

Theatre training beyond theatre: ideas, challenges and provocations for a 21st century training paradigm

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Theatre training beyond theatre: ideas, challenges and provocations for a 21st century training paradigm.

Mark Evans (ME), Simon Murray (SM), Jonathan Pitches (JP)

Ecologies Questions

SM: Do we accept that there are no 'route maps' for C21st training regimes?

ME: Does C21st theatre training need to address different models of theatre ecology?

JP: Does the prevalence and availability of digital technologies require different models of theatre training?



Qweets¹

#ELIA2008 Peter Sellars Art should train you to look at each other and see with the eyes of equality... theatre is not about theatre, it is about everything else.

'the problem of the actor is basically a corporeal one: the actor is standing on stage'
@JacquesCopeau #backtobasics

Artistic skill is achieved when the 'what' and the 'how' come simultaneously.
@vsevmeyerhold

The most beautiful thing in art is that at each new stage you again feel yourself to be a pupil. **@vsevmeyerhold #thatslifelonglearning**

I am a scavenger. I am not an original thinker. I juxtapose ideas.
@abogart#fiftykeytheatredirectors.

Students are often contradictory. We must hear what they say without listening too much. **@jlecoq#themoving body.**

SM: Preliminaries as we start planning

- Dear Mark and Jonathan. Are you going to the Zurich gig? Bests, Simon.

¹ – A qweet is a cross between a tweet and a quote

- Dear Mark and Jonathan. That's great. Should we risk working together again or go our own separate ways? Bests, Simon. PS: I hope there will be more snow in Zurich than there was in Helsinki.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. OK. Let's try to do something together again, but, oh fuck, what? Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. Really like idea of structuring our triple interactive immersive dialogic collaborative presentation through the forms of social media – texts, emails, tweets, letters and so on. But I don't tweet. Am I a dinosaur? Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. If we go for this form of collaborative presentation we have to be reasonably certain of our rationale. I think this is rooted in the idea of the presentation being a (structured) conversation containing different registers of exchange and one that notionally draws on contemporary digital technologies and social media. Bests, Simon
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. This is getting really complicated! Blimey, genuine collaboration is hard work. Perhaps we should we revert to 3 single traditional and boring papers – and salvage the principle of the single heroic auteur? Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. Not sure what it's worth but here are some developments on my thinking since last time. I've lost sight of whether this is totally trite, banal and should never be seen by anyone beyond you two, or whether there's conceivably something here to work on. Be honest with me! Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. I think one of the qualities we need to convey about the presentation somehow concerns the 'logic' and process of collaboration – something to do with the point that the form of this presentation mirrors the actual process of collaboratively constructing the 'paper' and that – tentatively – we are trying to transmit a collaborative journey into a conference context and to propose a different way of presenting an academic paper. Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. Maybe we are really getting somewhere. I'm excited about this. Possibly we're brilliant. Bests, Simon.
- Dear Mark and Jonathan. Oh fuck. This is difficult. I'm not sure about this. Is all this pretentious shit? What the hell have we let ourselves in for? See you in Zurich. Bests, Simon.
- PS: we can always escape across the Swiss border into Germany immediately after the presentation if it's crap.

ME: 'Re: Bit of Help' Emails

Email from Niamh Dowling to Mark Evans:

Dear Mark

I train actors for three reasons

To create highly skilled, independent, creative artists

To develop a stronger self awareness and confidence in themselves as people and as members of their communities. I love the holistic aspect of actor training, body/voice/mind/emotional/spiritual/imaginative

To meet the needs and at the same time challenge the demands of a fairly conventional industry [...]

Frustrations come from the lack of understanding on part of hundreds of young auditionees who do not realize the hard work required to train as an actor and have unrealistic interest in being famous

Enough? Niamh

Email from conservatoire tutor, UK to Mark Evans

Hi Mark

Sorry for the delay [...]

Frustrations are the number of students we have to take each year – sometimes impeding tuition time and often dissipating the quality – and the diminishing amount of time and budget that we can spend on supporting their vocational aims and challenges. [...]

Have a good year.

Email from Ian Morgan to Mark Evans

Hi Mark

[...] I just keep on coming back to the idea of inspiring a daily practice out of a period of initial training.

I'm frustrated with the perception that a three yr training is somehow enough. I would like that line between training and practice blurred, so the one is seeded in the other.

why train actors?

Being a performer still and above all, I am driven to understand, experience and explore deeper, the state of embodied creative play that I was fortunate enough to experience in my twenties and thirties. A flow of doing, in which one is completely involved / committed to the exercise/task; immersed but also increasingly aware and articulate in spontaneity.

What to train though? An exploration / expansion of the body mind's impulses in relation to concrete stimuli that call forth interesting and unique responses within a multitude of aesthetic parameters.

Why train actors (2): attempts at transmitting useful and concrete strategies for the young performer. Encouraging her / him to become an independent, self nurturing yet collaborative artist who can both function in the many existing realities of contemporary performing arts contexts yet also dream of changing and challenging them.

Above all, though it must do them no harm, and, hopefully, the opposite.

More Frustrations: I am disillusioned with the lack of opportunity the young get to risk with time these days. Everything needs to have results tomorrow. And sacrifices, that weren't so acutely present when I was younger, seem more prevalent.

Hope that's useful. [...]

Best

Ian

JP: Email from Pitches to Murray and Evans

Dear both

I don't have much to put down in terms of a finalised plan for my paper, but thought it helpful at least to indicate my direction of travel. I'd like in my section to discuss a synthesis of blended learning and actor training - I'm calling it blended training - drawing on definitions and theories of blended learning and from curriculum models of performer training, principally those from 1920s and 1930s Russia.

A starting point for the blended learning element might be the definition we use at Leeds:
"Blended Learning is the considered, complementary use of face-to-face teaching, technology, online tools and resources to enhance student education"

Three questions would follow:

- What is gained and lost when studio activities are dispersed and digitally archived?
- How do digital platforms recontextualise and repurpose historical documents of training?
- In what contexts and for what purpose might a blended training be most appropriate in the future?

I'd like to use my massive open online course as one reference point whilst I am redesigning

it for a second launch on the Monday we arrive back from Zurich. But I'd also like to find ways in which bigger questions can be opened up from this material. I think I'd like to speculate forward beyond the early 21st-century as well, picking up some of the trends we are encountering at the moment: use of social media, alternative pedagogies, open access, forces of globalisation etc etc.

Look forward to catching up with you at nine tomorrow

ME: Email from Evans to Murray and Pitches

Dear both,

Re: conference presentation on actor training curriculum.

Of course one proposal would be that we do not need a curriculum at all! Systematized and institutionalized professional training is a relatively recent historical phenomenon, the dominant model before the twentieth century was the apprenticeship. Indeed several conservatoires emerged specifically to address the needs of certain professional companies. Such a system tends towards the maintenance of tradition rather than change, and yet it can also provide an in-depth training with great attention to detail. The costs of training are typically then born by the industry, a model that might become more and more prevalent in an age of austerity and the decline of government spending.

Curricula built on industry needs tend to focus on the acquisition of skills. My own predilection is towards the Lecoq School curriculum; it is distinctive because although it delivers a set of skills, it is not based on skills acquisition but on an approach to understanding the world and expressing that understanding. It is closer to an art school approach in this respect.

Best, Mark

JP: Letter to Aleksandr Gladkov, assistant to Meyerhold 1934-8

Dear Aleksandr

I wonder if you would permit me to ask a question that has been concerning me for some time. It is a question relating to the value and future use of theatre documentation – an area many would argue you are uniquely placed to address having documented in such detail the last 4 years of Vsevolod Meyerhold's life as a theatre creator. If you hadn't been there in those last years our understanding and appreciation of Meyerhold's craft would be significantly denuded; your stenographic notes of Meyerhold both in rehearsal and talking privately, published as *Meyerhold Speaks*, *Meyerhold Rehearses* in my mother tongue, English, offer us such a vital sense of Meyerhold's character in those supposedly fallow years. Let me, before anything else, thank you for that service to theatre history (and practice).

But your passion for stenographic accuracy wasn't, it seems, reflected in Meyerhold's own attitude to documentation. I love the irony of this passage from Meyerhold on February 11th 1936, so plainly recorded in your book:

When I die, they'll poke in the cupboards of my study (a sly glance at me) to find out what little secrets are there, but there will be nothing. They'll be almost empty.

Some odds and ends and scribblings. When I was younger, I used to write things down, but as I mastered my craft, I stopped. If I devise a staging and sketch it on a scrap of paper, it becomes static. Everything that I devise and forget because I didn't write it down is worthless, since what is good doesn't get forgotten. (Gladkov 1989: 77)

I guess you couldn't disagree more? And of course, when Meyerhold did die, just four years later, his theatre cupboards were anything but bare thanks to you (and to many of your colleagues from the 1920s and early 30s). And that brings me to my question. If this (now rehabilitated) Russian master considered any attempt to record practice as synonymous with its death, why are there such good records of his training? Even now in the C21st (almost a century later) we have carefully framed still images, prose descriptions, line drawings, even short movies of his training, biomechanics. Don't these, following Meyerhold's logic, constitute the 'freezing out' of his craft, the rendering static and lifeless of all that vitality you witnessed in the late 1930s?

I ask because this question, now often framed as a debate about 'liveness' (Phelan 1993, Auslander, 1999, Dixon 2007), continues to rage in the first decades of this, the 21st, century and, believe it or not, because it has an important bearing on the contemporary debate (contemporary for me, that is, not you!) around 'blended learning'.

Many thanks in any case

Jonathan Pitches



Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength. @Pegphelan93 #digital_is_death

SM: Letter from Alexandr Gladkov

Dear Comrade

Thank you for your letter. I'm deeply touched by your kind words about my book. I suggest you ask Alexei Temerin your question about documentation. He was the one who produced all those photographs.

Best

AG

ME: Letter To Jacques Copeau

Dear Jacques,

In 1913, your posters appeared around Paris announcing an appeal to the young – ‘to react against all baseness of mercantile theatre and to defend the freest and most sincere manifestation of a new dramatic art’ (Copeau, 1990: 205). In this call to arms you characterize the tension within the theatre as one between the mercantile and the artistic, between theatre as a form of industry and commerce and theatre as a sincere and transformational art. The battle lines you drew up were so clear in 1913, I wonder if they are as clear now? What are the effects of the industry and commerce on actor training today, and are they effects that we should be challenging now as defiantly as you did then?

In order to create the theatre of which you dreamed, you sought to free the actor from what you called *cabotinage* (the habits of the ham actor). In your time, *cabotinage* was evident in the worst effects of the star system, in the use of gesture and voice without internal justification, in the recourse to old tricks. If we stand guard against the *cabotinage* of **our** time, what theatrical sins are we opposed to?

In the drama conservatoires of our time, many of them profoundly influenced by your own work and by the work of your nephew Michel Saint-Denis, there is a deep sense of acting as both a craft and an art. Students undertake a detailed and rigorous training in the techniques of acting, much of which you might recognize – animal studies, movement and dance, voice preparation, text analysis, development of character, finding inner justification for the part. Does this mean that we have purged our training of the kinds of impurities that you sought to remove?

Well, perhaps; partially. But if we accept that student-actors now have much better access to a more coherent technique, that is not to say that there are no bad habits for students and teachers. Roanna Mitchell (2014), for instance, identifies an important challenge for students with respect to their physical capital. Despite the fact that contemporary actor training attempts to take the student beyond superficial concerns, Mitchell suggests that the industry’s demands for certain forms of physical perfection are always only just below the surface:

it appears that many students perceive a relatively narrow general definition of the physical type that can bring them commercial success, most often using the descriptors ‘slim’, ‘sexy’, ‘toned’, ‘characterful’ and ‘individual’. These descriptors highlight students’ awareness that they will be required to develop an image that is rare and thus has a high market value... (Mitchell, 2014: 63)

Mitchell (2014: 63-4) identifies three responsibilities towards the development of the actor’s body that underpin these attitudes: the responsibility to the actor’s art, the responsibility to the self, and the responsibility to the business. She roots the problem the student-actor has in challenging the third responsibility in the notion of the ‘body as servant’ (2014: 64). In this context, the body is constructed as a product and a tool – something that is required to achieve a particular look or appearance, that can be reconstructed through dieting, gymnastics, weight-training or fitness regimes. Do we adequately empower our students to stand up for change, to challenge the practices around

their bodies (where is the teacher in the space; who observes who doing what; how are bodies treated within our theatre wardrobes and designers, by photographers)? Your own caveat rings very true in this context: 'Let us make an effort to acquire the craft and not let ourselves be devoured by it' (Copeau, 1990: 210).

A bientôt,

Mark

SM: Letter to a young person preparing to train. Part One

Dear...

I must begin by saying that by 'young' I don't necessarily mean this in years. You may be 17 and applying for a place at a drama school or you may be in your 30's and have decided for reasons of love, boredom, debt, friendship, unemployment, fantasy, divorce, homelessness or simply a desire to test the unknown that you want to be an actor, or maybe a mime or performance artist, a dancer, a director, a designer or a technician. By the way, I trained as a mime artist but it took me 20 years to come out of the closet and tell people. Probably, having knocked around a bit (or a lot) beyond school, university or your youth theatre group will be immeasurably helpful in two ways at least. Firstly there's a good chance that you will be more resilient and, secondly, you will have fed your imagination and experience in a way that will nurture your ability to be a creative practitioner.

Maybe you don't know exactly what you want to be or do, and that's probably a more fertile and creative space to be in than absolute certainty. I hope this is your state of mind but it's also, of course, often a painful one. A state of absolute certainty is likely to make you close down your imagination, your willingness to take risks and vastly enhances the chances of you becoming an unhappy, neurotic and pathologically driven psychopath. On the other hand, too much uncertainty can make you freeze, indecisive and can induce a different sort of neurosis and unhappiness.

As you look at glossy prospectuses, ringing endorsements from celebrities or grateful alumni and the extravagant claims that are made for this method or that approach to acting remember to exercise your muscles of scepticism (not cynicism), caution and sense of humour. Do remember that cynicism and scepticism are significantly different dispositions. The former is sterile, self defeating and speaks of giving up on the world; the latter is a healthy attitude towards accepting that things (and people) are not always what they seem. Never become cynical! Keeping hold of your sense of humour will be crucial, not only throughout your training but also during your professional career as an actor and theatre maker – perhaps the most important quality to possess and develop. You will know all the dreary statistics about actors and unemployment. Ignore these, at least for the time being. If you took on board the logical implications of these figures you would never be looking in this kind of direction in the first place. But actually, it is worth a moment or two of reflection to ask yourself whether you have the disposition, the stubbornness and a resolutely optimistic nature to endure the stresses and strains of dark times, or what theatre *luvvies* perhaps still call 'resting'.

I would urge you that whilst hanging on to a sense of excitement about the prospect of what you are going to do, at the same time start to scan the landscape of C21st theatre. Arguably, it is a much more varied and fertile landscape than it was 30 – 50 years ago. Of course, the epicentre of C21st Western theatre remains naturalism and realism – that’s what we largely still witness on our stages and screens. But today, despite this age of austerity, vast inequality and injustice all around us, theatre is a more varied and more of a multiply headed beast than it was three decades ago. Today there are far greater opportunities for exploring forms of theatre which delight in crossing boundaries between different art forms, which engage audiences in a different way, which play with numerous forms of digital technologies and which offer you the possibility of performing work in an almost unlimited array of sites beyond the proscenium arch or black box studio theatre. Keep your mind and body open to all these possibilities and don’t settle for courses which fail to acknowledge these opportunities or allow you to explore them. I strongly believe that there is a far more diverse and stimulating range of possibilities for the professional actor today than there were even 30 years ago.

I’ll continue this later...

C21st Performer Questions

- ME:** Is there a global actor? Are there still universal skills and dispositions to be taught?
- JP:** How much must we look *beyond* theatre in order to train for C21st theatre?
- SM:** How are the dispositions, cultures and economies of neo-liberalism impacting on student and teacher expectations and behaviours?

JP: Letter to Alexei Temerin, actor and photographer in Meyerhold’s theatre c.1926-

Dear Alexei Alexeyevich


Please excuse my intrusion. Alexander Gladkov suggested I contact you with a question about Meyerhold’s theatre training and it’s documentation in the 1920s. Of course I am very aware of your contribution to Meyerhold’s theatre as an actor, your portrayal of Oleg Bard in the premiere of Mayakovsky’s *Bedbug* (1929), for instance – and your chastising by Meyerhold himself for ‘forcing the tempo’ and forgetting that all Mayakovsky’s words ‘must be served up as if on a platter, in italics’ (Gladkov 1989: 185). You have Gladkov to blame for that becoming public, I’m afraid!

But I’m writing about your other function in Meyerhold’s theatre - as chief photographer and documenter. This supposedly much less visible role, behind the camera, is (at least in the digital age I am living in) much more prominent than you might expect. It may surprise you to hear that proof of that incredible combination of artistic geniuses working on *Bedbug* - Meyerhold, Mayakovsky, Rodchenko and Shostakovitch – is digitally ascribed to YOU in the metadata accompanying your famous image:



Stock Photo: Dmitri Shostakovich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Alexander Rodchenko by Temerin, Alexei Alexeevich (1889-1977)/The State Central A. Bakhrushin Theatre Museum, Moscow/1929/Photograph/Russia/Opera, Ballet, Theatre,Portrait,Genre

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Add To Lightbox

And this is just one of thousands of images and movies which still exist and are in circulation today, thanks to your visionary documentation strategy in the early 1920s. These images have been digitized and are freely available for billions of people to access. Take this example as an illustration, which has been viewed by nearly two hundred thousand people, - that's one Muscovite in every five living in the capital in 1920:²



Meyerhold's Theater and Biomechanics - Screener

Contemporary Arts Media artfilms

Subscribe 2,741

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335 8

² Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Moscow

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUUgaQqgBS0>

So, let me cut to the chase and ask you three burning questions:

1. What were your guiding principles when filming the études?
2. What was the intended function of the documented études? How did you expect them to be used?
3. What, if any, are the dangers of transforming these examples of live training into what Meyerhold considered static, if enduring, documents?
4. Oh – and might I have your permission to use this movie of Irina Meyerhold for my Massive Open Online Course, starting on January 26th 2015? I'm afraid I have no budget to pay you a fee...

Thanks in anticipation

Jonathan Pitches

JP: Letter from Alexei Temerin to Jonathan Pitches

Dear Professor Pitches

Please find answers below:

1. What were your guiding principles when filming the études?
Meyerhold insisted I capture the outward expressive form as if viewed by an audience member, what he called the racours or raccourci (Law and Gordon 1996: 97-99). Later, I filmed them as short movies to capture the rhythmic structure of the études.
2. What was the intended function of the documented études? How did you expect them to be used?
The etudes were photographed and filmed for our research archive, we tried to archive everything in those days. There was never any intention for them to be used in the studio either then or now.
3. What are the dangers of transforming these examples of live training into what Meyerhold considered static, if enduring, documents?
I don't follow the premise of your question; these étude documents are research data, just as with production photos. They are for scholars not practitioners. There are no 'dangers' with these kinds of documents, unless you count losing them from the archive!
4. Oh – and might I have your permission to use this movie of Irina Meyerhold for my Massive Open Online Course, starting on January 26th 2015? I'm afraid I have no budget to pay you a fee...
What is it you say in England? Please don't ask as a refusal can often offend...



@AntonioDamasio 'Wordless storytelling is natural [...] Telling stories precedes language, since it is, in fact, a condition for language' (2000: 188-9).

ME: Letter to Jacques Copeau, from Mark Evans.

Dear Jacques,

You identify routine, inadequacy and lack of a serious education as deep faults in the training systems of your time. Your training started from the body – as radical a starting point then as it would be now:

Without intending in any way to diminish the importance of words in a dramatic action, we concluded that for them to be right, sincere, eloquent and dramatic, it was necessary that the articulated speech, the enunciated words, result from thought felt by the actor in his whole body, and from the flowering of both his inner attitude and the bodily expression which translated it. Hence, the primordial importance given to mimicry in our exercises, which we made the basis for the training of the actor, for he must be above all else on the stage, the one who acts, the personality in motion [...] For a long time our school was nothing else in its principles and researches but a school for physical interpretation. (Copeau, 1990: 207)

You argue for an embodied training that is a process and not an end result. For an approach that is deeply explorative in nature, that references the physical world and the richness of the theatre of the past. Although many positive changes have taken place, in the UK drama conservatoires it is still the case that voice, acting and text analysis take precedence over movement and the body.

Why might we root actor training more directly in the body? Well...

- Differences of identity and diversity could become more evident and a more robust part of actor training. Such differences could be embedded into the training in place of industry norms that prioritise white, male, able-bodied, young, attractive actors.
- Identification and transformation might take on a different, more playful and radical sense than the psychological orientation that they tend to have in conventional actor training. Observation and analysis of the world will re-emerge as a primary skill, the necessary precursor to technique and production.
- A step away from dogma, method and ownership – more emphasis on what works, for whom, and why. The body engages first, revealing action that can then be reflected on; meaning is revealed rather than imposed. ‘The predominant idea of my work is never to submit to any preconception’ (Copeau, 1990: 49).
- A profound connection with our personal and social histories – what makes us the people that we are. Starting from our bodies means starting by understanding what has made us and continues to make us the human beings that we are.

For you, the implications of innovation and transformation in actor training ran deep: ‘I see no true transformation possible in the theatre except through and by social transformation. New dramatic forms will come from new ways of living, thinking and feeling’ (Copeau, 1990: 27). And this implies that some important features of the modern training institution must change. How can training centres become places for ‘living, thinking and feeling’? And what would have to change for them to do so? If they are already, what are the limitations and boundaries they experience on this way of working? How would the teaching day look and

feel in such a school? What would be the relationship between teacher and student, between student and student, between the school and its public?

You refer to the theatre school of which you dreamed as 'a private place' (Copeau, 1990: 25). You suggest that such training is a state responsibility, and yet you recognize that official education can too quickly lose a connection with the realities of many people's lives, and thus lose its *raison d'être*. A strong tradition does not necessarily create a sense of direction, connection and purpose, nor does newness on its own.

Or would such an approach be too daunting, austere and rigorous for many students' taste, too principled for the industries eager to devour new talent?

But then you weren't put off from starting your own school, nor was Jacques Lecoq; and the impact of students from both schools has been profound. Lecoq specifically aimed past the present: 'we are united by the pioneering aspect of the teaching, towards the theatre of the future' (2000: 162).

Much to think on!

Mark

Ethics and Politics Questions

JP: What role should choice play within a C21st actor training curriculum? Should we 'let the student decide?'

ME: Does performer training for the C21st require a changed ethical and political framework for its effective operation?

SM: What would a statement of ethics look like for C21st training?

ME: Acting student blog (2020):

Wednesday 22 January

Why do we study the great traditions of theatre? Today we looked at Copeau, Stanislavsky, Lecoq and Grotowski. Why are they still valid for us? For me? Professor Evans quoted Copeau at us the other day: 'no great change is valid, no great renewal is durable, until it is linked to a living tradition, a profound native spirit' (Copeau, 1990: 209). But is this still true, or has our relationship with tradition changed? Surely a tradition can only be living in the context within which it was created. Look at Professor Evans' mime class the other day. What started eighty years ago as a physical technique for the actor has become an end in itself, a dead-end road, its limitations clear and obvious. Has the same happened to the work of Stanislavsky and Grotowski? Can the traditions of acting remain living without being constantly betrayed, and without requiring them to start again in our own time?

Thursday 23 January

Am I studying the right things – will what I learn today become outmoded tomorrow? What should I make of neuroscience and acting, should I be training for video games and blue screen/CGI performance, does anyone want a political actor anymore?

My friends call me a 'luvvie' and mock the things that I learn – the games that my teachers make us play. Am I learning to be the actor that I want to be? Or the actor that I should be, or need to be? How can I know?

I read somewhere that Copeau talked about the need to 're-normalise' the actor – reconnecting with the reality of the world around them, connecting to the diversity and complexity of human life. To achieve this, must the acting studio become more mobile and porous – must we take to the streets and the fields? Must we take to the virtual spaces and to the ghettos? Sounds a bit too much like hard work!

Apparently, when he was asked to run the Théâtre des Arts, Edward Gordon Craig declared it was impossible unless the theatre could be shut for ten to fifteen years in order to train the actors for a renewed art. Should my journey today be any less arduous and thorough? Argh, I need a drink.

SM: Letter to a young person preparing to train. Part Two

Dear ...

My letter to you continues to you after a slight pause. As you start your training here are some thoughts – lessons if you will – which relate to the experience of training:

1/ ***When to immerse yourself and when to find critical distance***. Search for a productive relationship between being immersed and present in whatever activities you are asked to undertake ***and*** becoming critically reflective of such tasks and what lies behind them. Perhaps you simply need to separate immersion and critical reflection in time and let a healthy dialectic develop between them, one which has no closure, one which is always becoming, always developing and searching for new responses. Beware of answers!

2/ ***Collaboration lies at the heart of theatre***. How can you develop and train the 'muscles' of collaboration? Remember your collaborators are not simply fellow actors but all the other players who participate in the project of making theatre – technicians, admin and production staff, cleaners and janitors and above all your audience. Unlike most other art forms theatre does not live until it is experienced by an audience, even if that audience only comprises 5 people. How to develop a practice of collaboration which is generous but never too safe or cosy? Successful collaboration is not simply about being ***nice*** to each other. How to steal from other collaborators and to allow them to steal from you? You must remember that any effective piece of theatre is always greater than the sum of its parts. The strength, rewards and consequences of productive – and probably difficult – collaboration will always be present in the work itself. Never feel you simply have to rely on yourself. Collaboration must always be embodied as well as cognitive, psychological and emotional – and of course these are always embodied too. The beauty of an ensemble lies in a complex sense of its individual parts (people) and its physical and sensate whole.

3/ **Beware of talent, brilliance and mastery.** These may dazzle and impress us but they are often as fragile as they are inexplicable. Talent and genius may be much less important than you imagine. Beware and exercise all your sceptical muscles when your teachers talk about talent and its importance. What are the other human qualities you might list which need to be found in collaborative art-making? How do you value, acknowledge and perhaps even celebrate uncertainty, not-knowing, fear, melancholy, stillness, silence and failure as essential elements of the creative process?

4/ **Demand the right to work slowly,** but realise also the value of throwing caution to the wind and making work in a fraction of the time you feel it warrants. Find out when it's wise to work slowly and when to work fast and without caution. Feeling there's never enough time is probably a productive space to be in.

5/ **Your teachers.** You should start with the assumption that your teachers are good at what they are paid to do, probably know more than you (at least during the first few months!) and deserve your respect. This is not to say you should be in awe of them or become tiresome sycophants in their company. You may encounter teachers who wish to be known as 'masters', or who are described thus – I use the gendered male form advisedly as most teachers who are ascribed such status are indeed men. Be cautious in both your reverence for masters **and** your possible distrust/disdain for anyone who seems to enjoy such an appellation and status. Certainly in the training regimes of Eastern dance dramas the term 'master' has particular connotations and a cultural legitimacy which may be lacking in the West. In the 21st century world of Western training we are properly suspicious of people who make such claims or who are described as 'masters'. This seems healthy and wise to me. Respect teachers who do not claim to know all the answers, who manifest strength, confidence, uncertainty and vulnerability in equal measure, who have a deep curiosity about the world, have lives beyond the classroom or studio, who have a sense of humour and can laugh at themselves and who do **not** try to be your best friend. As an afterthought, it is probably best not to sleep with your tutor-teacher unless you are genuinely head over heels in love with each other. Remember, however benign and sociable your teacher may be the relationship between teacher and student is always an affiliation of power. This can be practised with constraint, respect and without exploitation but it remains nonetheless a relationship where power is unevenly distributed.

I look forward to hearing of your journey and would welcome your thoughts on my letter.
Yours ever....

Simon

PS: The idea for this letter came from Goat Island's 'Letter to a Young Practitioner'.

ME: Text

JP: 'Hi Professor Evans, just wanted to check what I need to do for a 1st.'

ME: 'Hi there. You need to demonstrate innovation, originality and imagination.'

JP: 'OK. I'll go for a 2:2.'

**JP: Letter to incoming Education Secretary (after 2015 election) from Jonathan Pitches
“A momentary pause for aim”**

Dear Secretary of State.

Congratulations on your recent appointment.

I'm sure you will be receiving many communiqués like this from people anxious to get a first hearing, from people disillusioned (or distraught?) with the previous administration's record on education, from people still holding onto a diminishing belief that a new government signals new thinking and that a small window of opportunity always exists at times of transition. But I hope this letter may rise a little closer to the top of those communiqués as it addresses some fundamental concerns about which you as Secretary of State for Education and the new Minister for Higher Education will surely be aware, even as you strive to get your feet under the table (if not under the same table!).

Those concerns can be summarized thus:

- A student population burdened with debt, increasingly asking questions of the benefits of Higher Education as a whole.
- A failed experiment in developing a Private Higher Education sector in the UK
- The progressive dismantling of Creative Arts as a viable option for students, post-16 (and pre-16).
- A reported mismatch between what Industry wants to see in graduates and the skills with which graduates are leaving university, including low levels of digital literacy.
- A growing tension between the economic benefits of studying at a local university and powerful forces of globalization and internationalization.
- Rapid climate change and associated volatility in markets, weather and, ultimately, community cohesion.
- The moral imperative to share resources, knowledge and skills as efficiently as possible with no respect for geographical borders.

Of course many of these points go way beyond your remit but they form part of a comprehensive educational and cultural landscape across the UK in need of radical change. The extent to which you, or any politician, can operate with any level of authentic radicalism is of course a big question for you and your new colleagues but I would like to suggest here one contribution to a new way of thinking, relating to my own expertise and academic discipline, using this transitional period in time as a 'momentary pause for aim' as the great Russian theatre director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, called it - an 'expedient concentration of action...preparing the audience for what is to come' (Leach 1989: 65).

My ten-point manifesto, calling for a new International University of Performing Arts (IUOPA), specializing in Blended Performer Training is attached. I'd welcome the opportunity to expand further and to provide context from the outgoing government's

Dept of Business Innovation and skills paper on the future of Massive Open Online Courses.⁴

Yours faithfully

Prof Jonathan Pitches, University of Leeds



The Clarice @TheClariceUMD @jpitches68 at @UniversityLeeds is teaching a FREE online course on physical theatre

ME: Letter to Peter Sellars

Dear Peter,

I've been thinking about the tweet I sent earlier.

Jacques Copeau wrote to the student-actors of the future: 'You have no choice. Each one of you must, in your secret soul, be a hero... and a saint for yourself' (Copeau, 1990: 209). To achieve this, he aimed: 'at putting the complete instrument of dramatic expression in the hands of the creator' (Copeau, 1990: 39). When he moved to Burgundy in 1924, he wanted to create a training that enabled the students to look more closely at the world around them and to create a response to that world that spoke to the people amongst whom they all worked and lived.

He wanted his training to be an education – all elements linked by a common dramatic idea. His school was at heart a technical school; but it also had ambitions to be more than that, to be a place 'where a whole family of techniques are conserved, rediscovered and renewed' (Copeau, 1990: 42). I like to think that this might provide a model for how we can train student-actors for a theatre that is not about itself.

You speak of how as actors we place the attention of ourselves and of others on the world, and that we should choose where we place that attention (Sellars, 2009). You describe the artist's skills as skills of perception, of creating relationships, of interrogating and reversing hierarchies of importance and difference. Where can we place these within the curriculum of the future drama school? Is this about new skills, or skills re-employed?

Yours,

Mark

⁴ MOOCS [Massive open online courses] will disrupt business as normal in several domains of higher education activity. Undergraduate teaching and recruitment, pedagogy, commercial CPD, and most particularly international recruitment and reputation maybe sharply affected. There will be opportunities to both gain and lose positioning. The report concludes that "an awareness initiative in the CPD sector, possibly around the stronger CPD focus of Euro MOOCS" could be money well invested from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills or BIS (2013: 104).



'We have not yet produced a dramatic aesthetic to express our age' (Jacques Copeau) #thechallenge

'I believe that in order to save the theatre, we must leave it' (Jacques Copeau) #wherenext?

'we are tired of keeping alive a cult whose deity is absent, and we are going outdoors, on the road, to try and meet him there' (Jacques Copeau) #herewego

'it's a rare thing to see an actor move correctly, and rarer still to see one moving and acting truthfully' (Jacques Lecoq) #fromthebody

Creativity and Criticality Questions

SM: How do we give confidence and power to our students to influence the shape and direction of their working lives?

ME: How do we teach 'critical judgment'? How do we help construct the critically aware and reflective practitioner?

JP: Should our pedagogical model be more about 'readying' and preparation than acquiring technical skills?

Email from Digital Learning team (Marketing) to Jonathan Pitches

SM: Dear Jonathan

I'm preparing the social media activity to promote the Physical Theatre course and wanted to run some Twitter/Facebook content by you for accuracy and relevance. These are to spark curiosity and awareness of the course and its content and drive exploration:

1. Physical. Intellectual. Creative. Discover a revolutionary approach to acting – free course enrolling now
2. Transcend the everyday. Exaggerate. Distort. Challenge! Free Physical theatre course enrolling now...
8. Meyerhold – Constructivist, Futurist, Modernist rebel. Learn the history of Physical theatre

Email reply to Digital Learning team (Marketing) from Jonathan Pitches

JP: Many thanks. Have suggested a couple of other tweets as well: see what you think.



Online learning for the studio. A new way of actor training. Enrol now

Learn. Create. Share. Physical theatre for a global classroom

Speak soon

Very best wishes

Jonathan

Focus Group: Queensland May 2014:

SM: And for a week's chunk of work, you could actually look at a little bit every day, rather than having to sit and do the whole lot, or, I think, one evening I sat there, and just went through everything, for the week. But then, I could go back, and then I'll revisit, and I downloaded the PDFs, as well, so I had [...] something I could then go back through and highlight.

ME: I think that was terrific, that there [were] three versions of it (PDF, Audio, Video), and so, just in the way, you would in the classroom, differentiate for different learners, it did that as well, so that you could read, or you could listen, in the car, if you wanted to.

SM: Were you the one that was going to take it to your students?

ME: I did [...] the exercises [...] with the feet, and then, because I teach all girls, and they've come into the room, and I've got this stick in my hand, like waiting for them all, going okay, so we went from there. So, we actually did it as our warm-up. It was good for me, because [...] they could help me, and it was sort of a cross-pollination of ideas, of how we'd use those things, and what it felt like

JP: Did you find there was a kind of natural affinity with visual based teaching, from that generation that you were teaching, or is that a gross simplification?

ME: No, no. They're very quick to pick up. And, I'm probably the newest person to the technology [...]. So, we could problem solve, we have just acquired Apple TV in the room, so learning to operate an iPad, with Apple TV, and have it all projected, so

new learning tools, and new information, new physical things, all worked really nicely together.

SM: That's a good example of your vertical training, too, isn't it? Where, in a way, you've passed it on, and then you've passed it down. [...] Is that what you mean by vertical, like from the teacher to a pupil

JP: Yes, it is, but it's an absolute fast track version of verticality!.

SM: It's like cascading that knowledge down.

JP: Yes, and I think the technology does something, to horizontalise that, actually.

SM: Yes, because they can access it themselves.



Christopher Neil "young ppl are using MOOCs to get taste of 3-year uni degrees"
[@FutureLearn](#)

Estelle Burton @Essieburton why just a taste - why not join up learning from GCSE to Uni.
Sch online systems gen poor

Email to Murray and Evans

Subject: Pastures new

Date: Sometime between 2015 and 2020

Dear Both

For too long I've been reading about others ducking out, downsizing, getting out of the rat race, moving to the Isle of Skye to farm organic chickens. For too long I've talked late into the night about alternative futures and alternative pedagogies. For too long I've felt that the Higher Education system you and I participate in is failing all of us, its values sliding inexorably towards the market and away from the academy. So, its time to shift perspective, accept responsibility, cease to observe others rebooting their lives and take action myself.

The principles underlying my plan are set out in the attached manifesto for a new International University of Performing Arts (IUOPA). Granted there are some fundamentals still to work out but these are for tomorrow. Today I want to share with you the core ambition of our project and to ask for your blessing. I hope to see you online or in a studio soon!

Very best

JP



We shall fight against the encroachment of professional tricks, against all professional distortions, against the ossification of specialisation @JacquesCopeau

When the fragile humanity of the amateur becomes preferable to the studied perfectionism of the professional, the utility of training is no longer self-evident or even clear @JohnMatthews

SM: Manifesto

A manifesto to identify the practices, dispositions and instruments of thought for C21st programmes of performer training and theatre making. To be applied and contextualised in particular local circumstances. These principles are modelled for the 21st century but draw strongly upon the principles and practices of four venerated educational institutions which in their time have been admired for their daring, their radicalism, their internationalism and their life-affirming humanity. All but one of these no longer exists but their history and the values they represented remain resonant and powerful down the decades. We have much to learn from them. They are:

- The Bauhaus
- Black Mountain College
- Dartington College of Arts
- L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq

SM: From the **Bauhaus** you might borrow:

- The aspiration to reunite creativity and manufacturing, to abolish the distinctions between fine and applied arts and between the spurious binary of craft and creativity
- The determination to link intellectual and theoretical pursuits with practical skills, technique and craft.
- The emphasis on experiment and problem solving.

JP: From **Black Mountain College** you might borrow:

- The emphasis that learning and living are intimately connected.
- The disposition that there should be no sharp distinction between work and play.
- The belief that creativity and practical responsibilities are of equal importance in the development of the intellect.
- A commitment to the idea that all learning should be imagined and planned as an experiment for 'education in a democracy' (Black Mountain College Prospectus)

SM: From **Dartington College of Arts** you might borrow:

- A model of learning which articulates training as performance or performance-making and as a reflexive and critical practice.
- An embrace of learning as a process towards goals which are never completely known and which remain to be (re)invented.

- An understanding that learning and knowledge is always in context, and that a deep awareness of context is a way of seeing and being in the world.
- A view that arts practices, materials and processes are persistently and irrevocably pervaded by the economic, historical, social and cultural worlds in which they were produced.
- A commitment to bringing arts practice out of the studio and closer to everyday life.

ME: From **L’Ecole Jacques Lecoq** you might borrow:

- A commitment to discover the driving motors of play.
- An understanding that learning is a site to build on, not a finished edifice.
- A belief and a practice that theatre does not take place in the head and that ‘the theatre is flesh. It’s from the verb made flesh’ (Mnouchkine in Murray 2003: 62)
- A understanding that ‘improvisation is at the heart of the educational process’ (Lecoq 2000: 18)
- The importance of observing how beings and objects move, and how they find a reflection ourselves.

SM: The pulsating heart of any 21st century programme of performer training and at the centre of our field of collective learning will be the issue of how can we best **flourish** in a complex, difficult and often distressing world and in the face of economic and political force fields designed to disempower and silence us. How can we **flourish** as we learn to make theatre, to perform and to live life. Terry Eagleton says that whilst:

The word ‘flourishing’ may carry rather virile, strenuous, red-faced connotations for us, it need not do so. It includes, say, showing mercy or sympathetic listening. We need to take the idea of flourishing out of the gym. We live well when we fulfill our nature as an enjoyable end in itself. And since our nature is something we share with other creatures of our kind, morality is an inherently political matter. (After Theory, 2003: 124)

Our programmes will invent (and continue to re-invent) the conditions and instruments of thought which will allow all participants – learner-teachers and teacher-learners – to flourish within their own ever-changing aspirations and commitments. And by flourishing we do not mean necessarily to be happy or indeed to seek happiness, rather that the quest to flourish is a pursuit to find those points **where** we meet with others in the task of making theatre – a quest to discover **how** we begin to practice ourselves and our ideas collaboratively with others. We must recognise that because this task is inevitably collaborative it is also ethical and because – says Aristotle – it is ethical it is also political. To determine whether and how we flourish is not to look inwards into souls – whatever a soul might be - but to look at our outward behaviours and how we **attend** to each other. As Eagleton says again: ‘to be concerned for another is to be present to them in the form of an absence, a certain self-forgetful attentiveness’ (2003: 131). Our programmes will always explore how we might practice this ‘self-forgetful attentiveness’

JP: Apologies, attached this time

Manifesto for new International University of Performing Arts (IUOPA) – to be launched in 2020

1. IUOPA will build on local developments in blended learning but on an international scale, combining online, digital resources with face-to-face embodied learning led by international experts who are still learning themselves.
2. IUOPA will train a new generation of actors and performers, whose interests lie in dispersed creativity, global connectivity and shared resources
3. IUOPA believes that elements of embodied training can be transmitted without face-to-face contact, providing there are also periods of intensive studio work, led by recognized practitioners.
4. IUOPA will exploit the enduring tension between vertical actor training traditions and horizontal eclecticism but ultimately favours the latter.
5. IUOPA will offer all its online materials for free on the understanding that the creators of that content will be appropriately attributed.
6. IUOPA will actively encourage the appropriation, repurposing and alternative application of (embodied) knowledges generated on its programmes.
7. IUOPA will have no centre, or building, but will be distributed across the student base with fluid nodes of activity.
8. IUOPA will be made up of numerous layers of student engagement – from 5% to 100% of a student's time.
9. IUOPA will not therefore produce graduates but advocates.
10. IUOPA will strive against all forms of commodification, exploitation, neo-imperialism, nepotism, prejudice and imbalance in pursuing its mission.

ME: Manifesto: Open College of Acting

What before how

Can actor training concern itself with technique that is not constructed around the needs of content? The student-actor must use their technique to study the world around them and use the world around them to develop their technique. We must train actors for a theatre of austerity and global depression, for a theatre economy starved of resources. Step out of the mainstream to participate in the school and theatre of which you dream.

Funding

The Open College does not rely on state funding. We create innovation despite the system, rather than buckle to it. Our free school is a response to the cultural economics of the theatre industry – the buying and selling of bodies, the violence done to our bodies in order to fit the demands of directors and agents? In return for your studies, you will give one day a month to community groups in your locality or beyond or to support the activity of the college.

Application and entry

Entry is not through audition or fee payment. If there are places, you can come; if you are able to stay and you respond to the work, then you remain. Our offer is an inclusive one –

Les Copiaus (1924-1929)

we welcome diversity. New pathways into learning, training and making are imagined and created at our college.

Curriculum

Our work on movement, voice and technique is ultimately about the nature and the quality of the relationship we have with ourselves as individuals and with ourselves as a society and a culture. Learning to be, to become, to represent and to understand others has traditionally been a core skill for the actor. We insist that this skill is not a commodity that the actor sells, instead it is a way of enhancing our human ability to build relationships and to communicate?

Les Copiaus (1924-1929)

09.00 start. 30 mins gymnastics and acrobatics.

10.00-12.00 mime exercises around themes (the storm, vineyards, winter, spring, vegetation).

14.30-16.30 – sewing, modeling, music, painting.

17.00-19.00 improvisation or rehearsals.

Technique implies a set of assumptions about the way we function and about the purpose of acting. The Open College constantly confronts technique with the reality of the world that we seek to represent, investigate and challenge. Traditional training, books and online learning will only be used to challenge assumptions not participate in their maintenance.

Spaces

The Open College seeks to create the kinds of spaces needed in order to recreate a theatre that speaks to, from and for the people. We create human spaces, equal spaces – where the human self-image can be properly examined and explored. Our space is not restricted to actors, but we will engage with playwrights, scientists, engineers, architects and many others who wish to share this journey with us. Our spaces are within the communities – schools, halls, houses, etc. Each space responds to the needs of its participants and evolves accordingly. Where possible, students will be able (but not required) to live together for periods of study.

Who are we?

You will be taught by actors, artists, theatre makers and others committed to a new model for education. You will also be taught by each other and by the world around you. The college ethos is one of experimentation, versatility and collaboration. The college is distributed internationally, and connected (in both real and virtual terms) through its

teachers, its students, its supporters and its audiences. We are international because we recognize difference and diversity, and not because we propose a globalized approach to acting.

We believe that acting is about play and presence. We shall not shy away from professional expertise, technique, or even virtuosity. But we will forefront the purpose of acting over technique.

JP: Afterword – a final letter to Gladkov

Dear Aleksandr

I wrote to Temerin and he did get back to me – honestly, if a little tersely. Thanks for the suggestion.

I just wanted to revisit one thing I said in my last letter: that what you had to say about documentation had ‘an important bearing on the contemporary debate around blended learning’. On reflection, that might have sounded a little opaque. What I meant to say was that perhaps the developments in online social media and their relationship to the practices of theatre training, with which 21st century teachers and scholars are currently grappling are not so radically removed from the context you documented when you were with Meyerhold. Back then there was still a range of different media used to capture training (and not to render it lifeless, to my mind - whatever Meyerhold thinks). They may have been analogue sources rather than digital but the task of second and third generation trainees was still to consider how to interpret the *mediated* biomechanics documents and to combine (blend?) them with their own corporeal knowledge of the training⁵. For sure, that process is infinitely more complex and transnational than it was in those heady days after the Revolution but your teacher’s suggestion, then, that the unique combination of ‘what and how’ defines what we might call artistry has not lost its potency today.

All best

Jonathan Pitches

(Independent researcher and practitioner, Isle of Skye, Scotland)

SM: Coda.

Dear Mark and Jonathan. Nightmare journey back. What about you? Wasn’t expecting it to take so long to get over the border into Germany. Perhaps keep our heads down next year...

⁵ The notion that the developments in online blended learning are not a radical departure from previous blends is also argued by Franc Camilleri in the forthcoming article: ‘Towards study of actor training in an age of globalized digital technology’ *TDPT 6.1*: “In this regard, the advance in new learning technologies and digital globalisation in the twenty-first century appropriates the lack of a shared physical location between teacher and student in actor training and recreates it as a space for autonomous agency via the mediation of online transmission and interaction.¹³ In a crucial sense, this technological development does not (as yet) announce a radical paradigm shift but a re-visitation of – because it reinforces and enables – fundamental aspects associated with auto-didactic approaches in autonomous and non-institutional situations.”

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