methods used in contemporary actor training, in the resurrection of popular theatre forms and in the proliferation of new forms that foreground the body in the theatrical text. The burgeoning of these forms has brought with it ways of working that reject mainstream hierarchical structures and interpretive analytical methods in favour of more visceral, improvisatory and collaborative processes. Notably, this paradigm shift has also impacted

on drama education, shaping it in profound ways that relate directly to what teachers teach and how they teach it. This shift is reflected in syllabus documents that prescribe the study of multiple, traditional and popular performance styles, and position realism as just one style among many. The value and importance of non-verbal/script-based theatre approaches is also acknowledged via the inclusion of discrete forms such as movement, mime and mask. Improvisation and self-devised work in the form of playbuilding occupy a central place in the curriculum (Board of Studies, NSW, 2003:41-45). One only has to imagine what the Higher School Certificate drama syllabus would look like if it had been written in 1950 to appreciate the extent to which the new wave movement has shaped secondary drama curriculum throughout Australia.

The paradigm shift from cognitive to embodied is not a discreet historical phenomenon but an ongoing tension between two profoundly different world-views that continue to vie for prominence (O'Toole, 2006:29). While critiques of Cartesian dualism have become commonplace in contemporary theory, the mind/body dichotomy continues to exert a pervasive influence on Western thought and activity (Bowman, 2004:33). Notably, the vestigial impact of Cartesianism also continues to be reflected in the theory and practice of secondary drama. Many popular drama teaching texts can be seen to exemplify this residual enactment of the mind/body dichotomy, and this would suggest that the paradigm is also embedded in the classroom practice of many drama teachers. This situation is indicated in a number of ways. Firstly, there is a reliance on the 'Stanislavski system' as the principal approach to creating and performing characters, whether scripted or devised (Tourelle and McNamara, 2006:153-165; Burton, 2005:42; Clausen, 2004:74; Baines and O'Brien, 2005:134-135). This approach frequently works in a disembodied way by placing the mind and the imagination at the centre of character development. Exercises and techniques commonly ask students to invent and write a character profile and a life history. Although movement and mime are seen as an important part of acting *per se*, they are positioned separately from the imaginative and psychologically-based character work and often without any indication of how the 'mind' and the 'body' of the character might come together in an integrated way. The work of Rudolf Laban or traditional mime techniques are sometimes included but in a way that positions them as supplementary to the cognitive/psychological work involved in devising a character. It would seem, then, that 'Stanislavski' is concerned with the mind and Laban with the body — but 'never the twain shall meet'. Secondly, there is often no link made between the development of a character and the theatrical style of performance. As Zarrilli (2002:243) indicates, the 'Stanislavski system' was developed to address a particular set of acting problems at a particular time in history — directly linked to realism and to creating characters in realist scripts. A character's personal history or psychological profile may be relevant to realism but not necessarily to other theatrical genres. In Greek tragedy, the hero is a symbolic construct, representing 'the people' rather than being the kind of fully-developed character associated with the realist genre. Characters created in a clown style, such as Charlie Chaplin, do not have a personal history or a psychological make-up, nor do *commedia* characters who have only three possible 'motivations' — food, love/sex, or money. Even with realism, characters can be created non-psychologically by using movement-based techniques. What Lecoq's pedagogy offers secondary educators is a movement-based, integrated approach to teaching drama theory and practice that is thoroughly embedded in an embodied paradigm.

Moving Right Along: Jacques Lecoq's pedagogical journey

The central metaphor of Lecoq's pedagogy is 'the journey'. His approach is not a 'grab bag', ad-hoc affair but a highly structured sequence of learning that follows a specific order of progression, moving from silence through to the spoken word (Lecoq, 2000:11-13). The Lecoq course is studied over two years and the curriculum works in two parallel directions simultaneously, via studies in improvisation and movement. The first year begins with training in techniques of movement, comprising preparation of the body and voice and an analysis of movement applied to the human body and nature through an exploration of physical actions. Parallel to movement work are studies in improvisation, beginning with silent exercises investigating the 'structures of play' in contextualised and then abstracted scenarios, so that the basic motors which drive a theatrical situation can be analysed (*ibid.*:33). These are followed by studies in the neutral mask, where students experience identification with the elements (earth, air, fire, water), materials (liquids, paper, glass, silk, metal, etc), colours (eg. 'how does red move?'), insects and animals. The physical dynamics learned in this work are then transposed into a theatrical dimension, transferring these movement experiences into characterisations that are beyond realistic representations and closer to anthropomorphic depictions (*ibid.*:44). These studies are followed by *mimodynamic* approaches to poetry, painting, music and objects, with the purpose of training the actor's powers of observation and ability to express gestural subtleties (*ibid.*:52). Thus the early stages of work at the school are not focused on acting but on 'the world and its movements' — observation and imitation of life through the miming body (*ibid.*:46). The pedagogy uses 'open mime', which Lecoq sees as a fundamental human activity that is at the centre of all theatre and theatre creation (*ibid.*:21). The next phase of study involves explorations with the expressive masks. These include larval masks (commonly known as Basel masks), full-face character masks (non speaking) and utilitarian or found-object masks (eg. masks used for sport or work). Towards the end of the first year, students begin studies in the creation of characters, which all of the previous training has been leading to. Drawing on the reference points offered by the physical and imaginative work of miming movements from life, students create an array of characters that are propelled into action via improvisational exercises. The characters are explored and developed by placing them in a variety of situations, contexts and encounters with other characters.

The second year follows a different path to the first. It continues the training in techniques of movement but here they are applied to the different performance styles. The year begins with a preparatory phase that covers different gestural languages including pantomime, figurative mime and story-telling through word and image. This is followed by the study of a number of different performance styles which Lecoq describes as a *geodramatic* exploration of 'dramatic territories' (*ibid.*:97). These include melodrama, *Commedia dell'Arte*, bouffons, Greek tragedy and clown. In accordance with Lecoq's overarching philosophy, these performance styles have not been selected at random but for specific pedagogical purposes. Lecoq considers that these five dramatic territories lay down principal theatrical structures in the body of the student and offer a foundational framework from which other work can be generated (*ibid.*:97-99).

The majority of the second-year course is again taught through improvisation within the constraints of each stylistic genre, although there is some work with written texts, particularly in tragedy. A significant component of both the first and second year programs

is the *auto-cours* (self-directed study involving the creation and performance of self-devised pieces). Each week the students work on a given theme to create small theatre pieces which are presented in public performance. The theme or 'provocation' is based on the work being studied in a given period so that students have an opportunity to apply what they have learned in a creative context. At the end of the second year students present a public solo clown performance. Clown and the neutral mask sit at opposite ends of the course and, as Lecoq comments, they 'frame a student's journey through the school' (*ibid*.:153). While work on the neutral mask moves towards that which is common to all humanity, clown brings out the individual: 'I have been asking the students to observe the world and allow it to be reflected in them. With the clown, I ask them to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can and to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience' (*ibid*.:149).

Making a Move: Lecoq's pedagogy and secondary drama teaching

Lecoq's pedagogy has much to recommend it as an approach to teaching secondary drama, not least of all because it is thoroughly grounded in a paradigm of 'embodiment'. Lecoq graduates Celia Moon, Judith Pippen, and Michael Newbold have long histories as teacher in-service providers and student workshop leaders in Australian secondary schools. These graduates consider Lecoq's pedagogy to be particularly effective with high school students because it is movement-based. It offers concrete and tangible ways of creating character and devising situations through a physical framework using movement, mime and mask techniques. The primary consideration in creating and performing theatre is the movement of the body in space. What this means for teachers involved in the day-to-day practice of secondary drama is that movement is seen as central to and integrated within their teaching rather than as complementary. Judith Pippen, for example, bases all her teaching on the principle that students must understand 'the body in itself, the body in space and the body in relation'. The premise of this work is that an audience responds primarily to the shapes the actor's body is making in space rather than to their emotional states. This includes rhythms, speeds, energy shifts, changes of tension in the body and the breath. It relates to the overall movement or dynamic structure of the whole piece or play as well as to the movement of individual actors (Pippen, 1998). As Gavin Bolton has commented, the 'Art of the Actor' is in the skill of making 'subjective meanings available for an audience […] *through technique* into a form that touches an audience at its deepest level of feeling' (Bolton, 1984:121). For Lecoq, emotions and physical movement co-extend, in that the inside and the outside take parallel paths: 'Feelings, states and passions are expressed through gestures, attitudes and movements similar to those of physical actions' (Lecoq, 2000:71). Pippen notes that Lecoq's purpose in teaching mime and movement is not to create 'mime artists' but to help students become physically articulate, to teach balance, control, focus and physical organisation. Foundational work can be done on 'action mime' with the aim of achieving an 'economy of movement' — the maximum effect for the least amount of effort (*ibid*.:79). Traditional mime techniques, such as lifting and pulling or sport mimes, can be explored by breaking down each action into its component movements, but this work should always be reinserted into a dramatic sequence so that it does not become merely a technical exercise.

Mask work is a vital aspect of the movement pedagogy. It gives students tangible ways of creating characters because it uses a concrete object rather than a psychological idea. The basic techniques of the neutral mask are especially useful for giving students

tools and reference points to create characters using the movements of animals, insects, the elements, colours or materials (Callery, 2001:57). It gives students a wide range of different energies to play with and a way of accessing character through the body. This approach can be used for scripted as well as devised characters. In working with a script, students can play with various movement options that give them 'a way in' to the character. As an example, the role of Blanche from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* could be developed using the movement dynamics of silk or the element of air. As an exercise, students could explore what element, material or animal might be appropriate for creating the character of Olive in *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll.* Lecoq graduate Celia Moon has given workshops to high school teachers and students in neutral mask pedagogy, drawing directly on the exercises in identification with various phenomena to demonstrate how to create characters for devised or scripted work. She considers Lecoq's approach to be more accessible and less confronting to students than a psychological or emotional framework which can often be too abstract for school students:

> It doesn't have to be a Stanislavskian approach. Lecoq works with the idea of creating larger-than-life characters and building character from physical elements rather than, 'Can you remember what it felt like when . . .?' I've used the neutral mask work a lot to help people find character — 'What animal are you? What colour are you? What's the rhythm of the character?' I've used all those elements and people can access that quite easily once they get used to the quirky thing you want them to do because you're approaching it in a way that is quite accessible. It's not some mysterious thing that's 'out there' and once you feel it then you've got to try and re-experience it. It's a very concrete approach. You can just build a character in quite a tangible way. (Moon, 1998)

Many drama teachers would be familiar with basing characters on animals when teaching *Commedia dell'Arte* but may not have considered it as an approach for all theatre, no matter what style. In my own work with secondary schools, I have observed a short devised piece performed by a group of students depicting a realistic scene involving adolescent girls lounging around talking about boys. Although the performance style was thoroughly based in realism, the students developed their characterisations using the movement dynamics of wildcats at rest. This is indicative of the ways in which movement qualities can be exaggerated or reduced, depending on the style of performance required. Such an approach to characterisation, beginning with the neutral mask, also provides students and teachers with a common theatrical language that they can use in discussion, critique and creative work. Characters can be described as being too 'airy' or needing more 'fire' in a scene, and this gives a physical reference point that can be grounded in students' own observations and analysis of movement dynamics in the 'real world'. Basel masks are also important in providing foundational studies and a highly accessible performance style. Like mime training, these masks filter out non-essential movements and give students basic structures for performance which will inform all their other acting. The Basel masks depict characters in a broad outline, and this simplicity promotes a corresponding way of performing that discourages movements which are superfluous as well as prompting students to use their whole bodies in the depiction of character (Lecoq, 2000, 53). Being able to play the mask requires students to enter its form and shape or, as a Year 10 boy expressed it, 'to let the mask fill you up'.

Movement, improvisation, devising and stylisation are linked in a key relationship within Lecoq's pedagogy and this can have applications in the drama classroom. Improvisation is not taught as a separate skill-base but is integrated with other learning, including mask, movement, styles and student-devised work. An important aspect of Lecoq's approach to improvisation is the necessary tension between 'freedom' and 'constraint'. This is an idea that is advocated among drama education specialists such as Heathcote and Bolton:

> The students are empowered not by giving them a spurious 'freedom', but by encouraging them to accept constraints within which they will work to encounter challenges and take decisions from a position of increasing authority and knowledge (O'Neill, 1995:ix).

Lecoq graduates have indicated the importance of setting up strict parameters or constraints in their own work as educators. 'Constraints' can take many forms such as a stylistic constraint, a dramatic form or convention, limitations placed on the use of space or time and any other type of constraint or imposition. Rather than hampering the processes of teaching or devising, these 'limitations' actually help students to achieve the objectives of exercises in playbuilding or improvisation. Imposing strict parameters can provide students with a necessary structure or scaffolding that facilitates the creative process:

> If you say to actors or even to young students who are not trained actors, 'Look, I want you to create a piece where you can say a poem, you can sing a song. I want you to have a change of levels and you're only allowed to do it in a space of three foot by three foot', you'd be amazed at what they come up with. We need those parameters because they give us the freedom to go and do the work. And it's the same thing with style. If all the actors know what style they're working in then the piece can be created very easily and quickly. And whether it's clown, whether it's melodrama, whether it's *commedia*, even if you use the Greek chorus, then that is a form that you're setting up. You're setting up your parameters and then you can create from there (Hodgson, 1998).

In the same way that children's games follow strict guidelines, constraints serve as rules which not only provide a framework to spark the imagination but can encourage playfulness and spontaneity in student improvisations. The notion of 'play' is strong in Lecoq's conception of acting and has many connotations including child's play and game playing, but it is often considered by graduates to be synonymous with '*le jeu*'. Lecoq defines 'play' as '. . . when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators using rhythm, tempo, space, form' (Lecoq, 2000:167). Many graduates can provide a less technical definition, however. As Isabelle Anderson (1999) notes, 'Lecoq was always on about "*le plaisir de jouer* — the joy of playing"'. For Lecoq, good theatre can only happen when there is an element of 'play'; without it, the performance has no 'life'. While an element of 'play' can be present in the writing of scripted work or devised pieces, it is also important in relation to how the actors engage with each other on stage and how they work with the audience. As graduate Heather Robb explains:

> Improvisation often involves two actors, so you can imagine *le jeu* being like a ball that you pass to each other and when it's your turn being fully aware that it's your turn and finding the pleasure of that moment. I mean that's what it's about if you want to be an actor — this incredible pleasure of it being your turn and have everyone look

> at you — it's your moment. But then having the generosity to know when your moment is finished and giving the ball to somebody else. There is a complicity that is created between two people where you're working together and you might be improvising a terrible argument together but underneath is this tremendous pleasure, generosity and complicity between the two actors (Robb, 1998).

Isabelle Anderson has described *le jeu* in a similar way, as being the energy that plays between people so that a scene is what happens in the space between the actors rather than in the actors themselves, like a ball suspended in the air. When actors understand this, she says, they learn to work with their acting partner and depend on them in the same way as a trapeze artist depends on the catcher (Anderson, 1999). There is a strong spirit of ensemble playing here, of listening and responsiveness, of sharing the stage with your fellow actors and finding what 'the game' is in the scene together.

The idea of constraints has important implications in terms of the way drama teachers approach improvisational work. With Lecoq's pedagogy, the characters are developed first through improvisation and then placed in a variety of contexts or situations within specifically related improvisational tasks. For example, students are asked to create a dramatic character who has been inspired by a real person they have observed in the street. All the students come to school in role as their character. They then work with a number of exploratory improvisations designed to help them develop and inhabit the roles they have created. Notably, Lecoq does this through the body by interrogating the characters physically and concentrating on how the characters are reflected in their bodies — what they do and how they behave rather than how they feel. For example, the group of characters is interrogated with questions such as, 'Who likes to be looked at?' 'Don't know where they're going?' 'Go to museums?' 'Go to football matches?', and so on. The characters are then investigated further through improvisations where they are placed in 'accidental situations', in contexts where strangers gather who would not normally speak to each other. Lecoq provides themes such as 'The Stalled Lift' or 'The Derailed Train' (Lecoq, 2000:61-64). Mask improvisations operate in a similar way in that the initial activities focus on creating the character implied by the form of the mask and then proceed to develop or explore the character by placing them in improvisatory situations in which they can 'play'. Such approaches differ significantly to many that are commonly found in secondary drama teaching texts, where improvisations are not always integrated with character development.

Style is another important framework for improvisation. Lecoq's pedagogy makes it clear that each style has its own particular reference points in terms of how it deviates from the neutral or the economical. This relates to movement dynamics such as rhythm, pace, energy and the physical tension in the body, but also to the driving forces of the style or what Lecoq calls the 'motors of play' and the different aspects of human nature that each stylistic territory explores (Lecoq, 2000: 98). This means that character can be intimately linked to style in a pedagogically useful way. From Lecoq's perspective, each style, in its original expression, is culturally and historically situated and demands a different approach to characterisation. Considering character in relation to style once again offers productive constraints and scaffolding that can facilitate students in the development of characters in improvisational activities. The point is that learning to create and perform characters within a particular style provides important reference points for students in other work, whether scripted or devised, especially because this approach works on

physically entering the spirit of the style. Students then have a rich palate of possibilities available to them when devising their own work and can blend and adapt styles to suit their purposes or invent new styles of their own. An example can be seen in a Theatre-in-Education piece called *Sucked in Bad* that was developed by graduate Michael Newbold for the Asthma Foundation. Newbold devised and directed the piece, basing the characters and narrative structure on a combination of *commedia* and clown styles, but without using masks or red noses. The result was a traditional clown duo with a 'smart' clown who had their asthma under control and a bumbling 'stupid' clown who was hopeless at dealing with their asthma (Newbold, 1999). These characterisations were depicted physically with the smart clown's posture being still, upright and controlled, whereas the stupid clown was depicted as uncertain, physically leaning, teetering and wandering. The overall structure of the piece used improvised scenarios and involved heightened physical and emotional states with the performance level reaching that of the *commedia dell'arte*. Each scene built to fever pitch with a physical and verbal crescendo (Newbold, 1998). This provides an example of how a study of various styles can serve student-actors in the creation of original work. Rather than being something that is separate from theatre creation, the study of styles can be seen as integral, offering a rich source for scripted or devised performance.

Conclusion

Jacques Lecoq has been called 'one of the finest teachers of acting in our time' (Esslin, 1999). While his pedagogy has been popularly identified as an approach to actor training, his teaching also has important applications and implications for classroom drama. In this article, I have argued that Lecoq's pedagogy offers a viable and valuable alternative to secondary drama education approaches that are commonly employed and based on the more extensively known 'Stanislavski system'. This 'method' and the concomitant performance style of Psychological Realism are embedded in the Cartesian paradigm, enacting a body/mind dichotomy. Lecoq's pedagogy enacts a paradigm of 'embodiment,' not only because it is movement-based but because it is profoundly situated in an integrated practice of body-mind, nature and culture.

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