This chapter will show how an actor who has been trained in what I will call “the Lecoq tradition” may approach the rehearsal of Shakespeare’s text. No one can legitimately claim to make statements that are true in all contexts for all actors who have come into contact with Lecoq’s work. It is possible, however, to argue for patterns of agenda, vocabulary and approach, and in trying to do so I will draw largely upon Ariane Mnouchkine’s production of Richard II (1981) for her company Théâtre du Soleil. In addition, I will refer to two productions of Shakespeare I directed, for which my approach was influenced by Lecoq’s ideas: A Midsummer Night’s Dream (2009) and Macbeth (2011), both at St Peter’s Arts Centre, Preston in the UK. I will also mention in passing two productions of Shakespeare plays by Theatre de Complicite for elements of supporting evidence.

Lecoq’s repertoire of concepts and exercises has been subjected to continuous revision in the hands of those who trained either at his school or with other teachers who have absorbed his influence. As Franc Chamberlain has said, “There is no ensemble with whom he is uniquely associated, no performer who is the Lecoq disciple par excellence […] there is no pure Lecoq form” (Chamberlain and Yarrow, 2002: 22). There is no pure Lecoq form. But there is an intense focus upon form within his pedagogy. Ariane Mnouchkine, in a discussion of her production of Richard II, says: “Finally, for all theatre one needs a form” (Williams, 1999: 93). Bryan Singleton elaborates upon this: “Mnouchkine’s role was to establish a working form and then to harness the improvised scenes into a coherent set of visual images consistent with the overall aesthetic of that form” (Singleton, 2010: 40). For my production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, I drew upon German and American cinema of the 1920s and 1930s to provide a set of provocations towards what I hoped would become an overall aesthetic form. It is a familiar move of the Lecoq tradition to refer to the visual languages of cinema, and Lecoq himself taught students to play with theatrical analogues of film editing techniques in his teaching of “cartoon mime” (Lecoq, 2000: 108-9). In my production, the actors found their first impetus for their characters by imitating the physical and vocal mannerisms of Greta Garbo (Hippolyta), Clark Gable (Lysander), Claudette Colbert (Hermia), Cary Grant (Demetrius) and Katherine Hepburn (Helena). The rhythms of scenes featuring the lovers were modelled on scenes from screwball comedies like Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night (1934) and Howard Hawks’s Bringing Up Baby (1938). Meanwhile, the supernatural characters were inspired by F.W. Murnau’s 1922 horror movie Nosferatu (Oberon) and James Whale’s 1935 Bride of Frankenstein (Titania). It was out of the collision between the machine-gun dialogue and percussive physical slapstick of screwball comedy, and the heavily atmospheric, slow, physically extended performance style of German Expressionism (and its American derivatives at Universal Studios) that the visual and aural world of this production gradually emerged.

For Mnouchkine, the search for form meant “an immediate voyage towards Asia, because everything is there, for music, dance, sacred art, or theatre” (Williams, 1999: 94). Some critics like Dennis Kennedy have seen a kind of decontextualizing intercultural tourism at work in
productions such as Mnouchkine’s *Richard II* (Kennedy and Young, 2010: 10). At the same time, Kennedy himself discloses just what it is that draws the Lecoq tradition to the East:

The foregrounding of embodied over verbal expression in Asian performance aesthetics, in formalized systems that appear highly stylized and presentational compared with realist representation, transpose Shakespeare according to a different order from that of textual translation, which occurs in the same (i.e. linguistic) medium. (ibid: 17-18)

Kennedy’s use of the word “transpose” here echoes Lecoq’s conception of theatre as a game that can be “transposed”: that is, it is “reinserted into the dramatic dimension” (Lecoq, 2000: 45) so that one idiom is then seen in terms of another. The act of transposition, which may involve borrowing or adapting a theatre language from another culture, will in itself foreground the means of representation. The dangers of cultural piracy are to some extent offset by a sense of visual eclecticism that marks many productions emerging out of the Lecoq tradition. This is partly a consequence of the essentially collective nature of work in a company such as Mnouchkine’s. She felt that critics who accused her of Orientalism had failed to notice that there were no exclusive references to a particular Asian form in her production. For Judith Miller, what mattered most about the turn to Asia was “the latitude it afforded her to create the feeling of staged ritual. Mnouchkine took from Asian theater a model that allowed her to perfect a gestic system and clarify physical lines” (Miller, 2007: 80). Eclecticism was also a feature of Theatre de Complicite’s production of *The Winter’s Tale*, as was noted by Peter Holland: “The cumulative effect was exhilarating in its rapidly switching moods. It was a production in which anything was possible to match a play perceived as narrating the joys of possibility” (Holland, 1997: 124).

When Mnouchkine set to work upon *Richard II*, she fastened her attention not only upon a form that might be found to transpose what she saw as “the ritual and chivalric universe” (Williams, 1999: 93) of the play, but also upon the characters in terms of what she called “states”. A state refers to the passion that the actor “must express in relation to the character” (ibid: 94); it is an emotional attitude shown through the body. The actor Philippe Hottier (who played the Duke of York in *Richard II*) breaks it down into a base state, or general “attitude to life”, and a series of secondary states that the character “will inhabit […] successively in joy, anger, aggression, etc. The base state is modified through the secondary states” (ibid: 106). Since Mnouchkine believed that it is “through the passions of his characters” that Shakespeare “expresses his understanding of human beings” (ibid: 95), her focus was on encouraging actors to “show what situation and what state the character who utters the word is in” (ibid: 96).

How does the Lecoq actor get at these states in rehearsal? The key is in Lecoq’s remark that “states and passions are expressed through gestures, attitudes and movements similar to those of physical actions” (Lecoq, 2000: 75). It is necessary to have a kind of physical reference point from which to make attitudes. This is found in the concept of neutrality. Lecoq thought of neutral mask work as deploying “a natural extension of the gestures acquired through sports” in the “training of dramatic characters” (ibid: 4). Thus it is seen as a useful “tool towards characterization” (Murray, 2003: 73). The training in neutral mask was the point of origin for Mnouchkine in her work on “base states” and “sub-states” of passions for the characters of *Richard II* (Singleton, 2010: 40).
The source material for these passions, or attitudes, was the Shakespearean text, and in particular its imagery – which Mnouchkine saw as “a raw material for performance” (ibid). The actor’s task was to “capture those images and convey them in a decoded form,” since if “he only conveys the word, it will not be decoded for the theatrical representation” (Williams, 1999: 97). The problem with this approach, however, is that even if you believe that to convey the word alone is insufficient, you may still see an act of decoding as itself a form of coding in need of decipherment. This objection has been raised by John Russell Brown, who argues that Mnouchkine interpolated into performance the “alien mechanism” of an unfamiliar theatrical language that “will tend to isolate the on-stage experience from the life-experiences of spectators and performers” (in Kennedy and Young, 2010: 40). It is a criticism that I think should be taken seriously by the Lecoq tradition – but then, Mnouchkine’s point was that “Shakespeare is not our contemporary” (Williams, 1999: 93). Her focus upon passions can be seen to draw attention to the text’s relationship to both the early modern psychology of humours (see Roach, 1993: 23-57) and with classical oratory. These are both arguably key conditions for a properly historicized realization of Shakespearean drama. Peter Holland’s critique of Complicite’s The Winter’s Tale hints at this when he notes that “the cast took full measure of the play’s rhetorical moments” (Holland, 1997: 125). In my own practice, I encourage actors to take the text’s invitations to “draw out in space and in gesture” (Williams, 1999: 106) the internal movements of the passions in gestures that are both physically committed and precise in their shape and timing. As Mnouchkine says, “what’s beautiful in theatre is when an actor transforms a feeling, a memory, a state or a passion. No one sees pure passion unless the actor transforms it into performance, that is to say into a sign, into a gesture” (ibid: 102).

The search for physical form of this sort in practice tends to involve much game-playing. To work in a game-like fashion on a scene would be to apply a restriction to it, and to test what this can produce by way of meaning and action. To demonstrate, here is a game drawn from Lecoq’s ideas about the fixed point of movement. Two actors play out a scene. The rule is: one actor makes a move, the other actor then makes a move in response, and so on. At any moment of their choosing, either actor can stop and wait. The actors are basically placing fixed points, like cinematic freeze frames, into the scene at any time they like. The actors must not try to convey what the attitude suggested by the fixed point means. They simply play the game, and the meaning of the attitude is allowed to take care of itself for the time being.

I used this game when I rehearsed Macbeth. In 1.4, Duncan praises Macbeth before making Malcolm Prince of Cumberland. Before discussing the scene, I invited the actor playing Duncan to move, and then to assume a fixed point when and where he liked. The other actors on stage were permitted to move only in reaction to his fixed points. After a few goes at the game, I encouraged the actors to play it again as they spoke the text. This approach led us to a dynamic scene, structured by interruptions in the flow of the dialogue, where the court appeared to be in suspended animation as everyone tried to second guess what the king’s attitudes actually meant, and thus what he was going to say or do next. To a certain extent, as the game is transposed into the dramatic dimension, there is a principle of disguising at work: we didn’t really want the audience to interpret the scene as a game but as a meaningful structure. The game, though, will never be totally abandoned in performance. And because everyone on stage knows what the game is, an important result of this approach is, in my view, the emergence of group complicity.
Thus, the script can be understood as a resource for game playing. Mnouchkine described her work on the text as “jouer frontal” (Singleton, 2010: 40). The basic rule was: don’t tell each other, tell the audience. “In rehearsal, every time the actors found themselves talking to each other, it didn’t work. I said to them, ‘Tell it to the audience’ […] I’m convinced that Shakespeare’s text must be spoken in this way. As soon as you begin to modulate, to refine, to make it subtle, you water it down” (Williams, 1999: 94). So the actors frequently faced the audience as they spoke, especially when playing the King’s courtiers. Through this simple restriction, a highly presentational performance style was discovered. Mnouchkine worked with the company on using their visual imaginations to place in the audience the objects of their speech. Meanwhile, the reactions of the non-speaking characters were played through (initially improvised) gestures. “The result was a visual staging of sub-text and an exteriorization of inner psychology” (Singleton, 2010: 40).

As Simon Murray suggests, for Lecoq “thought and language are all consequent upon movement and gesture” (Murray, 2003: 76). “Action,” says Lecoq, “is inscribed into words” (Lecoq, 2006: 92). The actor must “feel the text as a dynamic event” because a good text “is full of movement, and it carries a series of events that are dynamic before being literary” (Fusetti and Wilson, 2002: 99). To illustrate this, I will describe a classic Lecoq game – a game I often use in rehearsals and one that was part of Kathryn Hunter’s text work for her production of Othello for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2009 (I discuss the production from the perspective of actor Patrice Naiambana, who played Othello, in Brown, 2012: 181-5). Two actors face each other, balancing horizontally a bamboo stick between them using the palms of their hands or the tips of their index fingers. Their task is to move, and to keep the stick in balance. So the actor is practicing how to embody a rhythm of pushing and pulling. It seems almost childishly simple. In practice, it demands complex tactics, as the actors try to read each other’s intention and move accordingly without using words. The stick is then balanced between other parts of the body, and the actors attempt to construct a rhythmical sequence of moves that are interesting for the spectator. Next, the actors remove the stick and play the game again as if it were still in place. Then the game is played again and the dialogue of the scene is spoken. The result can be charged with the dynamics of an encounter mediated primarily through the body. Such a dynamic was in evidence in the first meeting of Oberon and Titania in my own Midsummer Night’s Dream (2.1), as the characters appeared to push and pull each other around the stage during their angry exchanges, whilst always keeping in imaginary tension a fixed distance from each other.

During rehearsals for The Winter’s Tale, Theatre de Complicite would undertake physical preparation for their encounter with the text for all of the morning and most of the afternoon, not beginning to apply themselves to the words until around 4pm usually (See Purcell in Brown, 2012: 162). What were they doing all day? Playing with bamboo sticks? Not only sticks. There is also ball work, which is designed to sharpen one’s skill at turn-taking and at keeping light in the body in the moment of reaction and risk-taking (such as catching and returning the ball at speed). Yet surely a far more sophisticated encounter awaits us if we engage with the words of Shakespeare, say through table discussion, before we try to put the scene on its feet? My claim, and my experience, is that this may be felt to be true by and for the director and the actors, but it is not automatically true for the audience, and it is to the audience – even if only as an ‘idea’ – that the Lecoq actor turns from the very outset of rehearsal. She knows that no amount of
verbalized engagement with the text is worth a bean to an audience unless she can \textit{embody} the fruits of this engagement so that it is made available to them.

This embodiment is vocal as well as physical. The Lecoq tradition, finally, admits of no distinction between the two activities. Voice is understood as part of the body; in the moment of speaking, voice is understood as \textit{gesture}. Lecoq, it is true, did not work in detail upon the training of the voice. This can lead to a lack of confidence in vocal handling of the text, which is presumably why Theatre de Complicite felt it necessary to work with Patsy Rodenburg when they rehearsed \textit{Measure for Measure} for the National Theatre (in 2004). In my own classes on Shakespeare, and in rehearsals as a director, I work on voice through gesture. The actors speak the text performing a physical gesture for each phrase (and sometimes a gesture for each \textit{word} of the text). These gestures are performed by the whole body, not just the hands; the impulse for a gesture can come from the feet, the knee, the pelvis, the sternum, the nose, the top of the head, and so on. The external forms of some of these gestures may be kept in performance. But where they are not, the actor is encouraged to speak the phrase with the same intonation she used when rehearsing the gesture. The influence of the gesture remains even when the gesture itself is not performed.

Ariane Mnouchkine worked at the level of the word itself:

Confronted with this text, we have worked from word to word, as if we were at the foot of a mountain, attentive to each word pronounced by these great visionary primitives, trying to see what they see, in order for us in turn to be able to show it, to place it in space, in bright light. (Williams, 1999: 89-90)

Similarly, when the actor Clive Mendus began work on \textit{Measure for Measure} for Theatre de Complicite, he was invited by director Simon McBurney to take the text one word at a time:

Simon’s principal ambition from before we got into the rehearsal room was to have the text flow like a river of words. So the idea was to start with the first word of the play ‘Escalus’, and the river was to flow right through until the last word, which is ‘know’. (Mendus, 2006: 260)

I think the origin of this word-by-word procedure is to be found in Lecoq’s approach to poetic language. Lecoq worked with the different languages spoken by his students, inviting them to discover the “physical dynamic” of individual words, embodying them as they sounded them out (Lecoq, 2000: 50).

For all that Lecoq’s \textit{via negativa} appeared at times to consist of variations on the theme of “That’s not it!”, there remained in his laboratory an openness to the performer’s ideas. For example, in the \textit{auto-cours} sessions, students worked in small groups on a given theme in their own time, then presented this to the school at the end of the week. As a result of this kind of self-directed, shared imaginative work (that is then subjected to criticism from the teacher(s) and other students) the actor becomes more attuned to the audience. He is taught to \textit{listen to} – in a sense, to \textit{think like} – the audience.
For *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I drew upon this approach. A case in point was the Mechanicals: at their first rehearsal, I left them to work together for some time on the theme ‘The Mechanicals Arrive’. They then presented the outcome of their collaboration to the whole company, who were invited to comment upon it. Through this, we developed a group scene with many engaging little details, showing how each of the Mechanicals could make a good entrance and establish who they were in relation to each other. As a company, we applied this procedure in many of the play’s group scenes, and incorporated resulting propositions into the production. For Mnouchkine’s *Richard II*, a gestural code intended to transpose into a theatrical idiom the company’s sense of the play as essentially ritualistic was developed in rehearsal by the actors themselves, as were the eclectic costumes, according to actor Philippe Hottier (Williams, 1999: 107). Entrances were practised at speed as a kind of ‘carcarole’; as the actors began to work on these entrances (in which a character presents himself to the audience as he arrives), the musician Jean-Jacques Lemêtre began to search for a way of offering “rhythmic support” as well as “different sounds for each character” (ibid: 108). The point is that the musician was invited to participate in the act of collective creation in rehearsal, offering the kind of “support [that] helped the actor to perceive his own rhythm” (ibid). Of course, a company that prioritizes the creativity of all its members must find a way of cutting against the text’s focus on the big roles without necessarily undermining it. One simple way to negotiate this is by doubling, an approach that seemed to pay dividends for Complicite’s eight-actor version of *The Winter’s Tale*, most evident from the praise given to Kathryn Hunter in the production. Peter Holland wrote that, in moving between the roles of Mamilius, Time, Paulina and the Old Shepherd, Hunter gave each role “its own value, none simply grist to her own brilliance” (Holland, 1997: 125).

The true agenda of ensemble theatre is, I suggest, not to create a (largely false and frequently oppressive) groupthink among participants in which ‘I feel the same as you’, but rather to carve out a space in which common agreements can be made regarding the necessary tasks. That said, we should be careful of privileging the idea of the ensemble. Lecoq insisted on the need for the actor’s imagination to stand alongside that of the writer or the director. Such an emphasis takes on a utopian flavour within the borders of Lecoq’s converted gymnasium in Paris. But theatre companies are not always put together from actors who have all trained in the same approach. A group of disparate individuals may not find it easy to share a working vocabulary, or a sense of priorities. It may be that an actor wishes to do no more than take care of her own performance. This is not automatically a bad thing, but it means that, for those actors who are attuned to the Lecoq tradition, yet who find that others in the room are not, the feeling that one is entitled to be regarded as an author – at least of the non-verbal *performance* text – can sometimes play out as a problem. And, of course, logistics or artistic temperament may dictate that, before the actors even turn up to work on day one, a pre-production process is already well under way, during which the director and designer(s) have finalized a number of key decisions with respect to the production, and thus collaborative engagement in the creation of a theatrical language will not be on the rehearsal menu.

Works cited


A version of this chapter appeared originally as ‘Shakespeare and the Lecoq Tradition’ in *Shakespeare Bulletin* (2012) Volume 30, Issue 4, pages 469-484. The author wishes to thank The Johns Hopkins University Press for permission to reprint material from the original article in this book.