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Jacques Copeau's Influence in Michel Saint-Denis' Actor Training: from the École du Vieux-Colombier to the Compagnie des Quinze

Because of the informal, intimate and relaxed character of this colloquium, I decided to take the risk of starting my paper with an unusual quote, which on the surface has nothing to do with actor training nor with Michel Saint-Denis. You will probably remember the acclaimed performance as Miranda Priestly, a fashion magazine editor which earned Meryl Streep her 14th Oscar nomination, in the 2006 comedy-drama film *The Devil Wears Prada*, directed by David Frankel.

After Andy Sachs, a college graduate (played by Anne Hathaway) who goes to New York City and lands a job as «Runway» magazine editor-in-chief's co-assistant, giggles at Miranda's difficulty deciding between two seemingly similar-looking belts, Priestly unleashes the brilliant monologue I now quote:

«Ok. I see, you think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don't know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise, it's not lapis, it's actually cerulean. You're also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn't it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic "casual corner" where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the

fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room» – end of the quote.

Now let's keep this in mind as we go down in 20th century theatre history, straight to Michel Saint-Denis' first approach to the theatre.

As we know, Saint-Denis devoted much of his career – and his life – to actor training. His book *Training for the Theatre*, which collects a number of papers and talks given between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, constitutes a summation of his actor pedagogy, a sort of guide for students, with many autobiographical anecdotes. In this handbook, Saint-Denis assigns a central importance to the experimental work with masks and to the characters improvisations: «The idea of using Character and Comic Improvisation, with and without masks, as an element in actor training, came to me in 1924», he claims in a key chapter. That “came to me” suggests a methodological originality which is quite unreliable, as it excludes – unconsciously or deliberately – a learning and creative process of significant impact on the genesis of Saint-Denis' actor training. Where does that “idea” – which is the basis of the teaching practices developed by Saint-Denis – come from? Where can we find the origin of the method he created to train actors from the 1930s to the 1960s, and that is still used today to prepare new generations of acting pupils?

Working with Masks at the École du Vieux-Colombier (1920-1924)

The theatrical identity of Saint-Denis has its roots in the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier. In his early 20s, between 1919 and 1920, he starts to work with his uncle Jacques Copeau as assistant, general and administrative secretary. Saint-Denis' administrative role within the company quickly expands and it is not long before he

is putting on plays; indeed, after the departures of Louis Jouvet and Charles Dullin, he begins to follow the company rehearsals as assistant director and stage manager.

Despite his organisational and administrative duties preventing him from assiduously attending the École du Vieux-Colombier, inaugurated in November 1921, Saint-Denis is able to attend some of the lessons and to follow the pupils' work, as Marie-Madeleine Gautier's notes demonstrate, indicating his active presence in several exercises.

On various occasions, Saint-Denis demonstrates his thorough knowledge of the school program and his understanding of the goal to reform the dramatic art. Indeed, during a seminar about Copeau's theatrical legacy, in spring 1959, he describes it as «a place to re-invent the theatre». Strict discipline was required of the students, in order to re-invent the forms of dramatic expression. Saint-Denis, who as Copeau did aspires to make the actor a creative artist and not just a mere executor, dwells on the importance of the improvisation techniques in order to uproot the *cabotinage* tendency in young talents: «The purpose was to make the actor invent, was to go to that deep region somewhere inside, out of which acting can come of an un-naturalistic kind».

It is inside the School that Copeau starts to study the actor's physical expression. For this purpose, dance, mime, improvisation and the work with masks are assumed as pedagogical instruments.

In an interview of March 1933, Saint-Denis points out the effects of the work with *basic masks* carried on in the School: «The result was immediate: the shy pupil immediately reached freedom in gesture and, thanks to the emphasised expression he was forced to give to the whole body, he instantly found his own *style*». First of all, the mask is discovered as a constituent element of actor training, as an instrument for increasing bodily expression and the control exercised on it by the

student, as well as for releasing inhibitions while practicing and performing on stage: «At the beginning, mask exercise was for us a *working method*».

Working with Masks and Improvisation: the Copiaus Group in Burgundy (1925-1929)

Character Creative Process: Jean Bourguignon

It is specifically with the Copiaus group in Burgundy that Saint-Denis comes into contact with Copeau's pedagogical and didactic practices. He acquires mime skills, learns to improvise, to create mask-characters and to use them in small dramaturgical structures, to write for the stage and to assemble collective creations. Copiaus' daily training aims to assemble a theatre company composed of fully-trained actors.

This persistent work bears fruit quickly: Saint-Denis develops his artistic potential in a very short time. At this point, the work with masks ceases to be exclusively pedagogical, and along with improvisation techniques becomes a creative, expressive and dramaturgical instrument. It is no coincidence that Saint-Denis is the one who gives birth to the first mask-character the Copiaus present to the public; his name is Jean Bourguignon, a colourful character in the tradition of the wine-growers figures.

In Pernand-Vergelesses, the comic and character improvisation intensifies and the *Comédie nouvelle* becomes a key theme in Copiaus' research. The rural context that hosts the company, the condition of cohabitation and the work in the *cuvier* influence group improvisations, and therefore the ensuing dramaturgical prompts.

Saint-Denis writes the first version of the prologue *Jean Bourguignon et les Copiaus* on April 8th 1925, and on August 15th the Burgundy public, watching the *Prologue de Meursault* followed by the *Discours de Jean Bourguignon au public*, demonstrates recognition of Jean Bourguignon. In the prologue script, the character introduces himself as an Harlequin-type figure, smart and clever, thoughtless and prone to mockery. He is one of the public, the typical Burgundy wine-grower who pretends

to be the meeting point between the Copiaus group and the inhabitants of Meursault. The prologue function is that of introducing the company to the spectators: the actors appear as Copiaus group's members, while the actresses pretend to be local girls, curious and interested in them.

Character Creative Process: Oscar Knie

Between 1925 and 1926 the Copiaus win over the Côte d'Or public. Copeau, after taking some time out from his Burgundy work, comes back to check on his pupils training and encourages them to focus on modern fixed types creation. The *Comédie nouvelle* work goes on: the mask, which has gone from being a simple instrument to an extended physical expression, becomes a main factor in the fixed types' identity invention, created by the actors and immediately recognisable. Saint-Denis and Jean Dasté invent respectively Oscar Knie and César: two well-rounded mask-characters that would come to have a relevant role in Copiaus' collective creations.

An unpublished *scenario* is held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, in the Michel Saint-Denis' Fond; thanks to this document it is possible to examine one of the stages of the creative process. It is probably the transcription of an improvisation exercise, aimed at deepening their characterization, or a *canovaccio* to be further developed. In the *scenario*, handwritten by Saint-Denis and titled *Histoire de Knie*, Knie and César face conditions that highlight the extent to which their characteristics are opposites.

Analysing the text structure, it is clear how César and Oscar Knie make a balanced comedy team, a couple of modern Don Quixotes and Sancho Panzas: on the one hand César, hungry for adventurous experiences, but with no sense of reality; on the other hand Oscar, a coward but more realistic. One's characterization seems to be strengthened from the comparison with the other one, not only on a

dramaturgical basis, but also during the different moments of the generative process, as an essential stage of the creation.

In *Training for the Theatre*, Saint-Denis minutely retraces the creative process which led to the birth of his Oscar Knie, and offers it for the use of pupils as an integral part of his pedagogy. The description begins with a *prop* list from which he started, in other words those elements – recovered from a previous show – which can become *extensions of the actor*.

Oscar Knie's silhouette is later nourished by the observation of peculiar people Saint-Denis has the opportunity to interact with, of figures belonging to the world of the public sphere, or to his biographical story, or eventually to the literary world.

In the character-building process, the imagination is fed by actual events and the actors' lives get mixed with fantasy. As Saint-Denis reuses his father's memory in order to elaborate Oscar Knie, Dasté, telling his César's biography, recalls elements from his childhood and adolescence: for instance, he lingers on the close encounter with a shepherdess, a figure who was very similar to one of the characters played by Marie-Hélène Copeau, Dasté's bride-to-be, during the dramatical exercises at the École du Vieux-Colombier.

a hat on his head, Oscar Knie is ready to get in on the action. To bring Knie to complete fulfilment, Saint-Denis imagines some *practical scenarios*. That is how improvisation work begins: how does Knie talk? How does he interact with others? What does he like? What does he hate? How does he react to the external world? Once again, the meeting between Knie and César helps Saint-Denis and Dasté to discover new aspects of their characters, in direct conflict with each other.

At the end of this long and complex creative process, Oscar Knie has acquired his predominant characteristics. Finally Oscar Knie is a proper mask-character, complete and ready to go on stage and to stimulate a theatre author's fantasy. He is a unit, a cell. He is a character and he needs a story. As Dasté writes in an undated

letter which probably dates back to 1926, Knie lives on stage as *the beginning of something*: «[...] I can't wait to work with you, we will surely be able to progress together. Some of your Knie's manners and words impress my memory as a chant, as the beginning of something». For all intents and purposes a primary ingredient and basic element of the *Comédie nouvelle*.

Fixed Types in Copiaus' Collective Creations

The absence of an author leads the Copiaus to depend on Copeau, who used to be in charge of choosing plays suited to the company. But from 1926, the group commits to the production of collective creations. One of their major successes is *La Danse de la Ville et des Champs*, written by Saint-Denis with music by Jean Villard. It is actually the play in which Saint-Denis' mask-character makes his debut; it is the *something* of which Knie had been the *beginning*. The show is composed by dance, acrobatics, singing, mime, grammaire, masks and improvisation. Saint-Denis plays Oscar Knie and presents the performance with a prologue, in which Jean Bourguignon introduces the company.

The following year, the Copiaus stage a second collective creation, titled *Les Jeunes gens et l'araignée ou La Tragédie imaginaire*, once again written by Saint-Denis and Villard; the main characters are Knie and César. The plot maintains a simple storyline, but the company inserts a twenty-minute pure mime scene, that fascinates the audience and outdoes the success *La Danse de la Ville et des Champs*. The reviews are appreciative of the work of the Copiaus group; an article, published in «Comœdia», dwells on the mask-character Oscar Knie, and compares it to Commedia dell'Arte fixed types.

Besides the artistic work, Saint-Denis continues with his administrative duties for the whole Burgundy experience. In November 1927, after Copeau's leaving for a

number of lectures and conferences in New York, Saint-Denis is in charge of the direction of the company. With increasing responsibilities, Saint-Denis desires artistic independence from Copeau, who is suffering a deep spiritual crisis and expresses contradictory intentions: he wants to break free from the burdening responsibilities of the company, but continues to consider the Copiaus group as subordinate pupils; he delays, severing the bond of obedience, but reduces his involvement. The result is a growing need for autonomy not only in Saint-Denis, but in all group members.

One of the biggest difficulties for the Copiaus is the absence of a playwright who knows the actors and collaborates with the company. As Saint-Denis writes in *Training for the Theatre*, the group has developed a huge capacity for imagination, and reinforced the technical skills. But with a view to make the *Comédie nouvelle* prosper, they need a playwright who is able to take advantage of the Copiaus' resources.

Mask Improvisation: the Compagnie des Quinze (1930-1935)

After Copiaus' dissolution in 1929, Saint-Denis attempts to gather the Burgundy group members by establishing the Compagnie des Quinze, of which he is producer and artistic director from 1930 to 1935. Creative emancipation from Copeau's aegis, too often limiting and overwhelming, is finally obtained. In this period of five years, Saint-Denis accomplishes his first experiences as *chef de troupe*, and in particular as actor trainer, within the company.

Saint-Denis defines the first company of which he is officially producer and artistic director as «one of the immediate artistic descendants of Jacques Copeau's creative spirit», but also «the successor to the Burgundy group, Les Copiaux [*sic*], reinforced by a few more actors». Indeed, after the failure of the Burgundy experience, the Compagnie des Quinze is composed of a restricted group of ex Copiaus; some acting-pupils are added, all strangers to the Copeau circle. Although

this event represents creative liberation for Saint-Denis and for his colleagues, what arises as a challenge is the desire to recuperate the working techniques they developed in Pernand. Neither Saint-Denis other ex Copiaus members are able to leave the Burgundy creative atmosphere behind, or to surrender to commercial mainstream theatre of the Parisian *boulevards*.

While shaping the artistic program's profile at the heart of the Compagnie des Quinze, Saint-Denis identifies the crucial point: the presence of a playwright who collaborates with the company and contributes to the production of original plays; the reunification of the group of actors who trained, studied and worked together at the École du Vieux-Colombier and later in Burgundy; the audition of actor-pupils to be trained as they did with Copeau; the partnership with theatre artisans, scenographers and composers.

The educational process used by Saint-Denis and his company for training the actor-pupils employed to strengthen the Quinze group reclaims the pedagogical practices they used in Burgundy. Improvisation, «with or without masks, silent or not», constitutes the fundamental principle. In his memoirs (*Les temps de la Compagnie des Quinze*, an unpublished typewritten document of about 130, held in Fond Michel Saint-Denis), one of the pupils – Pierre Alder, stage name of Pierre Rischmann – gives a didactic anecdote about the approach to work with improvisation and masks. Before hiring Alder as actor and pupil, Saint-Denis invites him to the Ville d'Avray studio in order to examine his creative qualities and his talent for improvisation:

He told me to watch it [a mask] carefully for a few moments. It was a chubby man head, gentle and naïf, a little bit childish. Saint-Denis said to me: «Wear it *only when you feel penetrated* by what it represents for you. Get it with both hands and put it on your head, as a hat. Wait a little longer, and then put it down. From that very moment you cannot express as yourself no more. Say what you want, or better,

what your character says. You will get back to speak as yourself only when you pull the mask off».

Jean Dasté, interviewed by Saint-Denis, brings back memories of mask exercises conducted at the École du Vieux-Colombier, which present a very similar approach. Both Alder and Dasté talk about a *prior state* to the use of masks: the act of carefully watching it before wearing it, to contemplate it in silent, waiting. In both cases, it is an attitude that denotes great respect for the instrument:

Before starting, we were taught to respect the mask; we were taught not to enter into a mask-character, as one would enter into anything. It was necessary to get the carnival mask idea out of our heads [...] we started by respecting the instrument, in order to be able to wear the mask and first of all to feel.

Saint-Denis asks Alder to wear the mask only when he feels well-penetrated; in the same way, Dasté recalls that the pupils of the École du Vieux-Colombier were authorized to carry out the exercise only once they were «well impregnated of what a mask is and of the internal and external inclination needed to wear a mask». Therefore, the approach to the use of masks, formalized by Saint-Denis in the École des Quinze, descends directly from the practices developed during the years of experimentation at the School of the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and in Burgundy, under Copeau's leadership.

The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier is the milieu where Saint-Denis' theatrical identity grows, and Copeau's pedagogical method, as the young Michel observed from 1921, radically influences the acting training at the base of the drama school he establishes over the years.

In Saint-Denis's actor training, improvisation and working with masks have principle relevance, both as tools to enhance physical expression, and as element of modern fixed types construction. In his handbook, *Training for the Theatre*, Saint-Denis confers great importance on his formative years, from which fundamental aspects of his drama school teachings derive. The elaboration of his path as an acting pupil proceeds at the same pace as the standardization of Copeau's experimentations, of the oral knowledge transmitted by contact, made of common experiences, sharing and cooperative efforts.

Of this acting *culture*, Saint-Denis seems to be the custodian: responsible for translating a combination of experimental workshops into a structured method and for their further development in acting school programs. Furthermore, upon his relocation from France to England, Saint-Denis becomes the link between two different theatre cultures: the theatre culture of *experience* (of which Saint-Denis made himself the bearer) and the theatre culture of *composition* (which he found in England), with earthy and alive consequences.

Now we can finally get back to the quotation from the very beginning of my talk. Actor training is exactly like Andy Sachs' sweater colour, that *cerulean* which was discovered and individuated by Oscar de la Renta – who can be considered, in our story, the creative genius: Copeau – and that slowly and imperceptibly arrived to modern-day drama schools, thanks to Saint-Denis's tireless and endless work. Miranda Priestly's monologue – even if I am aware that it is not a well-known quotation – acutely sums up and highlights a cultural standardization process people aren't conscious of, and the actual removal, that can be easily applied to the theatre history, of which *countless jobs*, such as designers, artists, directors, actors and artisans are victims.

What I am attempting to do, and what I hope colloquiums such as this one can support, is to understand not only Saint-Denis' importance for modern-day actor training, but also his role as standardiser of theatrical practices. What does it mean to transform experimental research with no defined form, into a proper determined method, consisting of clear and prescriptive rules? What do we need to give up in the name of this process? What do we gain?