



# Theatre of Movement and Gesture

**JACQUES LECOQ**

edited by David Bradby

# theatre of **movement and gesture**

Jacques Lecoq was probably the most influential theorist and teacher of what is now known as physical theatre. *Theatre of Movement and Gesture*, published in France in 1987, is the book in which Lecoq first set out his philosophy of human movement, and the way it takes expressive form in a wide range of different performance traditions. Lecoq traces the history of pantomime, sets out his definition of the components of the art of mime, and discusses the explosion of physical theatre in the second half of the twentieth century.

This unique volume also contains:

- interviews with major theatre practitioners Ariane Mnouchkine and Jean-Louis Barrault
- chapters by Jean Perret on Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau
- a final section by Alain Gauthé celebrating the many physical theatre practitioners working in the 1980s
- a wealth of illustrations, including previously unpublished photographs from the Jacques Lecoq collection.

Lecoq's poetic, incisive writings form the backbone of this extraordinary text. The pieces gathered here represent a precious testimony to his special vision of the art of acting and of its close relationship with the history of mime and of masked performance.

**Jacques Lecoq** founded l'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in 1956, developing teaching methods that have inspired numerous practitioners of physical theatre, in which gesture is at the basis of the performance.

**David Bradby** is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London. He was the translator of Jacques Lecoq's *The Moving Body* (Methuen, 2000).



*Figure 1* Jacques Lecoq. Richard Lecoq.

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Jacques Lecoq  
edited by david bradby

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## translators' preface

By publishing *Le Théâtre du Geste* in 1987 Lecoq broke for the first time with his usual insistence that ideas about acting could only be developed through practice. The book was an edited collection, including essays by a number of different hands, but Lecoq's work formed the backbone (his written contributions amount to more than a third of the text) and his editorship was visible in the eclecticism of the volume, ranging from the history of acting to the mimetic behaviour of animals, from silent cinema to Japanese Kabuki. Always keenly alive to the visual appeal of the actor, Lecoq chose images that went beyond mere illustration of the text, extending his argument into visual dimensions.

The material included here is translated for the first time into English. The choice was made to restrict the English publication to the contributions of Lecoq himself, together with those contextual essays that most centrally explain his place in the history of mime and of acting in Europe, as well as the legacy of his work over the twenty years since this book first appeared. Since he wrote only one other book (*Le Corps poétique*, published in 1997, and translated as *The Moving Body*), the writings gathered here represent a precious testimony to his special vision of the art of acting and of its close relationship with the history of mime and of masked performance. His approach in this book is more impressionistic, more centred on the genealogy and aesthetics of his art, less concerned to set out a systematic pedagogy than in the later *Moving Body*.

Lecoq was always acutely conscious of the limitations of language: in his writing one can sense the impatience of a man who had a marvellous physical expressivity at his command, and who feels constrained by the limitations of print. His style is elliptical, poetic, and occasionally difficult to follow, but not because of indulgence in technical jargon: his hallmark is the flash of imaginative insight. He enjoys raising a wealth of interesting ideas, and rather than exhausting any one of them, he leaves it to his readers to pursue them at will. His use of French is always creative, sometimes unorthodox, and he enjoys neologisms, such as 'le virtuosisme' (which we have translated by the equally neologistic *virtuosoism*). Where he uses terms to which he attributes a particular meaning within

his philosophy of acting, we have tried to preserve the same English translations as occur in *The Moving Body* (e.g. we have translated *le fonds poétique commun* as 'the universal poetic sense'; *le bide* as 'the flop'; *les bouffons* as 'the bouffons', etc.). A full glossary of the phrases to which Lecoq attaches a special significance can be found in *The Moving Body*.

The process of changing Jacques Lecoq's original French work into this English version would not have been possible without the support of Fay Lecoq. We are grateful for her help and encouragement.

David Bradby  
on behalf of the translators:  
Joel Anderson  
Luke Kernaghan  
Dick McCaw  
David Bradby

## editor's introduction

This actor's centrality to creative theatre is the subject of this book. First published as *Le Théâtre du geste*, in Paris in 1987, it came at a significant point in the development of modern theatre. Nineteen sixty-eight had seen a great upsurge of collaborative theatre productions in which actors took centre stage while authors and directors were marginalised. It did not take long for the directors to regain control and the 1970s was the decade in which Patrice Chéreau, Roger Planchon, Antoine Vitez, Peter Stein, Robert Wilson, along with many others, became the new international 'star' names. Then in the 1980s there was a swing away from 'directors' theatre' and a general recognition that, without the actor, a director is helpless. This was the decade when many of the most successful companies associated with theatre of movement and gesture were founded: La Compagnie Jérôme Deschamps – Macha Makeieff; Theatre de Complicité; Moving Picture Mime Show.

As performers and audiences began to take more interest in the creativity of the actor, the need was felt to explore different training methods and their genealogies. The Stanislavski system seemed unhelpful for actors who were creating their own material rather than starting from a playwright's text, and so practitioners looked to teachers like Jacques Lecoq for new inspiration. What they discovered was a tradition of mime and of physical expression that drew on a rich heritage going back through the various styles of pantomime to the commedia dell'arte and the Roman *mimus*. Lecoq's training methods, developed over the previous thirty years, were unusual in that they encouraged the actor to discover his own style rather than imposing one upon him. So Lecoq was the ideal person to put together this book, charting a wide range of physical theatre styles and practitioners, seeking to trace a particular tradition of actor training and to explore its relationship with pure mime.

Theoretical developments in theatre scholarship were favourable to this enterprise: a group of leading theorists, including Bernard Dort and Denis Bablet had set up a new journal in 1970 entitled *Travail Théâtral* (*Theatre Work*). Their emphasis was on process rather than product, on the need to understand creative method as much as to assess the outcome.

They began to redefine the notion of a 'text' in the theatre, showing that the old binary opposition between the writer's text and actor's performance was untenable, and that the performer also generated a 'text', which, properly understood, was extraordinarily rich, combining words, action, movement, gesture, dance, music, etc.

Because of this new approach, theatre scholars and critics were able to appreciate, for the first time, the originality of Lecoq's approach to theatre of movement and gesture. In his practice and his pedagogy, he refuses to allow an academic distinction to be made between text and performance, insisting that the actor 'writes with his body' in space, just as the author writes with black lines on white paper. As he explains in the extended interview with Jean Perret (pp. 94–124), he began as an athlete and sportsman, not as an actor, and so his first interest was always in the capacities of the human physique and in the way that every action, every movement that we make, carries meaning, whether we intend it or not.

Lecoq's introduction to the book is an essay on the universal practice of imitation. He points out that it is through mimicking movements that children learn about the world around them, and this copying of gestures and movements seen in others continues into adulthood. Lecoq goes on to ask the question: 'are gestures universal?' He points out how many everyday gestures are conditioned by time, place, class and fashion, but he also raises the question of whether there are some aspects of physical expression which might be said to be shared by all humanity. He always wanted to reach down, beneath the idea, beneath the word, to find the physical impulse which, he believed, could be shown to underlie all thinking, all emotion, all expression.

Lecoq believed that all human beings share a 'universal poetic sense' (my translation of *fonds poétique commun*, though the word *fonds* conveys something more real and concrete than a 'sense'). He believed that the ability to respond creatively, or poetically, depended on the laying down of a series of sediments through the universally shared experiences of being born, nurtured, developing movement and speech, and discovering a world of movement, objects, sounds, colours and other human beings outside ourselves. For an actor to enter into the necessary state of creative openness, he had to be able to relate afresh to these basic discoveries.

His approach was not that of a philosopher or anthropologist, however: he did not establish a set of theories which could be explored in discursive form. The exploration of the laws of movement was always practical and could only be experienced in and through the body. But neither was it divorced from the realm of the emotions: on the basis of

physical experimentation, he was always searching for ways of introducing the imaginative and poetic dimensions. These two aspects, the physical and the poetic, were set side by side in the original title of his second book, published in 1997: *Le Corps poétique* (translated as *The Moving Body*).

As soon as Lecoq's interests began to develop from sport towards theatre, he discovered the French tradition of radical experiment, going back to the early years of the twentieth century. In the performers he met, men such as Claude Martin and Jean Dasté, who had worked with Charles Dullin and with Jacques Copeau, he discovered an emphasis on the body, on acrobatics, on mask work, and on a playful approach to performance. In the early 1900s, at a time when great theatre was still equated with great literature, and Parisian stages offered little alternative between respectful productions of the classics and frivolous farce, the reforms of Copeau and his colleagues had brought a welcome emphasis on the creative possibilities of the actor.

However, the tradition of mime, too, had congealed into a rigid classicism. Lecoq was at pains to point out that his understanding of mime related to the whole of art of the actor, and was not to be constrained within the limits of purist 'classical' mime as embodied in the practice of the two most famous mime artists of the twentieth century: Étienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau. At the same time, Lecoq acknowledged the importance of the contributions of these two great mimes, which is why there are sections devoted to them in the book. But he shared with Jean-Louis Barrault the belief that the art of mime should not be seen as an end in itself; instead it should be made to serve the larger project of revitalising the art of the actor. Like Barrault, he saw the study of mime as part of the development of a complex performance idiom, rich enough to bear comparison with the literary tradition of written plays.

Among the people he influenced in this belief, one of the most celebrated is Ariane Mnouchkine, founder of the Théâtre du Soleil in 1964 and its director ever since. Following the upheavals of 1968, the Soleil began by researching traditional clowns (the result was a show entitled simply *Les Clowns* in 1969) and then went on to develop the working method known as *la création collective* which was responsible for the three great political shows of the early 1970s: *1789*, *1793* and *L'Age d'or*. This method involved the techniques, learned from Lecoq, of movement-based improvisation, mask work and the strategic developing and unravelling of dramatic situations. Ariane Mnouchkine has often stated that this method of work remains exactly the same, even when she is

directing a classic text by Shakespeare or Molière. Mnouchkine makes frequent use of masks in rehearsal, even when the final production does not involve masked performances. She also adopts Lecoq's approach to character, avoiding psychological work derived from Stanislavski, and insisting rather on the physical realities of each situation, in which her actors have to 'write with the body'. In the interview with Jean Perret in this book, she speaks of how her actors were able to develop a whole language of gesture and she evokes the need for actor-training to 'free up the physical imagination of the actor'.

The achievement of Lecoq's training method was to do just that: rather than putting actors through prescribed routines, he aimed to help them develop their own special idiom of physical expressivity through opening up their 'physical imaginations'. The wide range of topics dealt with in this book is evidence of his constant challenge to his students: to look outside the studio, to observe and experience life in all its richness, and to develop a creative, inventive approach to everything they did. He considered the study of movement to be fundamental to a thorough understanding of every aspect of life, and by extension to all the arts. He was convinced that his training was as appropriate for writers, painters and architects as it was for actors: for twenty years he offered courses in the physical exploration of space to trainee architects at the Paris École des Beaux Arts.

Although the training pioneered at the Lecoq school initially begins in silent improvisation and 'neutral' mask work, it quickly moves on to integrate speech. The students work with a variety of different kinds of text, and the purpose of such work is to get behind verbal means of expression to the underlying creative urge which finds expression through an artist's creations, in whatever medium. He was proud that, as well as many fine actors such as Geoffrey Rush and Sergi López, he had also trained people who went on to become writers (such as Eduardo Manet, Michel Azama, Yasmina Réza), directors (such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Luc Bondy, Albert Boadella and James Macdonald) and all-round creative theatre artists (such as Dario Fo, Steven Berkoff, Philippe Avron, Joan Font, José Luis Gómez, Simon McBurney, Christoph Marthaler and Paddy Hayter). In 1987, when *Le Théâtre du geste* first appeared, many of these were just beginning their careers and the final section of the book, entitled 'An actor's view of a theatre of movement', was an attempt by Alain Gautré to catalogue all of the different actors and companies working in this spirit at the time. Gautré's essay forms a precious record of performers, many of whom were street artists and so were never listed in published records, and some of whom have since disappeared.

As Simon McBurney wrote in his preface to *The Moving Body*, Lecoq 'was a man of vision'; in *The Theatre of Movement and Gesture*, he set out that vision for the first time in the form of a book. As always, his method was collaborative, and paid homage to other artists working in the same field. And as always, it was highly visual: by juxtaposing text and image, he was able to extend the points made in the different essays and interviews, demonstrating what McBurney calls his 'ability to see well'. This visionary quality emerges from every page of this book, filled with original insights that remain as relevant today as when they were first published.

David Bradby

# imitation

from mimicry to miming

*jacques lecoq*

Lecoq places the art of mime in an anthropological perspective, insisting that to imitate is the most universal response of all, since it is the means by which the child learns to understand the world. The reflections on the art of mime and of acting that follow are all grounded in this belief that physical re-enactment is essential to human development, arising from what Lecoq calls 'the crucible of the imagination'.

Children gain their understanding of the world around them by miming it: they mimic what they see and what they hear. They replay with their whole body those aspects of life in which they will be called on to participate. In this way they learn about life and, little by little, take possession of it.

Town squares are the privileged sites in which a secret alchemy reveals itself in the crucible of the imagination. Children play at life in order to prepare themselves for it, after many a shoot-out between cops and robbers, castles built in the sand and stampedes on horseback. Children's mimicry is a game: they imitate out of pleasure, partly believing themselves to be the object imitated but, like the actor, knowing that it is not altogether true. Children imitate for themselves, actors for an audience whom they will persuade of the truth of his character; but the audience, too, knows that it is not entirely true.

As a phenomenon, imitation may be purely voluntary – a deliberate decision to make others believe one is what one is not for one's own advantage.

To deceive an enemy, especially in hunting or in battle, the camouflage of the soldier typically employs foliage: if the forest masks the enemy let us become the forest. And thus history has filled our imaginations with forests on the march, which theatre has then brought to life. Decoy bird-calls allow us to mimic the cry or the song of birds in order to draw them within the range of the hunters.

Make believe, deception, creating an illusion, these all belong to the mimicry of the cheat. But he must be skilful. I knew an army doctor who



*Figure 2* Alberto Giacometti, Paris, Galerie Maeght, 1961. Henri Cartier-Bresson.

had a way of detecting people who pretended to be lame to avoid being drafted into the forces: he made them walk backwards. They were at a loss how to do it.

Imitation may bring into play characters who are ‘doubles’: a double, chosen for his resemblance to the original, and who practises imitating his behaviour in an attempt to identify himself with him, may be able to deceive the enemy. For example, during the 1939–45 war, General Dwight David Eisenhower was seen in places where he had never been.

Imitation is not necessarily a deliberate act: people who live together come to imitate one another without realising it. This can be quite remarkable between long-married couples. Look at how, bit by bit, they have begun to resemble one another, have exchanged gestures, voices, thoughts. Mutual sympathy, love, the habit of being together, of sharing the same ideal, can lead to a resemblance even between people who were quite different to start with.