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THE DECROUX SOURCEBOOK

Edited by Thomas Leabhart and Franc Chamberlain

The Decroux Sourcebook

The Decroux Sourcebook is the first point of reference for any student of the 'hidden master' of twentieth-century theatre.

This book collates a wealth of key material on Etienne Decroux, including:

- An English translation of Patrick Pezin's 'Imaginary Interview', in which Decroux discusses mime's place in the theatre.
- Previously unpublished articles by Decroux from France's Bibliothèque Nationale.
- Essays from Decroux's fellow innovators Eugenio Barba and Edward Gordon Craig, explaining the synthesis of theory and practice in his work.

Etienne Decroux's pioneering work in physical theatre is here richly illustrated not only by a library of source material, but also with a gallery of images following his life, work and influences.

The Decroux Sourcebook is an ideal companion to Thomas Leabhart's *Etienne Decroux* in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series, offering key primary and secondary resources to those conducting research at all levels.

Thomas Leabhart is an actor, director, writer and teacher who worked and studied with Etienne Decroux and performed under his direction. He is editor of the *Mime Journal*, and has published numerous articles on mime and theatre, as well as two books: *Modern and Post-Modern Mime* (Macmillan, 1989) and *Etienne Decroux* (Routledge, 2007).

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To Maximilien Decroux, and to the memory of Etienne and Suzanne Decroux.

To Lucy, Julian and Sophie: words are not enough.

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Part one

Part one

Introduction

Editors' introduction

This book documents the non-verbal, codified theatre tradition of Corporeal Mime passed from teacher to student in a way almost unknown in the West, but common in many Asian countries. Whereas the West's classical dance has a history of nearly four centuries, Corporeal Mime was created in the twentieth century. Etienne Decroux (1898–1991), the founder and creator of this living tradition, taught for six decades. Many of his students still practise and teach his work which subverts the prevailing paradigm: text-based theatre.[1]

Decroux himself (although a brilliant speaker and lapidary prose craftsman) encouraged among his students a healthy scepticism towards speaking or writing about things one could not do. He believed that until the word was made flesh, it was only so much hot air. He disdained intellectuals and others who were 'sitting down', in contrast to the Corporeal Mime who preferred to stand. He might have cautioned us against putting things into words lest people believe that the words alone could lead to understanding. And he would have defended his discoveries against people writing about them who had no practical knowledge of his intentions.

Yet despite the militantly non-verbal aspects of Decroux's work, these words by and about him form an essential part of his legacy. 'The Imaginary Interview', compiled by Patrick Pezin (pp. 61–160), organizes a collage of tape-recorded interviews and lectures, given by Decroux over a twenty-year period, around major themes: mime and dance, mime and puppets, mime and mask, etc. This material, made available here in English, was published in French in 2003 in a collection edited by Pezin. We also include previously unpublished articles by Decroux, archived in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. These articles reveal more of Decroux's wit, his unfailing conviction and his intellectual rigour.

In addition to these new words by Decroux, we include two important essays about him, one by Edward Gordon Craig, the other by Eugenio Barba. Craig and Barba both knew Decroux (thirty years apart), and although not his students, they were deeply impressed by his new/old approach to theatre. When others who had not worked with him tried to write about Decroux, they often got it wrong. Never having done the physical work, they could not grasp his metaphysical, political or moral stance. Reducing him to yet one more twentieth-century intellectual ignores his monumental contribution as a theatre practitioner and innovator of a new theatrical vocabulary. Both Craig and Barba, themselves considerable innovators, intuited that Decroux's mostly non-verbal work was not primarily theoretical but instead an inseparable blend of theory *and* practice. Decroux's world view, strangely inaccessible to scholars who have never put their bodies into his shapes, requires a kind of kinaesthetic literacy which often runs counter to and even contradicts scholarly literacy, at least as we know it in most Western universities. Craig and Barba, however, made the intuitive leap.

History and future of Corporeal Mime

Etienne Decroux, born of working-class parents, became interested in politics, and, at age twenty-five, took a year off from his work as a manual labourer to study voice and diction as a

way of furthering his political aspirations. He happened upon a class at Jacques Copeau's Ecole du Vieux-Colombier, where he quickly became enamoured with body work taught there: masked improvisation, Noh theatre, ballet, acrobatics and so on. His new political party became the theatre, more precisely his own developing vision of an artistic (artificial and articulated) theatre with a newly conceived actor at its centre; Decroux took Copeau's purism (bare stage) a step further (a nearly nude actor on a bare stage) and Corporeal Mime developed in that rarefied environment. Decroux reimagined the human body in an abstracted and systematic way without precedent, starting with what ballet had devised for legs and feet, and adding on rich possibilities obtained by articulating, in three dimensions, the trunk. As twentieth-century scientists sought the smallest particles of matter – cells and atoms – Decroux found the smallest articulations of the human keyboard. While the aesthetics might owe something to the ancient Noh, the mechanics were cubistically cutting edge.

While most people associate mime and pantomime (terms used sometimes today interchangeably, and throughout history variably) with silent storytelling, much of what one called mime or pantomime in the ancient world and for hundreds of years afterwards was seldom silent; often a chorus accompanied, or the mime performer himself spoke or sang. During brief periods (usually due to governmental restriction, as during the time of Louis XIV, or in nineteenth-century France) mime was exclusively silent; yet these gave rise to the misconception, still commonly held, that mime is silent storytelling. Decroux reacted strongly to these notions as he created a new form, Corporeal Mime, which de-emphasized face and hands and focused on the actor's trunk. His new mime marked a break from nineteenth-century pantomime, in whose silenced theatres the exercise became: what can I say without words? Decroux, who detested this kind of guessing game, often said, 'If you have something to say, why not just come out and say it?' He never imagined his ideal theatre should remain silent forever, but simply until the actor took control from directors, playwrights and other 'colonizers' of the theatre (Decroux 1985, 23–7).

Figure 1 The French pantomime Séverin (1863–1930) represents the kind of silent performance Decroux saw as a child, and about which he wrote:

> About the same time [1909, when Decroux was eleven], I saw a Pierrot who told his audience, without words, the tale of his love, his misfortune, his crime and his punishment.
> The speaking actor is less garrulous.
> This displeased me. (Decroux 1985, 14)

A contemporary article describes Séverin's performance, as Pierrot, in a four-act pantomime entitled 'Conscience': 'Throughout the entire performance not a word is spoken, music alone being relied upon to help reveal the pantomimist's emotions' (*New York Times*, 22 December 1908).

Decroux reversed this paradigm. He exchanged the completely covered body for an almost nude one; the emphasis on expressive face and hands replaced by inexpressive face and hands which neither promised nor threatened; the emphasis on plot for an almost plot-less performance, where causality could replace story line; and dim footlights exchanged for bright light from above.

If mime performers may speak, one might ask, how do they differ from ordinary actors? Again, painting with a broad brush, mimes have historically created their own verbal and

non-verbal texts, and not been subject to directors or playwrights. Decroux often said that plays should be performed first and written later, giving most power to actors, shifting it from a sedentary individual (the playwright) and giving it instead to an active group (the actors).

When thinking about the history of Corporeal Mime, we are considering something less than a century old, as Decroux laid most of the groundwork in the 1930s and continued developing it through the 1980s. With hindsight, Corporeal Mime may turn out to be (on one end of the spectrum) a figment of that one man's maniacal imagination, or (on the other end) the beginning of a new theatre form – or something in between. Only time will tell if Decroux fills the role of a twentieth-century Zeami, as Kathryn Wylie-Marques suggests:

> Like Zeami, Decroux was intent on creating a mime based on elegance, inner beauty, and truth; for him, this meant fidelity to the laws of kinetic geometry applied to the moving body.
>
> (Wylie-Marques 1998, 115)

Decroux, obsessed with Corporeal Mime's uncertain future, often wondered aloud in his now-legendary Friday evening lectures if it would survive in the way he hoped. He knew that anything 'new' ran the risk of becoming assimilated by the prevailing paradigms. Perhaps that's why he went to such pains to distinguish Corporeal Mime from nineteenth-century pantomime, from dance, from speaking theatre and from cinema.

Inspired by his studies with Copeau, Suzanne Bing and others at the Vieux-Colombier, and by a collaboration with Jean-Louis Barrault, Decroux reimagined the human body in a musically analytical way, breaking it down into a keyboard that could, he hoped, play any melody the actor imagined. Through a distaste for silent pantomime, he developed a project much more aligned with that of his contemporary, Artaud, who wrote that:

> the theatre
> as I conceive it,

> [is] a theatre of blood,
> a theatre which, with each performance will have done something
> *bodily*
> to the one who performs as well as to the one who comes to see others perform, but actually
> the actors are not performing,
> they are *doing*. [second emphasis added] (Artaud 1988, 585)

In her kitchen, Madame Decroux once said something remarkably similar: 'The Corporeal Mime does not *pretend*, he *does*.' (The word in French for 'pretend' is *faire semblant*, which makes the citation more pungent: 'Le mime ne fait pas semblant, il fait.') Decroux's project recognized that creating illusions limited both actor and audience in a trite world of predictable vignettes. Like Grotowski, Decroux wanted to touch the audience deeply rather than simply entertain them. This reminds one of Grotowski's description (in a lecture at Eugenio Barba's International School of Theatre Anthropology in Copenhagen in 1995) of the principle of induction, whereby an electrical wire, attached to an energy source, runs parallel to another unattached wire in which one can detect a lesser energy; in the same way a receptive (Grotowski's word was 'unblocked') audience can absorb a measure of energy from actors who are charged through their technique and rehearsal process. (The relevant *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of induction: 'The action of inducting or bringing about an electric or magnetic state in a body by the proximity [without actual contact] of an electrified or magnetized body.')

So the emphasis shifts from 'what' (what is the performer doing?) to 'how' (is the performer, in Artaud's words, doing something bodily which changes – electrifies or magnetizes – himself and those who witness it?). Artaud would have called nineteenth-century white-faced pantomime 'corrupted' pantomime as the gestures represent words. He preferred 'pantomime which has not been corrupted':

> By 'pantomime which has not been corrupted' I mean direct Pantomime in which the gestures – instead of representing words or sentences as in our European pantomime, which is only fifty years old and which is merely a distortion of the silent parts of Italian commedia – represent ideas, mental attitudes, aspects of natural objects or details. . . . [. . .]
>
> This language, which evokes in the mind images of an intense natural (or spiritual) poetry, gives an idea of what it might mean for the theatre to have a poetry of space independent of spoken language.
>
> (Artaud 1988, 233)

Decroux would call Artaud's 'poetry of space' Corporeal Mime, which bore more resemblance to cubism, surrealism, collage and abstract expressionism than to charmingly decorative nineteenth-century pantomime.

Decroux's project prefigures by decades the phenomenon described by Hans-Thies Lehmann as postdramatic theatre:

> The physical body, whose gestic vocabulary in the eighteenth century could still be read and interpreted virtually like a text, in postdramatic theatre has become its own reality which does not 'tell' this or that emotion but through its presence *manifests* itself as the site of inscription of collective history.
>
> (Lehmann 2006, 97)

We ought not to be surprised that Artaud's writings contain implicit or even explicit references to Decroux, as they knew each other well enough and Decroux spoke of their relationship (see 'The Imaginary Interview', pp. 95–6). In addition they each mentored Jean-Louis Barrault, and all three had different degrees of connection with the work of Jacques Copeau who had sought a Commedia 'using contemporary types and subjects' (Rudlin and Paul 1990, 153). Though one may argue convincingly that the seeds of Corporeal Mime come directly from Copeau's Ecole du Vieux-Colombier, one may also find several other lesser influences, not least of all

Decroux's working-class background as a manual labourer and a militant socialist.

Copeau's (and subsequently Decroux's) interest in the Commedia dell'arte was shared with others searching for a new theatre such as the Russians, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold and Vakhtangov, but also the peripatetic and hugely influential Englishman Edward Gordon Craig, whom Copeau visited in Italy at the start of World War I, and whom Decroux recognizes in *Words on Mime* as a primary inspiration for Corporeal Mime.

In 'The First Dialogue' (1905), Craig's Stage Director claims: 'The Art of the Theatre has sprung from action – movement – dance' (Craig 2009, 73). While Craig looked to the past or to other cultures for theatres he admired, in tune with the spirit of the times, he wasn't interested in re-creating what was lost, but in finding new forms. As Isadora Duncan wrote of the connection of her work to ancient Greek dance: 'I do not mean to say *copy* it, *imitate* it; but to *breathe its life, to recreate it in one's self with personal inspiration*' (Preston 2005, 275). Likewise, Copeau's innovative bare stage owes an enormous debt to what he called the Golden Ages of theatre, which had similar bare stages: the ancient Greeks, the Noh, the Commedia dell'arte and the Elizabethan theatre, as well as the modern circus ring. And Decroux's Corporeal Mime body, with all its modernist and purist aspects, often resembles the ancient statuary we can see in museums like the Getty Villa in Malibu, representing veiled dancers and mimes of antiquity.

We should include the dance of Laban, Wigman, Shawn and St Denis, Graham, Humphrey and Isadora Duncan with this list of those looking to develop a new art of movement, but these were all easily assimilated under the dance umbrella and, although Corporeal Mime might take temporary shelter there, as it differed in its basic DNA (a dramatic rather than lyric art) it never really belonged there. Decroux considered that Corporeal Mime's rooted, Promethean lower centre of gravity and imitation of work movements clearly distinguished it from dance. (True, Laban, Graham and others advocated a lower centre of gravity, but Decroux did so explicitly because work movements – counterweights – required it. These work

movements give Corporeal Mime a preponderance of 'bound flow' and gravitas, more common in drama and less so in dance, which even in its heaviest manifestations is more air-borne than Corporeal Mime.) Nor did it belong with spoken theatre, which seems almost permanently wedded to the playwright. While Artaud might have wanted the theatre to be free from the playwright in order to speak its own language, its own 'poetry of space', he is in some ways less of a kindred spirit to Decroux than Craig is. Artaud has remained, since his death, central to the study of theatre, his writings inspiring the avant-garde of 1960s' Europe and of America and continuing to inform both theoretical writings and performance practice.

Artaud, for all the immense influence of his ideas of the theatre as plague, never developed practices that have been passed down, while Decroux carved out Corporeal Mime, inspiring through teaching rather than polemic, a living practice passed on through the bodies of his students. And if we are to take the transmission of practices as key to the discussion, we would have to concede that Craig also failed to do that. If we are looking for a set of corporeal teachings that have been passed down, perhaps we should look to Meyerhold's biomechanics: they have attained a huge reputation since his death, but, until quite recently, with very few people who had actually studied the practice. We might argue that Meyerhold's reputation was primarily based on his directorial profile as theatre studies indeed shifted away from the playwright, but only towards the director rather than the performer.

Craig, Artaud, Copeau, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold held their places in the academy as representatives of the rise of the director. Meyerhold's biomechanics were far more likely to have been familiar through photographs in books such as Braun's *Meyerhold on Theatre* than through any engagement in actor-training or spectating. There were attempts, by the Living Theatre, for example, to use biomechanics, but they effectively galvanized photographs and descriptions from an article by Mel Gordon (1974), and galvanism only ever gave the illusion of life. In an article ten years later, Gordon wrote that he watched the Living Theatre's demonstration with