

# The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre

Lynn Everett and Russell Cheek

## Introduction

Jacques Lecoq has been called one of the finest and most inspirational theatre teachers of our time.<sup>1</sup> His approach to theatre training has been described as ‘one of the greatest influences on contemporary international theatre’.<sup>2</sup> Since L’École internationale de théâtre Jacques Lecoq opened its doors in 1956 it has attracted some seven thousand students from over eighty countries around the world. The work that graduates have created in the wake of their Lecoq training spans the performing arts, including theatre, circus, film, television, dance, music and opera. Many Lecoq alumni have gone on to receive international acclaim as performers, directors, dancers, writers and teachers of theatre. Among them are Steven Berkoff, Isaac Alvarez, Philippe Avron, Luc Bondy, Yasmina Reza, Julie Taymor, Ariane Mnouchkine of Théâtre du Soleil, and Simon McBurney of Théâtre de Complicité. Through the work of its graduates, the Lecoq school has had a profound and enduring

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Esslin, ‘Mask over matter’, *Guardian Weekly* 160, no. 6 (February 7, 1999): 26; and Jacques Lecoq, Jean-Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias, *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, trans. David Bradby (London: Methuen, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body* (London: Methuen, 2000). (Quote from cover of book.)

influence on theatre across the globe and Australia has played its own part in this world-wide phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Over sixty Australians have trained at the school and returned to create and produce works inspired by their studies abroad. As with their international counterparts, Lecoq graduates working in Australia have forged new directions in theatre training and practice. This article will discuss the influence of the Lecoq school on Australian theatre through an exploration of the theatre work done by Lecoq graduates. It will focus on some key examples to illustrate how Lecoq's training has manifested in and impacted on Australian theatre. An examination of the work of alumni will highlight the impact and evolution of Lecoq's pedagogy in an Australian context. The research process for this study uses oral history methodologies. Data is drawn from personal reflections and contributions by Lecoq graduate Russell Cheek and from Lynn Everett's doctoral study, 'The Influence of the Lecoq School on Australian Theatre'. Research data also includes interviews with many other Lecoq alumni, videos, recordings, photographs of productions, theatre reviews, theatre programs and company notes and other relevant documents.

### **Who was Jacques Lecoq?**

Jacques Lecoq was born in Paris in December 1921. From a young age he had a great love of sports. He was particularly drawn to gymnastics and envisaged the latter in poetic terms. He felt the lyrical rhythms and geometry of the movement of the body in space were like a physical poetry and this had a profound effect on him.<sup>4</sup> As a young adult, he attended a college of physical education and completed teaching degrees in physical education. It was at this college that he met Jean-Marie Conty who, at the time, was responsible for physical education in France. Conty had developed an interest in the relationship between sport and theatre through his friendship with actor-directors Antonin Artaud and Jean-Louis Barrault. Lecoq's first training in theatre was with avant-garde director Claude Martin at the Travail et Culture (Centre de Recherche, d'Innovation Artistique et

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre' PhD diss. (unpublished), University of New England, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

Culturelle du monde du travail (TEC/CRIAC). This institution was founded as part of the French Resistance movement and aimed to give working-class people opportunities to engage in artistic pursuits.<sup>5</sup>

After the war, Lecoq joined others to establish Les Compagnons de la Saint Jean, which mounted large-scale festival theatre events. In 1945 he was invited to join the Comédiens de Grenoble, a company founded by the nephew of Jacques Copeau, Jean Dasté and his wife Marie-Hélène, daughter of Jacques Copeau. Both had trained with Copeau at the influential Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in Paris. With his background in sports, Lecoq was given the responsibility of providing the physical training for the actors. It was here that Lecoq first encountered masked performance and Japanese Noh theatre, both of which made a deep impression on him. He also experienced ‘the spirit’ of Copeau’s company—his philosophy, his approach to actor training and his ‘ambition to take theatre that spoke simply and directly to unsophisticated audiences’. From this time onwards, Copeau became a crucial reference point for Lecoq’s work.<sup>6</sup>

Lecoq returned to Paris in 1947 and began teaching at the Éducation par le Jeu Dramatique (EPJD). This theatre school had been established by Jean-Marie Conty in collaboration with notable French avant-garde theatre and dance professionals. Then in 1948 Lecoq was invited to teach movement at the Teatro dell’università di Padova in Italy, where he established the University of Padua Theatre School and directed his first plays. In 1952, with Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler, he established the Theatre School of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan. Together with Strehler and sculptor Amleto Sartori, Lecoq helped to re-invent the lost Italian theatrical form of commedia dell’arte. This had been a vibrant, irreverent style of improvised street theatre that began in the sixteenth century. The commedia actors created characters based on vivid social stereotypes using leather caricature half-masks that allowed the actor to speak and demanded a high level of physical performance. It was during his time in Italy that Lecoq gained experience working on many productions with different theatrical forms. Here he formulated his mime techniques and developed his skills in teaching, directing, and theatre choreography. He became sought after throughout Italy as a theatre choreographer and was invited to choreograph

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<sup>5</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>6</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

and direct some sixty theatre productions. Lecoq notes that he made ‘two fundamental discoveries’ in Italy: the ‘Italian commedia dell’arte and Ancient Greek tragedy and its chorus’.<sup>7</sup>

Lecoq returned to Paris in 1956 and founded his school in a studio on the rue d’Amsterdam. The school relocated a number of times over the course of its history but in 1976 it relocated to Le Central, 57 rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis in the tenth arrondissement and this has been its home ever since. The premises had an auspicious history, being situated on the street where Jacques Copeau was born. It was originally a boxing studio and then a gymnasium where Francisco Amorós y Ondeano developed his famous gymnastics method. After opening the school, Lecoq continued to direct productions but his main focus was the ongoing development of his pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> As the school grew, Lecoq engaged other tutors but he continued to teach the key aspects of the training himself. He taught at the school from the beginning until just a few days before his death on January 19, 1999. The school carries on under the direction of Lecoq’s daughter, Pascale, and continues to thrive, attracting international students from around the world.

### **What is the École Jacques Lecoq?**

Russell Cheek writes:

When I recall my first imaginings of the school it is impossible to express the nuance of feeling and romance it evoked. Even now, to describe what that humble door at 57 rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis, in that wonderful corner of the tenth arrondissement in Paris, came to mean to me over the period of time I lived in Paris and what it still means to me today, stirs up memory, emotion and gratitude. This door, and the narrow corridor that led to its inner rooms and ultimately to the Grande Salle, held so many dreams for our future.

After each day’s grappling with our personal challenges we would spill out of school into rue du Faubourg-Saint-Denis. We stood in the seventeenth century shadow of its city gate—the Porte Saint Denis.

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<sup>7</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>8</sup> Mira Felner, *Apostles of Silence: The Modern French Mimes* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

Our senses came alive. This was a magical, provincial French market street—we saw rabbits hanging nude, raw, strung upside down by their still-remaining fluffy socks, a wonderful cornucopia of cheeses, vegetables, breads, meats and pastries. These sights, smells and sounds became the fabric of our daily lives. What a brilliant precinct we shared. What a blessing we lived. And to Lecoq's credit, the observation and recreation of such aspects of Parisian life, in its inestimable forms and characters, became an essential and examinable part of our formation over our allotted two years' instruction.

The École Jacques Lecoq is an international theatre school situated in the heart of Paris. The hallmark of Lecoq's pedagogy is the motif of 'the journey' with all its connotations of movement and traversing different terrains.<sup>9</sup> The cornerstone of Lecoq's philosophy and approach is his signature phrase 'tout bouge—everything moves'. The movement of the body in space is at the centre of the Lecoq school and is viewed as the primary tool in any quest to create and perform theatre. The primary aim of the school is to empower students to generate new dramatic works and, to this end, the students' creativity and imagination are continually kindled. Russell Cheek continues:

Each stage of the course would enhance and develop in tandem the actor's body as the engine-room of all theatre, as well as the attendant liberation of the imagination via improvisation and weekly 'auto-cours'—devised short pieces developed and performed in small groups.

The pedagogy is a cohesive, structured learning sequence that follows a specific order of progression, moving from silence to the spoken word.<sup>10</sup> The following quotes express the essence of Lecoq's philosophy and the quality of the educational journey:

In life I want students to be alive, and on stage I want them to be artists<sup>11</sup>. . . . So in the journey we are to take, we shall observe life as it is. No natural gesture appears natural in the theatre. There is a

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<sup>9</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>10</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>11</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

transposition. . . . a false gesture must replace it. But the foundation is to know what are the rhythms and observations possible in real life, in order to nourish the actor with what he needs to imitate, because in fact the actor is a mimic.<sup>12</sup>

The Lecoq school offers a two-year course with the curriculum running in two parallel directions through the study of improvisation and analysis of movement. In the beginning, the training is not concerned with acting but with the world and its movements. It is primarily focused on the observation and imitation of life through the miming body using Lecoq's 'mimodynamic' technique which is a type of 'open mime' that Lecoq considers to be a fundamental human action that is central to all theatre and all the Arts.<sup>13</sup>

The first year opens with a study of the movements of life, exploring the dynamics of physical actions and natural phenomena. The actor's journey proper begins with the physicality, dynamism, mystery and presence of the neutral mask. This is a leather, full-face, non-speaking mask specifically designed for actor-training and is not intended to be worn in a theatrical performance. Unlike other theatre masks, the features of the neutral mask do not express a particular character but represent the universal human experience and the essence of what is common to all humanity.

One objective of training in this mask is to give the actor a greater awareness and control of what they communicate physically through their body on stage. The other objective is to nourish the actors by asking them to observe and physically express the movement dynamics of what they encounter in the world around them, both natural and human-made. Under the neutral mask, students experience and learn to identify with the movement dynamics of nature including: the elements of earth, air, water, and fire; materials like paper, glass, silk, liquids; colours; insects, animals; approaches to poetry, painting, music and objects.<sup>14</sup> Russell Cheek describes it thus:

As students we follow, embody, identify with, imagine, explore, refine and create from these dynamics and vectors with our bodies in space.  
Rhythms. The Pause. The Silence.

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<sup>12</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>13</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>14</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.



Commedia masks in leather, made by Russell Cheek:  
Capitano, Arlecchino and Pantalone

[In Bali, Russell Cheek met the mask-maker Ida Bagus Anom, and commissioned him to carve wooden moulds of some commedia characters—Capitano, Arlecchino, Pantalone and Tartaglia, from which he painstakingly made leather masks. <http://russellcheek.com.au/commedia-dellarte/>]

Work with the neutral mask is followed by explorations with a range of expressive masks. These are non-speaking, full-face character masks and larval or Basel masks, inspired by the large white masks used in the Festival of Basel in Switzerland.

The physical dynamics that are learned during all these mask and physical exercises give students a foundational physical vocabulary and a rich palate of movement qualities that can then be transposed into characterisations and dramatic situations. This is what all the previous training has been working towards and, as students near the end of the first year, they undertake a major assessment. Russell Cheek continues:

The climax of the first year was the Enquête or investigation. In this task, each class broke into three or four groups, chose a milieu of Parisian life and, for a period of about two months, studied and observed the milieu. Then, in the final week of the first year, we presented our pieces before each other in a soirée. One group took on Les Péniches—the culture of the barges of Paris. Forty years later it stays with me. The group darkened the Grande Salle completely and with no props save a couple of bicycle lamps and a minimal soundtrack, created the impression that we were on barges in the Seine, manoeuvring before dawn... It exemplified and summarised so much of what we had learnt in that first year: movement, sensitive observation, collaboration in the goal of creating images in rhythm and sound which, by cumulative seduction of the senses, transported the watcher into a believable world. Lecoq put a great deal of emphasis on observation in his pedagogy and insisted that we be able to create scenes that were underpinned with an irrefutable reality.

While the first year emphasised the world and its movements, the second year focused on the student as theatre artist. After initial preparatory studies in pantomime blanche and conteur mimeur (storytelling mime) comes the study of a number of theatrical forms which Lecoq calls a geodramatic exploration of ‘dramatic territories’ including Ancient Greek Tragedy and chorus, commedia dell’arte, melodrama, bouffons, and the art of the clown.<sup>15</sup> Lecoq regards these five dramatic territories as foundational in that they

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<sup>15</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.



embody essential theatrical structures which offer students a framework from which to generate new original dramatic works. Throughout the course, Lecoq is always wanting students to find ‘l’esprit du jeu’ in their performance—the quality of taking pleasure in performing and bringing each moment alive. Lecoq describes ‘le jeu’: ‘when, aware of the theatrical dimension, the actor can shape an improvisation for spectators, using rhythm, tempo, space, form’.<sup>16</sup>

An important aspect of the first and second year curriculum is the auto-cours or self-directed study. Every week during the program, students are given a specific task to create a small dramatic piece that is then performed in a public presentation. The theme or ‘provocation’ for the task relates to the subject matter that is currently being studied. The final year culminates in a solo clown performance. The study of the neutral mask and the study of the clown ‘book-end’ the two-year program and, as Lecoq comments, they ‘frame a student’s journey through the school. The neutral mask focuses on that which is common to everyone, to all humanity, while the study of the clown focuses on what is unique to each individual’.<sup>17</sup>

### **Why do Australians want to go to the Lecoq school?**

Russell Cheek remembers:

Scores of us hopefuls left our home country and embarked upon an expensive adventure: to live, learn and speak in a foreign land and language. We were, for the most part, in our twenties. We were struggling to find a common language at an international school—in gesture, movement, word and sound. This was a full-body immersion, far from home.

It is perhaps surprising that over sixty Australians should travel half way around the world to study with a little-known theatre teacher in an old boxing centre in Paris. However, when the first Australians left for Europe to study with Lecoq in the early 1960s, it seems that the times were ripe for what the Lecoq school had to offer and the antipodean students were to capture the zeitgeist of a critical period in Australia’s theatre history.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>17</sup> Lecoq, *The Moving Body*.

<sup>18</sup> Lynn Everett, ‘The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre’.

As in other parts of the world, this was a period of dynamic social and cultural change. In the theatre world, this period saw a movement away from the predominance of mainstream, psychological realism and a movement towards more physical, movement-based, popular theatre forms.

Prior to the 1960s Australia had relied almost exclusively on imported theatre from America and particularly Britain. Not only were theatre productions imported, but so too were approaches to playwriting and acting styles like melodrama and psychological realism.<sup>19</sup> The first professional theatre companies and actor training schools in Australia were established by English immigrants and based on the English model.<sup>20</sup> As theatre critic James Waites noted, 'Basically acting back then was standing around speaking in a good English voice'.<sup>21</sup> After the 1950s, however, a major shift occurred that would produce a significant transformation in Australian theatre. Within the context of a general climate of growing nationalism, a quest began for a 'distinctive Australian theatre',<sup>22</sup> with 'Australian' plays and a recognisably 'Australian' acting style.<sup>23</sup> This profound shift came to be known as the 'new wave' and was fuelled by the production of new Australian form and content in pockets of the Sydney and Melbourne theatre scenes. This period also saw the establishment of state-operated theatre companies presenting Australian plays and the emergence of community theatre in Australia.<sup>24</sup>

This, then, was the broader theatrical context within which the Lecoq influence in Australia began to emerge. Australian actors and directors were searching for an alternative theatre training and the Lecoq school seemed to

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<sup>19</sup> Katherine Brisbane and Nick Enright, 'Acting', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 17–23; John Clark, 'Directors and directing', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 192–194.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Mitchell, 'English Influences', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995); Peter Lavery, 'National Institute of Dramatic Art', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Amruta Slee, 'One cool chameleon', *HQ*, 57, 42–49.

<sup>22</sup> Veronica Kelly, *Our Australian Theatre in the 1990s* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Brisbane and Nick Enright, 'Acting', 17–23.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Murphet, 'Victorian College of the Arts', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 625.

have what they were looking for. George Ogilvie thought Lecoq's training suited his 'physical nature' and he has suggested that Australia's interest in Lecoq's approach relates to a cultural disposition in that 'the physical nature of Lecoq's work suited Australians down to the ground'.<sup>25</sup> Others were drawn to study theatre traditions that were distinctly different from Australia's British theatrical heritage. As Geoffrey Rush has commented, Australia's geographical remoteness has meant a cultural estrangement and isolation from 'great European or international traditions that go back much deeper in theatre history for different cultures that we haven't been part of'.<sup>26</sup>

Upon their return to Australia, graduates have reinvested the skills, techniques and abilities they gained at the Lecoq school. They have gone on to work as actors, directors, writers and teachers of theatre, founding theatre companies and contributing to community projects. They have passed on what they learned to others in workshops, theatre schools, actor training institutions and universities throughout Australia. Importantly, what these graduates created was not French or even European theatre, but Australian theatre that reflected our own culture with its penchant for movement and our own stories. As Nigel Jamieson comments:

[Physical theatre is] what Australia does spectacularly well. It's what Australia has become famous for really. . . . This is something that can be uniquely Australian. It's about Australian humour, it's about Australian physicality, and it's about Australia's sense of egalitarian traditions.<sup>27</sup>

What identifies the work of Lecoq graduates is its diversity of dramatic form, its overt theatricality and focus on collaborative creation. As well as developing new styles of theatre inspired by the local milieu, alumni have introduced a number of theatre forms never before seen in this country. They have contributed significantly to the growth of a vibrant physical theatre as well as to what Richard Harris in 1994 called the 'revolution' in Australian comedy that produced 'a comedy culture that was both rich in talent and unmistakably Australian'.

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<sup>25</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Rush and Neil Armfield, 'Tearing the cat: The Fifth Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture for 1999', *Australasian Drama Studies* 36, (April 2000): 4–18.

<sup>27</sup> As cited in Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

### **The influence of visiting international theatre artists**

Although the strongest impact on Australian theatre has come from local Lecoq graduates working within Australia, a significant impression has also been made by visiting theatre artists and companies. Through their work Australian audiences, critics, performers, directors, writers and producers of theatre have been privy to and inspired by alternative visions of what theatre can be and what theatre can do.<sup>28</sup>

Cirque du Soleil has of course toured Australia multiple times, and Lecoq graduate René Bazinet was the original creator of the clown act for this company. Steven Berkoff directed productions for the Nimrod in 1977 and for the Bell Shakespeare Company in 1996. Footsarn Travelling Theatre toured their production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Adelaide Festival in 1985 and again in 1990. Yasmina Reza's play *Art* was produced by the Ensemble Theatre in 2004 and *God of Carnage* by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2009. The Swiss theatre company Mummenschanz toured to Australia in 1988 and again in 2006. The stage production of *The Lion King* toured to Australia in 2003–5 and in 2013, directed and designed by Lecoq graduate Julie Taymor. The critically acclaimed production of *War Horse* toured Australia in 2012, and Lecoq graduate Toby Sedgwick was the horse puppet choreographer.

Théâtre de Complicité, now simply 'Complicité', has brought to Australia a series of exceptional shows over many years which have expressed and showcased the essence of Lecoq's pedagogy, namely 'theatre based on the body and an ensemble of actors devising and improvising to create theatre'. The company toured productions of *The Winter's Tale* in 1992, *Street of Crocodiles* for the Festival of Sydney in 1993, *The Three Lives of Lucy Cabrol* in 1995, *A Disappearing Number* in 2008, McBurney's one-man show, *The Encounter* in 2017, *A Pacifist's Guide to the War on Cancer* in 2018, and *Beware of Pity* in 2019 for the Sydney Festival.

### **The beginnings: George Ogilvie**

George Ogilvie was one of the first Australians to go to the Lecoq School in 1960, and upon his return to Australia he worked as Artistic Director of

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

the Melbourne Theatre Company (1965–1972), then as Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company (1972–1976), and subsequently as a freelance director of theatre, television, and film. He has directed productions for virtually all of Australia’s major theatre companies and has worked with the Australian Opera and the Australian Ballet. His career spanned some forty years and touched generations of actors, directors, playwrights, theatre teachers and audience members. His influence within the Australian theatre industry is substantial and he is primarily responsible for the introduction and proliferation of Lecoq’s work within mainstream theatre circles.<sup>29</sup> As Ogilvie observed:

When I returned to Australia in 1965, of course no-one had yet heard of Lecoq, but gradually through the Melbourne Theatre Company and workshops with The Australian Performing Group, [Lecoq’s] practice for the actor began to take hold.<sup>30</sup>

During 1965 to 1970, Melbourne got a taste of almost everything that I’d learned and I gave classes to the actors ... clown classes ... mask and mime. . . .<sup>31</sup>

Ogilvie’s work was to become the first stable and far-reaching thread between the quintessentially European school and the far antipodean outpost of Australian theatre. Ogilvie always conducted Lecoq-based workshops as part of his directing approach. He gave workshops to train the actors in the Melbourne Theatre Company and when he was appointed the Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company he trained the ensemble of actors for several months during the first year. Katharine Brisbane regarded Ogilvie’s strong focus on actor training as a critical move towards the development of an ‘Australian theatre’ and a new ‘Australian’ acting style. She was impressed by what Ogilvie had achieved with his actor training scheme and felt that Ogilvie was well on the way to achieving these goals.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> As cited in Lynn Everett, ‘The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre’.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Portus, ‘Arts Today’, ABC Radio, February 3, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> As cited in Lynn Everett, ‘The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre’.

<sup>32</sup> As cited in Peter Ward, *A Singular Act: Twenty-five years of the State Theatre Company of South Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1992).

Ogilvie's directing reflected his Lecoq training in many respects, particularly in terms of characterisation, *mise en scène*, and theatrical form. His approach to directing scripted plays was to work with the text in combination with physical movement work. He made great use of the chorus in creating choreographic movement in a number of his productions.

Lecoq was a man who had a vision about the space we call the stage and it was this vision that I saw. We did a lot of work on Greek chorus and on the focus of the stage and this is really what I left Australia to discover as a director and that was to learn about the stage itself. I wanted to see it in a choreographic way and the notion of focus in a chorus and in a Greek script, which we began to use, became the most fabulous way of approaching theatre as a director.<sup>33</sup>

Ogilvie's training in a repertoire of theatrical forms was not only apparent in his use of form as a principal aspect of theatre dynamics, but in his employment of particular theatrical forms in his productions. Ogilvie's training in *commedia dell'arte* and the art of clowning was notable in a number of his comic productions, and these forms were virtually unknown at the time. He has been variously described as a director who 'excels in stylish comedy and farce',<sup>34</sup> and 'the master of farce'.<sup>35</sup>

His production of *The Servant of Two Masters* in 1967 for the Melbourne Theatre Company was the first to bring the *commedia* form to mainstream stages and audiences. He incorporated the *commedia* style into a number of his productions including *The Government Inspector* for the Melbourne Theatre Company and *The Comedy of Errors* for the South Australian Theatre Company. Significantly, Ogilvie chose to mount a *commedia* play, *The Three Cuckolds* for the première production of the opening of the new Adelaide Festival Centre Playhouse in 1974.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ogilvie as cited in Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>34</sup> John Clark, 'Directors and directing'.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Ward, *A Singular Act: Twenty-five years of the State Theatre Company of South Australia*.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Ward, *A Singular Act: Twenty-five years of the State Theatre Company of South Australia*.

## Nigel Jamieson

Nigel Jamieson was born in England and studied with Lecoq in 1988. Since moving to Australia in 1994 he has risen to prominence for his direction of large-scale, outdoor spectacle and festival events. In the relatively short time he has been in Australia, he has had a significant influence on theatre in this country. He has been called ‘one of the most energetic, hard-driving and visionary theatre-makers working in Australia’<sup>37</sup> and was ‘instrumental in integrating highly physical and visual theatre at large scale events’.<sup>38</sup>

Jamieson’s productions have had immense audience exposure and he has pioneered new directions and genres in circus and physical theatre. His directing and devising works include *Red Square* for the 1996 Adelaide Festival; *Kelly’s Republic*, the central commission for the 1997 Sydney Festival; *Flamma Flamma: Fire Requiem*, the opening event of the 1998 Adelaide Festival; and the visual theatre show *Wake Baby*, for the Moomba Children’s Festival, which toured internationally. He is best known for the creation and artistic direction of *Tin Symphony* for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games Opening Ceremony as well as the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games in 2006. He is also renowned for his work with internationally acclaimed physical theatre company Legs on the Wall and Brisbane’s Rock n Roll Circus. In 1991 he founded the Australian International Workshop Festival and invited Jacques Lecoq to Australia as one of the contributors. This was the first and only time Lecoq visited Australia.<sup>39</sup>

Jamieson considers his training with Lecoq as the critical influence on his approach to directing and devising theatrical material:

[Lecoq’s training] is to do with the very fundamentals of space and how we inhabit space [...]. You start with understanding how a stage is balanced, the fundamental choreography of chorus. This is absolutely

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<sup>37</sup> Elissa Blake, ‘Theatre of war’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 2008, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/theatre-of-war-20080719-gdsml.html>

<sup>38</sup> Gavin Robins, ‘The passion and totality of your body, mind and soul: An interview with Nigel Jamieson’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 35, (October 1999): 44–51.

<sup>39</sup> Lynn Everett, ‘The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre’.

fundamental to the way I approach theatre. In almost every rehearsal [...] I utilise exercises to balance the space and to get the performers to feel the rhythms and energy of the game they are playing.<sup>40</sup>

The idea of the chorus is a strong element in much of Jamieson's productions, where he uses the chorus inventively and on a grand scale. In *Kelly's Republic*, for example, he devised a production that was inspired by Sydney Nolan's series of Ned Kelly paintings. The piece was staged on the Opera House forecourt and incorporated visual spectacle, sound, song, and music. Using the iconic Kelly mask and armour, he created a chorus of Ned Kellys; sometimes a solo Kelly would be the focus and sometimes the chorus of Kellys performed together as an ensemble. At the opening of the piece, a lone figure of Ned Kelly appears from high up on the Opera House sails. Below in the forecourt, another Ned Kelly figure appears on horseback and rides towards the audience. Then a chorus of Ned Kellys appear carrying long rifles. Other choruses in the piece included ensembles of thirty-five Irish dancers and thirteen percussionists. Jamieson also incorporated clown elements in scenes such as the police chase led by a chorus of 'Constable Plods' riding tricycles. Many of the key elements in this production found their way into the Olympics' *Tin Symphony*.<sup>41</sup>

### **Geoffrey Rush**

Geoffrey Rush is best known for his award-winning performance as David Helfgott in the film *Shine*. However, prior to garnering the 1997 Academy Award for Best Actor, Rush had long been one of Australia's most acclaimed and distinguished directors and stage performers. His theatre career spans some four decades and over seventy theatrical productions. He has consistently worked in Australia's major theatre companies and has made a tremendous contribution to Australian theatre as a director and performer.

Rush trained at the Lecoq school in 1975 and 1976, when the school was celebrating its twentieth anniversary. He has candidly acknowledged the influence his Lecoq training has had on his performance and directorial work:

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<sup>40</sup> Gavin Robins, 'The passion and totality of your body, mind and soul: An interview with Nigel Jamieson', *Australasian Drama Studies* 35, (October 1999): 44–51.

<sup>41</sup> Angela Bennie, 'Kelly rides again', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 30, 1996, 15.



I always knew when I was there that I was in the hands of a great teacher. I think the most overt examples of [the training] are things like *Clowneroonies* and *Popular Mechanicals* and *Diary of a Madman* [...]. ... I'd always liked the chameleon actors and somehow that sense of transformation is really what I did discover in a big way at Lecoq's— about the transformation of your own self.<sup>42</sup>

Rush says that it was the study of the art of clowning which left the most striking impression on him. When he returned to Australia in 1978 he quickly harnessed his Lecoq training by devising, directing and acting in *Clowneroonies*, his directorial debut for the Queensland Theatre Company. This show introduced Lecoq's clown style to mainstream audiences and Rush suggests it had 'quite an impact because it was long before any kind of red nose clowning had really been done here in any full-scale way'.<sup>43</sup> The show was critically acclaimed and described as 'one of QTC's most successful, original and durable offsprings'.<sup>44</sup>

Rush then created *The Popular Mechanicals*, which became his most popular and acclaimed directorial undertaking. This collaboratively devised play was based on the rustic clown characters in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The production played in every major city in Australia.<sup>45</sup> Critics praised the show, with one reviewer calling it, 'the most strikingly original comedy of the year'<sup>46</sup> and another, 'one of the cleverest pieces of original theatre seen here for a very long time'.<sup>47</sup> Acclaim was not only given to the inventiveness and high quality of the piece, but also to Rush's direction: '... great clowning, sheer lunacy and mad, joyous foolery.

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<sup>42</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>44</sup> Mary Nemeth, 'A Rush Job is also a Labour of Care', *Financial Review*, October 2, 1987, <https://www.afr.com/politics/a-rush-job-is-also-a-labour-of-care-19871002-k2he6>.

<sup>45</sup> Tony Sheldon, 'Tony Taylor', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995),

<sup>46</sup> Paul LePetit, 'Review of The Popular Mechanicals', *Sunday Telegraph*, November 22, 1987.

<sup>47</sup> Susan Bredow, 'Review of The Popular Mechanicals', *Daily Telegraph*, November 23, 1987.

Much of this is the consequence of Geoffrey Rush's skilled, tight direction. His comic sense is a finely tuned one ...'.<sup>48</sup>

Rush is a consummate performer who is able to bring the liveliness, playfulness and creativity of Lecoq's ethos to a role. Critics have often commented on the physical aspects of his performance, noting his extensive range of expression, and admiring his 'physical precision', 'rich physical vocabulary',<sup>49</sup> and 'physical eloquence'.<sup>50</sup> This was particularly the case with his portrayal of Poprishchin in Nikolai Gogol's *The Diary of a Madman*. Here Rush artfully conveyed the gradual descent into madness of Poprishchin as he transforms from a mildly eccentric Government clerk into an insane delusion of himself as King Ferdinand VIII of Spain. This remarkable transformation was lauded by critics: 'Geoffrey Rush is a stylish and sometimes stylised performer. His acute physical control is as remarkable as his imaginative characterisation. His Parisian training is obvious'.<sup>51</sup> Directed by Neil Armfield, *Diary of a Madman* premiered at Belvoir Street Theatre before playing at the Melbourne Theatre Company, the Adelaide Festival, a return season at Belvoir, and later touring to Russia. Rush received both popular and critical acclaim for his performance and won three major theatre industry awards.

### **Russell Cheek**

Russell Cheek trained at the Lecoq school in 1978–1980. After graduating he paired up with his clown-duo partner from the school and performed a show *I Patate (The Potatoes)* at the In Teatro festival in Italy. Later at the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt he performed another clown show, *Debut*, under Philippe Gaulier's direction. He then returned to Paris for a year and formed a theatre company called Double Take with fellow Lecoq alumni Claire Teisen from the USA, Ted Keijser from the Netherlands and later, Australian Lecoq graduate Iacon Gunn.

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<sup>48</sup> Angela Bennie, 'Review of *The Popular Mechanicals*', *Australian*, November 23, 1987.

<sup>49</sup> John McCallum, Review of *Diary of a Madman*, *Australian*, March 30, 1932.

<sup>50</sup> Frank Gauntlett, Review of *Diary of a Madman*, *Daily Mirror*, 1989, July 27.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Healey, 'Geoffrey Rush', *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, ed. Philip Parsons (Sydney: Currency Press, 1995), 513–514.

They played an independent Paris season and then a showcase in Amsterdam, before completing an extensive tour of the Netherlands. In 1982 the company arrived in Australia and played seasons in Newcastle, the Sydney Festival, Belvoir Street, the Adelaide Festival and *The Last Laugh* in Melbourne. The troupe had two shows in repertoire: *The Last Laugh*, which was a spoof on Raymond Chandler style detective novels and *No Flies on Biggles*, a mad-cap Australian stage version of the British series of adventure books.

Double Take used visual humour created through mime and movement to convey the narrative. They mimed dog-fights, scuba-diving in the Barrier Reef and flying a plane from Britain to Australia. Cheek notes that the work was ground breaking at the time.

Audiences recognised a truly fresh stage-craft. This was Australian audience's first glimpse of a signature, tight, funny, creative Lecoq ensemble, performing self-devised work. We did make an impact because we worked in a style together that people really hadn't seen companies do before.<sup>52</sup>

The critics agreed and sang the company's praises:

[*The Last Laugh*] is full of effects done almost without the help of props, but with well-disciplined imagination [...]. All three are tightly controlled, very stylish actors, who can take a piece of nonsense to the nth degree of well-timed humour.<sup>53</sup>

*No Flies on Biggles* delightfully fulfils [Double Take's aim] ... of sharing a style of theatre that is 'alive ... visual and, above all, accessible'.<sup>54</sup>

Cheek considers that the group's performances in 1982 had a seminal influence on the 'revolution' in Australian comedy, contributing to its growth and development through his work with the Castanet Club and Circus Oz. As a direct result of his work with Double Take, Cheek was invited to join the Castanet Club, which became prominent both nationally and internationally between 1983 and 1991.

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<sup>52</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>53</sup> Tim Lloyd, 'Happiness is a Last Laugh', *Advertiser*, March 9, 1982.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Molloy, 'Nothing to do with the Real Biggles', *Sydney Morning Herald* (The Arts), February 9, 1982, 8.

Born in Newcastle, the Castanet Club sported 1960s costumes and created shows that were a mix of music, movement, mayhem and satire powered by a cast of comic characters. After the Castanet Club folded, Cheek performed a series of roles in productions for the Sydney Theatre Company including *The Government Inspector* directed by Neil Armfield, *Tartuffe* directed by Barrie Kosky and *A Month in the Country*, directed by Lindy Davies. In 2002 the Artistic Director of Circus Oz, Mike Finch, invited Cheek to spend an extended period in Melbourne to conduct a creative lab for the performers and then to devise an entirely new show for the company. Cheek's brief was to bring a new level of theatricality by giving the performers a more cohesive approach to developing characters, ensemble playing, and structuring narrative circus acts. Finch and Cheek then co-directed the material and wove it into a new show which became one of the company's most successful world-touring spectacles. In 2003 John McCallum wrote, 'This is Circus Oz's best show in years—an exhilarating ride ... even more fun'.

Cheek continued to work in the spirit of his Lecoq training with his solo show *Who am I?*, conceived and directed by Stephen Abbott of The Castanet Club. After an initial Sydney season, the show was invited by Rachel Healy and Neil Armfield to play in the Adelaide Festival. *Australian Stage* called it 'An absolute treat [...] a carefree and comic delight. Fascinating and funny [...] Winning, warm and rewarding ...'.<sup>55</sup>

### **Passing on the baton: the teachers and the schools**

The teaching work of Lecoq graduates has had a widespread influence on performance training in Australia. Lecoq himself gave workshops as part of the Australian International Workshop Festival in 1991. Short courses have also been given periodically by Lecoq's long-time clown teacher Philippe Gaulier. Lecoq graduates themselves have given numerous independent workshops, taught at private theatre schools and at major university, tertiary, and actor-training institutions throughout the country. Alumni have taught Lecoq-based pedagogy to high school teachers as part of teacher-training courses run by state education departments.

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Cotter, 'Who am I ...? Old 505 Theatre', *Australian Stage*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.australianstage.com.au/201608067915/reviews/sydney/who-am-i...-%7C-old-505-theatre.html> .

Lecoq's approach has been a consistent and growing presence in major actor-training institutions. With the growing popularity of physical and circus theatre forms, Lecoq's pedagogy has grown and become more predominant.<sup>56</sup>

In 1975, Heather Robb began teaching at the Ensemble and later at NIDA, where her students included Mel Gibson and Judy Davis. Isabelle Anderson took up Robb's position at NIDA in 1980 and taught clowning to students who would later appear in *Strictly Ballroom*. Also at NIDA, Richard Hayes-Marshall, Luda and Ron Poppenhagen introduced movement-based approaches, work with the neutral and Basel masks, commedia dell'arte and clowning. Jo Turner currently teaches actor training at NIDA and has done so for a number of years.

At the Victorian College of the Arts John Bolton, Lorna Marshall and Stephanie Kehoe have contributed similarly. Bolton has made a particularly significant contribution, teaching there over many years since 1986. Lorna Marshall was Head of Movement in 1997. Judith Pippin has taught Lecoq-based performance at QUT. Lecoq alumni have established two long-standing private theatre schools based on Lecoq's pedagogy and curriculum. The Drama Action Centre in Sydney was founded by Francis Batten in 1980 and the John Bolton Theatre School in Melbourne in 1991, with Stephanie Kehoe also teaching at the latter. Both schools were modelled on Lecoq's curriculum in terms of how the courses were structured, the subjects taught and the methodological approach. Graduates have gone on to do varied theatrical work, but particularly self-devised physical theatre. A study of Lecoq's pedagogy is even offered as a topic option in the NSW Drama Syllabus for the HSC examination. For the young people who elect this option, their studies may ignite a desire to become future actors and directors.<sup>57</sup>

### **The grass roots influence: community, street and festival theatre**

Many Lecoq alumni have been working solidly on the margins rather than in mainstream theatre in street, festival, and community settings. In many cases, this has been a deliberate choice rather than a necessity, with graduates preferring to be at liberty to create, design and direct their own

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<sup>56</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>57</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

original theatre. They have contributed to the growth of street and festival theatre in Australia over the last five decades. Many have contributed to the rise of Australian comedy culture.

In the 1970s, for instance, Lecoq graduate Heather Robb and her creative partner Jan Hamilton devised and performed a female clowning duo. Their show *Ready for Men*, introduced Lecoq's clown to Australian audiences and challenged what had traditionally been a male domain, paving the way for future female clown and comedy acts. Later, Lecoq alumni Christine Grace and Therese Collie have also performed clown acts and therefore served as role models in a style that had previously been taboo for women.

In the 1980s, the company Red Weather, founded by Andrew Lindsay, Nicoletta Boris and Nique Murch, introduced Lecoq's bouffon form to Australia. They performed self-devised pieces in many major cities between 1984 and 1989. They used the humorous and unsettling bouffon as a vehicle for cutting social comment by satirising aspects of Australian culture. Other graduates have also drawn on personal experience and observation of the local culture and environment. Isabelle Anderson created a solo mask piece called *New Sky* that focused on immigrants in Australia. Dominique Sweeney and Will Hodgson created a piece about life on Australia's Gold Coast called *Strangers in Paradise*. For the devised piece, *Children of the Devil*, Russell Dykstra created his characters based on his observations of life and the people he encountered. Steven Bishop created large stilt-walking bouffonesque characters for the Brisbane Festival and Southbank. Michael Newbold has performed his stilt-walking clown character called 'Longdrop' in cafés, in the street and at festivals. Justin Case has performed his clown character at clubs, race courses and even at the Sydney Casino taxi rank.<sup>58</sup>

Lecoq alumni have also influenced community theatre. Graduates have worked with West Theatre Company in Melbourne (1979–1991), Street Arts Theatre Company in Brisbane (1982–1991), Theatre of the Deaf, the Humour Foundation, people with disabilities, unemployed people, young people and on community projects involving specific geographical communities. Lecoq alumni assisted and guided these communities to create their own original theatre productions. They have provided a political voice and theatrical vehicle to people within marginalised low socio-economic

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<sup>58</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

communities who were rarely able to participate in mainstream theatre practices and for whom theatre had been largely inaccessible.

A number of alumni noted that Lecoq's training gave them skills and techniques that were particularly suitable for community theatre contexts. Lecoq's physically-based and image-oriented practice proved to be well suited to community theatre contexts working with those who were not trained actors—children, adolescents, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. John Bolton and Claire Teisen contributed to a number of West Theatre Company's productions and Therese Collie was a long-term writer, director, performer, deviser and workshop leader of Street Arts Theatre Company. These alumni working at the theatrical margins but in direct contact with everyday folk have introduced Lecoq's clown and bouffon styles to Australian audiences as well as devising theatrical pieces that tell their stories primarily through movement and imagery, using mime and movement as the main channels of theatrical communication. They have enlivened our streets and festivals with weird and wonderfully playful characters who inhabit public spaces, making us look and making us laugh, sometimes at ourselves.<sup>59</sup>

### **Future directions: Emily Ayoub and the Clockfire Theatre Company**

One contemporary theatre company that is breaking new ground in physical theatre and epitomises the Lecoq ethos of devised, independent, ensemble work is the Clockfire Theatre Co. Artistic Director Emily Ayoub trained at the Lecoq school from 2008 to 2010. In 2012 she founded this troupe of actors who create their own strongly visual, physical theatre pieces. Ayoub leads a skilled ensemble of actors who collaborate in the creative process. At different times, other Lecoq graduates have also been members of the company.

The troupe's website candidly acknowledges its debt to the Lecoq school, saying '... this training has heavily influenced the ensemble's process of creating original devised theatre'.<sup>60</sup> An example of their work was seen in *Night Parade of One Hundred Goblins*, for the 2020 Sydney Festival

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<sup>59</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>60</sup> Emily Ayoub, Clockfire Theatre Company, <https://www.clockfiretheatre.com/we-the-lost-company>.

and commissioned by the Art Gallery of NSW. This piece was based on Japanese folklore traditions that focused on other-worldly happenings with trickster figures, shapeshifters and enchanted objects, accompanied by live taiko drumming. The piece was created as a complement to the ‘Japan Supernatural’ exhibition, that brought artworks from around the world focusing on the theme of supernatural beings such as monsters, goblins and imps from folk tales and legends. The work relies almost entirely on the visual spectacle and incorporates mime, clowning and a variety of characters that are at once humorous and frightening. One reviewer described it as ‘... fuel for the imagination, and with an eclectic mix of intrigue, wonder and eerie ethereality, *Night Parade of One Hundred Goblins* serves up an experience that invigorates our senses and draws us into its world’.<sup>61</sup>

Steph Keogh writes about other Lecoq influences in Melbourne and elsewhere:

The Victorian College of the Arts (VCA)’s Bachelor of Fine Arts Theatre course is directly inspired by the Lecoq pedagogy and the John Bolton Theatre School still sells out four-month workshops regularly. The presence of Lecoq/Bolton trained teachers teaching at any number of Higher Education institutions means that the influence on emerging artists in the independent sector remains extensive—from emerging companies such as POPOMOCO, Fish and Twiners’s Bait Shop, and PonyCam to established companies such as Born in a Taxi. In Sydney too, with Nigel Jamieson currently head of movement at NIDA, one can assume that emerging artists are leaving this mainstream training with at least some understanding of the Lecoq pedagogy. There is also the considerable influence in the Melbourne independent sector of Giovanni Fusetti (former teacher at the Lecoq school) who for the last six years has been giving yearly workshops in Melbourne—so this training too has had a considerable influence on the next generation of actor-creators in the Lecoq tradition.<sup>62</sup>

Further research in the other Australian states may also reveal more companies and drama schools influenced by the Lecoq school.

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<sup>61</sup> Jessie Trompp, ‘Night Parade of One Hundred Goblins’, Clockfire Theatre Company, <https://www.clockfiretheatre.com/we-the-lost-company>.

<sup>62</sup> Steph Kehoe, email message to the editors of *The French Australian Review*.



## Conclusion

What's been wonderful is being able to watch so many people go over there and bring him back. They bring Lecoq back with them and I think that every company I've seen perform in Australia ever since is gradually influenced by this extraordinary man and his work through his students [...]. It pervades everything.<sup>63</sup> (George Ogilvie)

While the main wave of students going to the school peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, it would seem that the praxis and the spirit of the Lecoq school have become a vital and integrated aspect of Australian theatre. Australians travelled to Paris with a desire to learn from a master teacher and to experience great European theatre traditions that were not accessible in their homeland. These graduates have enlivened our theatre spaces with new theatre forms like mime, clown, bouffon, and commedia dell'arte. They have brought their training to bear on scripted and devised theatre, telling dramatic stories with energy and vitality through movement and imagery as much as through words.

They have introduced a rich palate of theatrical possibilities that have manifested in a myriad of different ways. They have created popular and visually rich theatre that has widened the scope of audience appeal to include and embrace new spectators, taking theatre to people who would not ordinarily attend mainstream theatre performances. Through the acting, teaching, directing and devising work of its former students working in Australian theatre, the École Jacques Lecoq continues to influence theatre training and practice in this country.<sup>64</sup> In the words of Philippe Gaulier, 'We needed him so much. Bravo Jacques and thank you'.<sup>65</sup>

*University of New England / Sydney*

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<sup>63</sup> As cited in Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre', 97.

<sup>64</sup> Lynn Everett, 'The Influence of the Lecoq school on Australian Theatre'.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy Amsden, 'Philippe Gaulier's contribution to clown theatre: Traces and manifestations', Masters thesis (unpublished), University of Birmingham, 2011, <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/1718/1/Amsden11MPhil.pdf> .

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