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## THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO JACQUES LECOQ

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### CHAPTER 42 - La Mancha Theatre Company and School – Chile

Ellie Nixon

‘A theatre School should not always journey in the wake of existing theatre forms. On the contrary, it should have a visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself’ (Jacques Lecoq 2002: 172).

La Mancha Theatre Company was founded in 1989 by Ellie Nixon (British) and Rodrigo Malbrán (Chilean/Norwegian). We met at the Lecoq School when I was in my second year and Malbrán, a student from 1983 - 1985 was completing the teaching diploma, a distinction shared by very few in the world at the time. La Mancha’s practice has comprised devised theatre, adaptations and classical texts, to create a highly varied body of work in live and recorded media in Europe, Scandinavia, Central and South America. Over the years our projects have involved collaborating extensively with practitioners from each host country, cultivating rich links and long-lasting cultural correspondences. In 1992, La Mancha established a permanent base in Santiago, Chile, and with the encouragement of Jacques and Fay Lecoq, established The La Mancha International School of Image and Gesture, the first of its kind in South America.

The repercussions of Lecoq’s teachings have reverberated in La Mancha long after our time with him as students. This chapter attempts to capture some of these resonances by tracing the trajectory of both the La Mancha Theatre Company and the School. Firmly placed in the lineage of Lecoq, the La Mancha School has, over time, developed its own curriculum through a process of constant re-evaluation and adaptation, in a way that chimes with Francisco Varela’s notion of ‘enactivism’ which sees cognition as resolutely entwined with life and unfolding as the subject dynamically interacts with the social and physical environment (*The Embodied Mind* 1991).<sup>1</sup> Viewed from this perspective, I will consider the challenges of introducing a distinctive approach to theatre-making in the climate of a post-dictatorship and how La Mancha’s curriculum has necessarily responded to the evolving cultural, social and political context in which it is immersed. While I am wary in this brief account of over simplifying the challenges and experiences we have faced at La Mancha, I seek to exemplify

how our practice and evolving curriculum affirm Lecoq's pedagogical approach as essentially an emancipatory process, a life-long pedagogy of self-discovery; an enactive paradigm.

### **La Mancha Theatre Company: From Europe to Chile**

In the early years, we identified the company's two-person structure as a viable basis for working internationally. This model involved bringing professionals and students together in each host country to produce innovative project-based performance in a variety of settings. Through a process of creative interaction, we experienced directly the cultural, artistic and social concerns of our collaborators, which were subsequently reflected in the collective authoring of productions. As we built an identity for the company, we increasingly felt drawn to establishing a more permanent residence along with a desire to deepen our engagement with the teaching process. As a student, Malbrán had discussed with Lecoq the possibility of establishing a school in Chile and our experience as an itinerant company prepared the way for this development. In 1990, we were awarded a research grant from the Norwegian Arts Council to review contemporary theatre training in Chile. In leading workshops at Chilean universities and other leading drama schools, we confirmed that actor training at the time was firmly rooted in the traditions of psychological realism, with an overriding focus on the actor as interpreter. This suggested a potential opportunity for our more actor/creator centred approach.

Concurrently, we were invited to lead an environmental theatre project co-funded by the Chilean Catholic University and the Canadian International Development Research Centre.<sup>2</sup> We devised a performance with children living in the most polluted and destitute region of the Pacific coastline, based on the decimation of the traditional livelihood of artisanal fishing by sea pollution and industrial trawling. A documentary was made about this process, which has subsequently been shown worldwide by the IDRC<sup>3</sup>. The knowledge and insight gained from working on a project of this nature triggered a deep and long-lasting commitment to Chile as a future destination for La Mancha.

It is worth bearing in mind the political backdrop at this time. The Chilean experimental theatre movement had a long tradition of innovation and renewal, which, during the Marxist government of Salvador Allende, extended to a deep involvement with the unfolding political process. In 1973, this culture of exploration and political activism was abruptly obliterated by the military coup led by Augusto Pinochet. Under his military regime, Pinochet introduced extreme censorship practices intended to stifle any progressive forms of resistance. In the words of the Chilean playwright Benjamin Galemiri, 'Culture was seen by Pinochet as an act

of terrorism'.<sup>4</sup> Over the next twenty-seven years, state censorship determined creative content. This is not to suggest that experimentation did not occur, but Chile's rich cultural identity had effectively been isolated, truncated and silenced. Our initial visit in 1990 coincided with the historic hand-over of power by General Pinochet to a new democratic government, a very exciting time indeed. It seemed an opportune moment for La Mancha to invest in the cultural development of a new democracy and to contribute to the evolving landscape of contemporary performance.

### **La Mancha Theatre Company Settles in Chile**

In 1992 La Mancha established a permanent base in Chile. Located in an era of political uncertainty where suspicion and mistrust even within families were still predominant forces, we found ourselves operating in a landscape of political paradox and cultural uncertainty. An example of this was when we premiered *Parranda: Selected Texts by Nicanor Parra by a Band of Bouffons* (1992), an incisive and humorous perspective on the poetry of the Chilean Anti Poet Nicanor Parra,<sup>5</sup> through the lens of the bouffon. The show's premiere in the Catholic University was promptly followed by a 'suggestion' from the University that we remove three 'seditious' poems by Nicanor Parra from the production. This was a huge shock to us as we had received very positive reviews. Furthermore, not only had we been financially supported by the Norwegian and Chilean governments, but the British Council had also sponsored the international collaboration with the British art collective *Space Explorations*,<sup>6</sup> who had designed the sculptural scenography. In defending our artistic position, La Mancha triggered much excitement in the press, resulting in a vigorous national debate about the underlying censorship still permeating a nascent democracy. The production's artistic values were eventually vindicated and the censorship retracted. Subsequently, *Parranda* toured major national theatre venues, festivals and the most remote parts of Chile for the next two years. In 1995, *Parranda* was selected by the International World Theatre Festival to represent Chile in Costa Rica. This opportunity established La Mancha as one of the leading contemporary theatre companies in Latin America.

### **Establishing the La Mancha School of Image and Gesture**

In 1995, we founded The La Mancha School of Image and Gesture, in Santiago, Chile, as a space for preparing actors in the Lecoq tradition. We were joined in this endeavour by the Chilean actor and theatre professor, Ernesto Malbrán Vargas and the directorate became three. The School's first cohort of nineteen was made up of Chilean actors who had worked with La Mancha on a steady basis along with five external applicants. We offered members of our company a grant to attend the School financed by ourselves. Our motives here were tactical. It

was important to begin with a sufficient number of students and to establish a strong first year, open to an alternative teaching and learning approach.

The core values of our mission were centred on the notion of the actor/creator and a commitment to preparing graduates for generating their own work. We considered the title of the school very carefully. The words 'Image' and 'Gesture' in the title evolved from a desire to emphatically foreground the visual and the physical within a landscape dominated by a literary driven theatre. In implementing our vision, we were met with curiosity and enthusiasm by educationalists, as well as the incoming democratically elected government and a large sector of the cultural establishment. Conversely, we encountered a considerable amount of suspicion and resistance from the more established quarters of the theatre elite who, I would argue, were convinced that our intention was to undermine the integrity of the writer and the value of text-based theatre. This was not an insignificant concern. As I mentioned earlier, the stifling censorship laws had forced contemporary Chilean playwrights to operate from a position of subversive defiance. Theirs was an important voice. While it was never our intention to contest this view, in offering an alternative we were directly challenging prevailing conditions. As such, we realised early on in the School's development that it would be our graduates who would eventually break through this resistance.

### **The School's Location: Interacting with Surroundings**

As a student at the Lecoq School, I remember vividly the overwhelming sensation of wonder when walking through the small tardis-like door at '*Le Central*' in Paris, which led to '*le grand salle*', a unique and extraordinary space. I had entered a parallel universe. In Santiago, we searched for a similar environment, a rented space that would serve as an essential component of the learning experience. The first La Mancha School was situated on the outskirts of Santiago in an unusual location on the slopes of the Andean mountain range. Hidden in the mountains, the School was surrounded by eucalyptus trees, cacti, medicinal plants and a water supply from its own spring. We lived there on the premises alongside lizards, rabbits, horses, tarantulas, scorpions and condors, all of which enhanced its unique atmosphere.

Varela's enactive paradigm contends that knowledge evolves through a bodily engagement with the environment and is rooted squarely in the irreducible nature of conscious experience (Varela & Shear 1999). From this perspective, I would argue that our unique location permeated the consciousness of both students and staff with enduring consequences. Most students came from cities to the school and this exceptionally potent environment invited them to interact with an alternative world, serving initially as an immersive and observable resource

for first year exploration of the elements, matter and animals. This later extended to second year work. For instance, plant life with its multiple forms and variations serves as an unlikely starting point for the students in the creation of their bouffons. Similarly, our approach to teaching bouffon integrates animal work to explore an alternative vocabulary for the movement, rhythm and world of each bouffon. These modifications were not imposed, but, I believe, have evolved from being enveloped by our unique location. In the words of the French poet Noël Arnaud: *'Je suis l'espace où je suis' or 'I am the space where I am'* (in Bachelard 1994: 137).

Running a school before the widespread use of the mobile phone and Internet made for a totally immersive experience. We worked late into the evenings and throughout the weekends to build a creative, collaborative, productive and highly rigorous environment for our students. There was a kitchen in which students could cook their own meals. This allowed for a longer working day, but also brought with it the practical challenges of sharing food and cleaning. We established a cleaning rota for the kitchen, which soon extended to the other spaces and the garden. What began as a practical solution gradually became an integral element of the curriculum. Despite the ongoing challenges of managing the communal upkeep of the school, this has become a means by which students value their working space and feel integrated into the aspirations of the project. It was not until much later that I read that Jacques Copeau, the French actor, director and teacher had instilled a similar system in the Vieux-Colombier in the early twentieth century. Mark Evans describes how Copeau's students were responsible for 'sweeping the floors, washing up and cleaning tables' (Evans 2013: 115). He writes that this was based on Copeau's intention to train an actor who could respond to Copeau's vision of 'the deep moral, social and artistic purpose of theatre'. Unbeknown to La Mancha at the time, we were echoing Copeau's immersive 'culture of shared work and creation' (ibid.).

The Chilean Education Authority refused to validate the School. Their framework accounted for four-year courses only and our two-year diploma was an anomaly in their view. At first, we were concerned that marginalisation by the establishment would limit the number of student applications. However, we soon realised that this had little effect and indeed, our independence became empowering. We could set up the school on our own terms; design our own diploma and develop an independent curriculum with the freedom to be mobile and flexible. Initially, the School was financed through income generated by the La Mancha Theatre Company, but within two years, thanks to forward planning and a significant increase in student numbers, we were in a position to consider purchasing land nearby and build a school to our own architectural specifications. The Chilean architect Pablo Vodanovic, a pioneer in the design of earthquake resistant buildings, designed a highly adaptable and

versatile space, which encapsulated our vision. The new Theatre School was inaugurated in the year 2000 and consists, on the second floor, of two large rehearsal/teaching spaces that convert into one performance space with an audience capacity of two hundred. Situated on the banks of the River Mapocho, the surrounding land was landscaped to create diverse external rehearsal and performance spaces integrating indigenous flora and fauna.

With the opening of the new building, La Mancha was in a position to expand its international profile. In 2004, we invited Floriana Frassetto, founder member of the Swiss group, *Mummenschanz* to hold workshops. Our students also worked with the Swedish Feldenkrais movement teacher Vesna Puric. We developed ongoing student exchanges with the *Toi Waakiri Theatre School* in New Zealand and *El Centro Nacional de las Artes* in Mexico. We also established links with local and regional agencies (project funding from the Chilean government and local county councils, work in community centres, hospitals and the Mapuche indigenous community), industry bodies: CODELCO,<sup>7</sup> professional associations (school fee grants and donations), and employers and practitioners (theatre festivals and student placements). From a small cohort of nineteen, the School's student body over the years has expanded on occasions, to over one hundred across the two-year diploma.

### **The La Mancha Curriculum**

The curriculum was originally conceived along the same pedagogical lines as the Lecoq School and these continue to influence even the most recent curriculum developments. It is important to acknowledge at this point the degree to which in the early days, our own artistic vision dominated student output. This was not a narrow-minded aspiration, but rather a deliberate means of highlighting the potential of the creative work. Moreover, while it was not our intention to preserve or fix Lecoq's pedagogy, we felt an enormous responsibility not to distort it. Perhaps this initial apprehension exemplifies Jonathan Pitches' observation that to place oneself in a line of practitioners going back many years, 'is often driven by a genuine concern that they might otherwise be lost, misunderstood, diluted or misrepresented, compromising a hard-earned and long-exercised apprenticeship' (in Kershaw and Nicholson 2011: 123). Equally, in our attempt to respect the values and aims of Lecoq's pedagogy alongside our own professional practice, it was important to avoid becoming dogmatic and intransigent in our approach.

When writing the initial course document we uncovered surprising discrepancies of experience. Whilst Malbrán had been at the Lecoq School only five years earlier than myself, his recollection of the process differed from my own. Far from being conceptually fixed or prescriptive, Lecoq's curriculum was more fluid and flexible than we had imagined. These

shifts in emphasis and curriculum content were inexorably linked to the unique contribution of its teaching staff. Along with M. Lecoq, we were both taught by Norman Taylor, Christophe Marchant and Sandra Mladenovic. However, Malbrán had been highly influenced by the Belgian teacher Lassaâd Saïdi, whereas I was a student when Alain Mollot joined the team. All staff brought distinctive *specialisms* and unique experiences that were to enrich the depth and breadth of Lecoq's approach.

In our own School, the presence of Professor Ernesto Malbrán Vargas complimented significantly our own *specialisms*. His association with the Chilean experimental theatre movement, his background as a student at the Actor's Studio in New York in the 1960s, his early political engagement with the Popular Unity movement in the government of Allende, his application of Rudolf Laban's work to the writing process and his professional experience as a film actor, (including: *The Battle of Chile*, 1972, *Sub Terra*, 2003, *Machuca*, 2004, *El Viaje de Emilio*, 2010), made his a unique and profound contribution to the progress of the School's curriculum, most notably in the area of writing for theatre, which over the years increasingly empowered the student voice.

### **The relationship Between Teacher and Learner – A Turning Point**

While staff input goes some way to explaining the mobility of a curriculum, Lecoq's method is profoundly dynamised by the students themselves. Teaching the two-year pedagogical cycle, in my case over fourteen years, it is interesting to note that our own student cohorts appeared subtly to change over time. How does one begin to account for the shift in student interest and concern? Moreover, what is the role of the teacher in this context? In order to address these questions it is necessary to backtrack thirty years. The Chilean cultural background outlined earlier, set the stage for La Mancha's work, but this transformed as democracy increasingly asserted itself. In his own writings, Lecoq acknowledges that 'The great strength of the school lies in its students' (2000: 23). A Turning Point in my understanding of this assertion occurred when, in 1996, still in its early days, The La Mancha School featured prominently in the documentary *Obstinate Memory* (1997) made by the Chilean documentary film director, Patricio Guzmán as a sequel to his internationally renowned trilogy, *The Battle of Chile* (1975, 1977, 1979).<sup>8</sup>

*The Battle of Chile* chronicles the 'Popular Unity' era of Salvador Allende and had never before been shown in Chile. Guzmán returned to his homeland to show the film for the first time to a cross-section of society with the aim of capturing how obliterated memories might be reawakened. La Mancha's involvement in the film marked a turning point in the way I understood the role of life experience in the pedagogical process. The documented reaction of



our students to seeing *The Battle of Chile*, starkly exposed the confrontation between an ineffaceable past and a new generation of young Chileans who had been educated effectively, to forget history. The result was overwhelming, as Cathérine Humblot observes in her analysis of *Obstinate Memory*, ‘The film ends with an intense and terrible sequence: the shaken, troubled faces of the youths incapable of controlling the emotions that arise in them as they contemplate their own history.’<sup>9</sup> These were the faces of our students.

From that point in our development, I became deeply mindful of the fact that students are not simply a *tabula rasa*, but instead, necessarily bring to the process elements of themselves and their experiences. On the one hand these students had witnessed their family’s involvement either for or against military rule. The hurt ran deep and to discuss it or to explore it within a theatrical context was a dangerous and uncomfortable option at the time. This in part, may go some way to explaining the challenges of initiating the voice programme at the La Mancha School. Initially it was difficult to fathom why vocal projection and articulation were so problematic for early cohorts. Importantly, these students had lost family members and had grown up in a culture where to talk openly was acutely dangerous. While I may be oversimplifying the reasons for their unique vocal characteristics, it was compelling to witness subsequent generations of students become increasingly assertive and imaginative in their vocal technique and experimentation.

### **Developing a Dialogic Space**

Varela’s enactive paradigm asserts that identities are in constant motion. In line with this argument, the dynamic evolving of La Mancha’s curriculum is intricately and intrinsically tied into the students themselves. If students themselves change over time, it is crucial for the teacher to be sensitive to these nuances in order to identify a latent concern or an emerging possibility. As such, the La Mancha School curriculum acknowledges the individual student and the evolving cultural context within which we work. Increasingly, we felt able to potentiate a process of enquiry that seeks to explore possibilities with the students rather than to impart fixed ideas, thus confirming that Lecoq’s approach is not so much about mastery as enquiry. Viewed from this perspective, Lecoq’s teaching approach chimes more accurately with what Peter Jarvis sees as a shift away ‘from a delivery of static knowledge to a dialogical relationship where knowledge is co-created’ (Jarvis in Kahn & Walsh 2006: 36). In this sense, Lecoq’s teaching model is not fixed, but instead consists of negotiated realities and shared understandings, where the students discover themselves through the process of making their own work. Likewise, through our own students, La Mancha also discovered itself.

From a position of self-discovery the students progressively connected to the wider culture, turning their gaze outwards towards other art forms and environments, in part, I would argue, as a result of the distancing effect of the transitional period from dictatorship to democracy. This is not to offer a simplistic solution, but inevitably, the consolidation of democracy in Chile led to students' curiosity to re-encounter the world around them. This expansive and outward looking perspective was galvanised by the growing number of applicants from other countries, most notably, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba, Brazil and Spain. Increasingly, students connected to contemporary issues. In *Conteurs Mimeurs* or *storyteller mimes* (Lecoq: 2000: 103), they wanted to tackle challenging themes of incest, religion, abortion and education, topics that a few years before would have been unimaginable within a theatrical context. The students embraced the world of the bouffon with relish. Its provocative, acerbic and satirical qualities correspond with Chilean humour. Clown and Commedia dell'Arte are styles that our students have gone on to champion in their own companies and in Melodrama they choose real and pressing themes of exile, abuse in religious schools, domestic violence, disability and poverty, drawing from current events and their own experience of the world.

Our students hold a particular fascination for '*Les Tribuns*', an element of Lecoq's curriculum intended as a springboard into Tragedy. At La Mancha students are highly motivated by the imaginative reconstruction of a historic event involving the heroine/hero and a chorus. Over the years, we have been invited into a tiny suffocating space to witness Anne Frank's world. Riders on horses have charged down the mountainside to reconstruct the moment that Mapuche Indian Lautaro, confronted the Spanish invaders. Students with Jewish ancestry were given yellow stars and herded into a separate space as Hitler espoused his Nazi vision. Salvador Allende's last radio address was performed in one space while the audience moved around various otherwise indistinct spaces in the School to observe families from every aspect of society, listening intently to this defiant goodbye as they huddled around their radios. John and Yoko's 'love in' was memorable in the foyer of the School as well as Cicciolina's first parliamentary speech in Italy. The Mexican '*Chiapas*' defended their homeland in the grounds of the School and as our own daughters grew up, they participated in various roles as daughters of civil rights leaders, French revolutionaries or Che Guevara's daughters receiving his last letter. Together, students and staff have vividly experienced the power of oratory, its variant creative possibilities and the dynamics of the crowd. The use of internal and external locations broke the mould of the traditional theatre layout for the students, who demonstrate endless resourcefulness and imagination in their understanding of how a theatrical space contributes to the overall audience experience. Crucially, this 'reconstruction' process highlights the tensions of the transition from the real to the imaginary.

'*Auto-Cours*' or what might be considered in the UK as 'self-directed learning', is a core aspect of Lecoq's pedagogy. Likewise, for the first year students in the La Mancha School, the weekly sharing of their work is, amongst other things, a space for developing an understanding of critical feedback and its importance in the learning process. Over the years, second year '*Auto-Cours*' have become increasingly interactive and inter-reflective, evolving into a kind of laboratory of research and mutual discovery between teacher and student and often extending late into the evening. Sometimes the dialogue is heated, argumentative and frustrating, but because it centres on the work itself, a highly productive and vibrant exchange is always guaranteed. Writing on the relationship between student and teacher, the French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) calls for a voyage of mutual discovery, an egalitarian and life-long engagement with learning.<sup>10</sup> This view culminates in his fundamental principle of the 'pedagogy of the objective attitude', whereby, 'whoever is taught must teach' (Gaudin in Bachelard, 2005: xxi). This call for a projective approach to learning and teaching echoes the way in which Lecoq's pedagogy has offered La Mancha the means of evolving as a responsive rather than reactive institution. In this sense, Lecoq's pedagogical model might best be conceived as a 'method' in its double meaning, combining 'the rigor of a system and the indeterminacy carried by its Greek root *hodos* ("way")' (Gaudin in Bachelard, 2005: xxi).

## **Conclusion**

Over the years The La Mancha Theatre Company and the La Mancha Theatre School of Image and Gesture have evolved as both separate and interactional entities. The Theatre Company has become a space for graduates and teaching staff to explore, develop and test boundaries of performance, serving as a vital stepping-stone into the professional spheres of both practice and research. This dynamic relationship between Company and School has opened up opportunities for developing postgraduate courses in Teaching, Directing and Theatre & Human Development. In Central and South America, La Mancha has contributed to a forceful momentum of collective creation and actor/creator led work spanning two decades. Graduates have pursued careers as practising artists, actors, dancers, writers, directors, arts administrators and producers, forming national and international theatre and dance Companies. They have also gone on to teach and direct workshops in schools, local communities, hospitals, prisons, and indigenous communities, initiating and developing national and international networks as they work with each other across cohorts, cultures and continents.

The students themselves have offered the School paths for change and discovery, allowing us to continually question, challenge and renew our teaching and practice. As such, I would argue that La Mancha's journey reflects Varela's assertion that cognition is embodied and situated. Furthermore, his notion of *autopoiesis* (or the 'emergent self')<sup>11</sup> maintains that 'knowing,

doing and living are not separate things and that reality and our transitory identity are partners in a constructive dance' (1996: 415). I believe that Lecoq's pedagogical approach activates this dance in the student and in our case, generates the mobility and dynamism of La Mancha.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Varela (1946-2001), Chilean biologist, philosopher and neuroscientist.

<sup>2</sup> IDRC is a Canadian Crown corporation working in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world.

<sup>3</sup> *El Lugar Donde Termina la Tierra [The Place Where the World Ends]* (1991 – IDRC)

<sup>4</sup> From *The Guardian*: 'Chilean Theatre After Pinochet' by Michael Billington, Tuesday 7 September 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Nicanor Parra (1914 - ) is a Chilean anti-poet, mathematician and physicist.

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<sup>6</sup> *Space Explorations* is a London based artist group renowned for site-specific art work that responds to the former use of empty buildings.

<sup>7</sup> CODELCO: *Corporación Nacional de Cobre* (The Chilean National Copper Corporation)

<sup>8</sup> Guzmán's more recent documentary, *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010) is a culmination of this series.

<sup>9</sup> From *Le Monde*, France by Cathérine Humblot 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Lecoq references Gaston Bachelard as having, 'analysed the materiality of the imagination: in *L'Aire et les songes* [*Air and Dreams*]' (Lecoq 2000: 44).

<sup>11</sup> Term used by John Brockman in *The Third Culture* (1996)