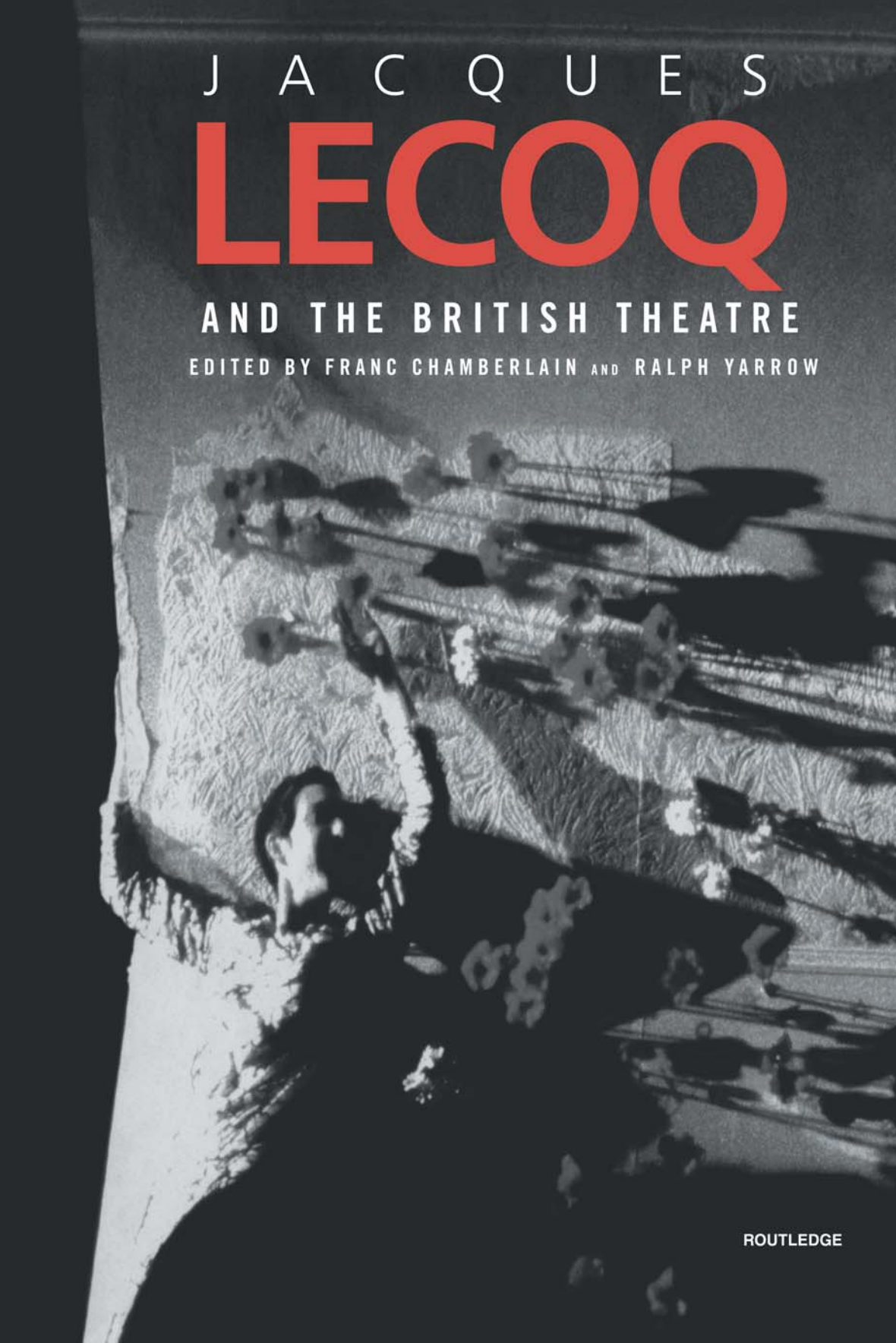
JACQUES LECOQ AND THE BRITISH THEATRE

EDITED BY FRANC CHAMBERLAIN AND RALPH YARROW



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JACQUES LECOQ AND THE BRITISH THEATRE

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Franc Chamberlain

LIST OF PLATES

PREFACE

The material for this volume was already to hand before the death of Jacques Lecoq in January 1999. I believe Lecoq never received the recognition that he deserved in the English-speaking world and this book, as the first collection of essays in English to focus on his work, aimed to rectify the situation.

Rather than attempting to sum up Lecoq's career or contribution as a completed project, the authors write of their engagement with Lecoq as a dialogue with the work of a living master whose practice was continuously shifting and changing, a process rather than a closed system.

Death, through its finality, causes us to pause and reflect on a life as a whole, it tempts us to fix a set of practices as the authentic contribution of a teacher, losing the sense of the living openness of the approach. Jacques Lecoq's work will live on through the creativity of his students and their ability to make theatre vital.

I greatly regret that this volume was not published whilst Lecoq was alive, but I am pleased to have been free from the temptation to make this the 'definitive' book on Lecoq. It is a contribution to a conversation that has barely begun . . .

Franc Chamberlain

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INTRODUCTION

Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow

This volume does not set out to review the effects of Jacques Lecoq's teaching everywhere. His school has been in operation for over forty years and companies of ex-students have flourished around the world. In focusing on the influence of his work in Britain, the essays here however inevitably bring out key features of his approach which are relevant to performers and companies everywhere; they raise questions about the relationship of his pedagogy to drama training and about the ways in which performers, companies, directors, writers/devisers and audiences who have experienced the work incorporate it into their practices and expectations and thus contribute to changing the nature of theatre.

In what follows immediately, Franc Chamberlain sets out some personal parameters to the encounter with Lecoq on the British theatre scene. This is followed by a summary of the approaches of the essays in this volume which places them in other contextual frames.

From the Bakery to the National

In the autumn of 1974 I was working a Friday-night shift at a bakery whilst studying for my A-levels. My local Little Theatre, The Loft in Leamington Spa, was hosting a weekend mime workshop with Geoffrey Buckley.[1] I remember turning up on the Saturday morning straight from work wearing a black surplus National Fire Service greatcoat, covered in acne, with my skin feeling an unpleasant mixture of grease and flour. My eyelids felt as though they had flour underneath them, which they probably did. My memory of my arrival is still quite strong because I always felt slightly out of place in the theatre and felt particularly self-conscious about my appearance having not slept since the Thursday night. I think I remember someone commenting on my commitment ...

It was during this workshop that I first heard the name Jacques Lecoq. Because Buckley focused on *pantomime blanche* during the weekend, however, Lecoq's name became equated in my mind with Marceau-type images of imaginary staircases, windows, invisible barriers and so on. Buckley's performance on the Sunday evening involved him attempting to

speak to the audience but being prevented from being heard by an imaginary glass barrier, like an invisible safety curtain. He would struggle to lift the obstacle, succeed, try to speak, and immediately discover another invisible wall. In my memory he did eventually speak to the audience – an act which immediately differentiated his work from that of Marceau.

I don't remember hearing of Lecoq's name again until eight or nine years later when I attended another weekend workshop with Buckley in the same room at the same theatre. Lecoq was a mysterious figure for me, someone with whom it was possible to study if you had the money – I didn't.

I developed a stronger interest in Lecoq's work from 1984 when, as a mature student studying for a BA in drama at the University of East Anglia, I was asked to cover the Norwich Mime Festival for the student paper *Phoenix*. Between 1984 and 1989 I covered the Festival for both *Phoenix* and *City Wise*, a local arts magazine and attended workshops and residencies with a host of Lecoq graduates including Théâtre de Complicité, Mark Saunders, I Gelati, Justin Case, John Martin, and Clive Mendus.[2] I also taped interviews with Marcello Magni and Simon McBurney of Complicité, Clive Mendus, and Footsbarn. It was during the interview with McBurney and Magni in February 1984 that I think I first heard the term physical theatre in relation to Lecoq, a term which I was to use but become uncomfortable with in the late 1980s after watching Ben Keaton's *Memoirs of an Irish Taxidermist* (if this is physical theatre, I thought, then what isn't?). I didn't attend Lecoq's master class in 1988 which is a key moment in the formation of the perception of Lecoq-based work in this country. I was, however, applying what I'd learned with a company I'd formed with Dominic Everett in 1986 (Hidden Risk which was later to include sometime Footsbarn members Barry Jones and Mafalda da Camara) in performances and workshops. My work during this period wasn't solely Lecoq based, however, and I drew on a number of other sources and teachers. Any attempt to assess the influence of Lecoq on the British theatre needs to take into account experiences like my own – people who have worked with Lecoq graduates, knowingly or unknowingly, incorporated the exercises, methods, and aesthetics into their own work and then passed them on to others. Such a pattern of influences, which has been growing since 1968 at least, eventually becomes impossible to trace with any certainty back to Lecoq. Perhaps in these cases we should no longer be talking about 'influence', maybe, as Eric Bentley suggested it is a blanket term which 'covers far too large a bed'[3]:

> When Jesus appeared in the sky and said, 'Why persecutest thou me?' Saul of Tarsus, a Christian-baiter, became the Christian saint, Paul. That's influence: impact unmistakable and total . . .