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The French Ensemble Tradition: Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis and Jacques Lecoq

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An ‘ensemblier’, according to the dictionary, is ‘an artist who aims at unity of general effect’. We were ‘ensembliers’. We set out to develop initiative, freedom, and a sense of responsibility in the individual, as long as he or she was ready and able to merge his personal qualities into the ensemble.’

(Saint-Denis 1960: 92)

Jacques Copeau and the Vieux-Colombier (1913-1924)

Jacques Copeau (1879-1949), through his work as a critic, through his ensemble theatre companies Le Théâtre du Vieux Colombier and Les Copiaus, and later through the influence of his students and disciples¹, was to provide one of the most significant and long-lasting challenges to the commercial system dominating theatre in Paris in the early twentieth century. In his work at the Vieux-Colombier in Paris and with Les Copiaus in Burgundy, he developed a model of the theatre ensemble that redefined the notion of the professional actor through its emphasis on continual training, physicality, rhythmic play, improvisation, collaboration and creativity.

¹ For example, Michel Saint-Denis, Suzanne Bing, Louis Jouvet, Charles Dullin, Jean Dorcy, Étienne Decroux and Jean Dasté.

Copeau's career did not begin in the theatre itself. Inspired by the changes that he saw happening in the arts and by friends who supported his literary abilities and ambitions, Copeau, by his late twenties and early thirties, had instead developed a significant career as a journalist and critic. Eventually his passionate criticism of the boulevard theatres, and of the star system that underpinned them, led him to the point where he realized that the only logical step was to found his own theatre². Copeau had become appalled by the commercialism and vulgarity of much of the theatre on offer: 'one finds fakery everywhere, excess and exhibitionism of all kinds, all the usual parasites of a dying art that no longer pretends to be otherwise' (Copeau in Rudlin 1986: 3). He had also become skeptical about the ability of naturalism (as proposed by André Antoine) to respond to 'the essential theatricality of theatre' (Rudlin 1986: 4). All the same, founding what was in effect a privately financed independent theatre company of the kind he proposed was a bold and radical step to take for a relative novice.

Copeau opened Le Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in 1913 in a renovated Parisian variety hall on the Left Bank. Copeau's aim was to set up an ensemble company of actors able to create a new theatre that explicitly rejected the old star system, and that also brought a sense of theatrical poetry and moral purpose to the stage. He recognized that in order to achieve the theatre of which he dreamed – a theatre that was physically expressive, collaborative and founded on the creative skills of the actor – he would also need to train a new generation of actors. It is the effective realization of this dual innovation that places Copeau at the heart of the early twentieth century history of ensemble theatre. For Copeau, the models for this process

² For a more detailed discussion of all of this period of Copeau's life and work, see Evans (2006).

lay in the work of the great theatre practitioners of the past. In this sense, Copeau's impulse towards the ensemble was in part a conservative impulse. His models were the theatres of Molière, Shakespeare and the Japanese Noh Theatre; theatre traditions built around families, professional groupings, and conceptions of a complete and coherent vision of theatre centred around the actor and the writer/poet.

Unlike Edward Gordon Craig, who dreamed of rejuvenating theatre by launching into a visionary future, Copeau's idea was to return to the past to rediscover the simplicity, purity and essential physicality, as well as the collaborative nature, of theatre performance: 'Copeau realised that the essence of theatre is not literary, but ritualistic and physical. He wanted to return to the sources, to primitive theatre, following through this the trend of the other arts of that period' (Saint-Denis 1982: 31). To achieve this purity and to enable the work of a creative ensemble, Copeau realized he needed a new kind of stage space, a space cleared of falseness and unnecessary decoration. To achieve this he created a bare stage, 'le tréteau nu': 'The whole stage was an acting area, in contrast to that "box of illusions" – the proscenium stage' (Saint-Denis 1982: 27).

Copeau placed himself at the centre of the whole enterprise – artistically, financially, administratively and socially. He became 'le patron', the father-figure of the company, ceaselessly raising funds, planning seasons and driving the artistic vision of the company through his choice of actors, playwrights and collaborators. This meant that the model of the ensemble that emerged was very much an ensemble shaped in the image of its director. Copeau's need for control over the work and its direction would in this sense continue to complicate his various attempts to create ensembles

over his working life – each compromised in the end by his own reluctance to give up ultimate authority.

Key factors in the development of the Vieux-Colombier company as an ensemble were the periods of time spent preparing and training for performance. The first of these periods took place before the company's first season in 1913. Copeau took his new company to a family property in Limon, where as well as rehearsing, the actors undertook physical training, movement work, discussion and improvisation. The company lived and worked together for the duration of this 'retreat'³ – a condition that greatly enhanced the ensemble ethos, even if it also led to some interpersonal tensions.

The impact of the Vieux-Colombier Theatre was profound. Copeau's productions of classic plays and the work of new writers promoted a simple, expressive and natural new style. Copeau had the vision and the good fortune to draw around him a richly talented and committed group of actors and collaborators, each of whom variously contributed to the company's development. In 1920 Michel Saint-Denis (1897-1971), Copeau's nephew⁴, also joined the Vieux-Colombier company. He gained his professional training by working his way up through the most menial of tasks, eventually leading to his appointment as general-secretary to the company – effectively Copeau's right-hand man (Baldwin 2003: 19).

³ The idea of a retreat from the city to the countryside was part of a cultural trend of resistance towards urbanization that can be seen across a number of art forms and that was to be repeated by Copeau a decade later with the group that became Les Copiaus.

⁴ Saint-Denis was the son of Marguerite, Copeau's elder sister. For more information on Saint-Denis' life and work, see Baldwin (2003) and the Michel Saint-Denis website at: <http://michelsaintdenis.net/msd/>.

The Vieux-Colombier School (1920-1924)

Despite the critical success of the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier, Copeau was never completely convinced that his actors truly left behind them the tricks and *cabotinage*⁵ of the boulevard theatres. As Copeau remarked to Saint-Denis in 1923: ‘I always know in advance what they are going to do. They cannot get out of themselves; they love only themselves. They reduce everything to the level of their habits, their clichés, their affectations. They do not invent anything’ (Saint-Denis 1982: 31). Copeau throughout his life despised the commercial actor’s tricks, and sought at various stages in his practice to ‘re-normalise’ actors, taking them ‘outside the theatre and into contact with nature and with life’ (Copeau, 1990: 24). However he eventually came to realize that re-education would always be limited in its effect, and that the way forward lay in beginning that process with teenagers, less tainted and constrained and more open to new methods.

Starting a school was therefore the logical next step. Saint-Denis recalls how Copeau ‘envisioned a kind of laboratory attached to a theatre, but outside it, where gradually a new kind of actor, an instrument of a new revitalized dramaturgy, could be evolved’ (Saint-Denis 1982: 31-32). The school was in this sense to be a ‘sacred place’ (Dorcy in Copeau 1990: 239), a place where body, mind and spirit would all be educated to create an actor able to respond to what Copeau understood as the deep moral, social and artistic purpose of theatre. The young students worked at the school from nine o’clock in the morning through to six o’clock in the evening. They wore gymnast’s outfits or overalls; simple, practical clothes suitable not just for training classes, but

⁵ For Copeau *cabotinage* was a disease, ‘the malady of insincerity, or rather of falseness. He who suffers from it ceases to be authentic, to be human’ (Copeau 1990: 253). It represented all the qualities that he most vehemently despised in the commercial actor.

also for their other tasks such as sweeping the floors, washing up and cleaning tables. The students were to be totally immersed in a culture of shared work and creation: ‘We shall always have in view the development of individual talents and their subordination to the ensemble’ (Copeau, 1990: 24). The school’s focus on physical skills and techniques, and on the importance of movement, was a particular innovation in the training of actors. Much of the school’s approach came together in the work on masked improvisation, which helped to develop spontaneity and inventiveness: ‘The mask demands both a simplification and an extension of gesture; something forces you to go the limit of a feeling being expressed’ (Dasté in Copeau 1990: 237).

Whilst the school produced a group of young actors bound together by a shared vision of theatre and a shared theatrical language, it could still only lay the foundations for the kind of ensemble of which Copeau dreamed. The students gave few performances, most of which were ‘works in progress’ presented for a restricted audience. The improvisation work created a sense of confidence in play and in the primacy of movement and action over psychological detail. One of the highpoints of the school’s work was the rehearsing of a Japanese Noh play *Kantan* (directed by Suzanne Bing) which although never performed inspired Copeau with its vision of what might be possible with his young disciples. Saint-Denis, who was not a pupil at the school although he did attend classes on a regular basis (Baldwin 2003: 20), remembered *Kantan* as ‘the incomparable summit of our work in Copeau’s School/Laboratory’ (Saint-Denis 1982: 33).

Les Copiaus (1924-1929)

In 1924 Copeau once again sought radical change. He took the bold step of closing down the Vieux-Colombier Theatre, sensing perhaps that the full realization of his vision was slipping out of reach while he was tied up with the demands of running a Paris theatre. Taking with him a group of family, collaborators and students he set off for Burgundy, ending up in the village of Pernand-Vergelesses. They set up a producing company, seeking to turn their endeavours from training towards performance – basing their work on the style that had begun to emerge at the Vieux-Colombier School, a style that combined mask, mime, movement, chorus and song.

The local people gave the company the name of Les Copiaus (the ‘little Copeaus’ in the local dialect). With the loan of costumes, props and some financial help from Copeau, the company set out to create a repertoire of pieces that might appeal to their local audience as well as make use of their new skills. Copeau’s own presence in Burgundy was intermittent; although still ‘le patron’ other responsibilities drew him away. Unfortunately his strong personal vision and sense of mission seemed gradually to be at tension with the increased democracy within the group that had emerged in his absences. His natural inclination was towards a seriousness that the young company did not instinctively share.

The typical work pattern for Les Copiaus was a mix of ‘classes, physical training, research exercises, and rehearsal’ (Baldwin 2003: 32). The company members shared their expertise amongst each other with teaching generally led by Michel Saint-Denis, Marie-Hélène Copeau (Copeau’s daughter), Jean Dasté and a few others. The days started early, at 7.30 am, with gymnastics led by Dasté, followed by mime exercises

and improvisations. The afternoon was taken up with music composition, mask and costume construction, and administration; rehearsals and performances happened in the evening (Baldwin 2003: 32). The creative process that led to new pieces was fuelled by improvisations that they undertook both as individuals and as a collective. The productions toured local villages – often playing in the open air and echoing theatre’s roots in popular entertainment.

Les Copiaus was a project based on the idea of collective creation, creative collaboration and choral performance skills and practices. In its aims, its practices and its relationships with its audiences it drew on historical precedents: ‘We turned backwards in order to check what we knew, learn what we did not know, experiment with what we vaguely felt’ (Copeau 1990: 169). Copeau, for instance, saw the Greek Chorus as his model for ‘the ideal troupe of actors, made up of various people whose sole ambition is to do their share with perfection. Nothing is more exciting than forming such a company (...) I don’t think there is another profession where one is ready to make so many sacrifices to the quality of one’s work.’ (Copeau 1990: 168). The notion of the Chorus – a group of people bound together through a shared performance language and serving a common collective purpose within the drama – was central to Les Copiaus work and defined much of what made the company an ensemble.

The quality of performance was never an end in itself for Copeau. What evolved from the work of Les Copiaus was the development of a style of acting and performing that emerged from the actor’s whole being, and as such was ‘postulated both in him and in his acting’ (Copeau 1990: 169). In this manner theatre and life would be linked in

the company's work, an approach that at a deep level undermined conventional notions of theatrical virtuosity and imitation. He can in this respect be seen as a line of influence for the early work of Grotowski, who shared an equally fierce belief that theatre should aspire to transcend technique. The group's reliance on the local rural audiences also meant that their public became their teacher – the work was driven as much by what worked within this particular social context as it was by any underlying ideology: 'Because there was never a barrier between players and audiences, the spectators sensed how much they influenced the actors, how they could affect their performances, indeed, how at times they could lift the actors to a rare degree of exhilaration' (Saint-Denis in Baldwin 2003: 33). Style and context thus combined to create a new sense of how theatre could be created and who for: 'our plays were virtually improvised, according to circumstances, the season, the place, the audience. They were healthy, vigorous, almost completely free of the dust of the theatre' (Copeau 1990: 177).

One notable success was an adaptation of Corneille's *L'illusion* (first staged by Copeau in 1926 and subsequently revived and toured several times), in which theatre and life, text and improvisation became intimately entwined in all aspects of its creation and presentation. The whole company engaged in the realization of the performance, 'either by contributing an idea for its composition, or by conceiving a dance step, a mimicry, a game, a mask, casting and painting it, creating a backdrop, fabricating a green sward, a prop, a section of staircase, a lighting fixture' (Copeau 1990: 171).

The key elements that formed the heart of the company's work and training – mask work, silent improvisation, play and gymnastics – all demanded the continuous development of skills and understandings intrinsic to successful ensemble acting. Copeau's direction of the company and its work was clearly focused on the creation of a community wherein the working lives of the group were intimately linked to the work that was produced.

Michel Saint-Denis: La Compagnie des Quinze (1929-1934), two London drama schools (1937-1952), and the Royal Shakespeare Company (1962-1966)

There was no doubting the artistic achievements of Les Copiaus by the time they disbanded in 1929: 'Towards the end of the Burgundy period (1924-1929) we were beginning to possess a more complete mode of expression, one rich in possibilities; we could act, dance, sing, improvise in all kinds of ways, and, when necessary, write our own dialogue. We were ready to devise shows that used these special techniques' (Saint-Denis 1982: 26-7). Many of the group had worked together for ten years, since the beginnings of the Vieux-Colombier School. Not only had they acquired confidence and skill in improvisation, mime and music, but their shared experience meant that this ability was underpinned by the kind of communion that only prolonged collaboration can bring. If there was a disadvantage it was that they were as a consequence less well equipped to find work outside of what they now excelled at: 'we were a chorus with a few personalities sticking out rather than actors ready to act the usual repertory, classical or modern' (Saint-Denis in Copeau 1990: 234).

La Compagnie des Quinze was formed in 1929 by the core of Les Copiaus, who decided to continue with their work under the direction of Michel Saint-Denis. The most notable development was the decision to work more closely with a writer. The company still undertook almost all the preparatory and backstage work themselves – designing and making costumes and sets, for example – and recognized that the presence of a writer would greatly assist the process of creating and structuring their performances. The only condition was that ‘the author become a member of our ensemble and adhere to its orientation’ (Saint-Denis 1982: 33), so that the script emerged from a process informed by their improvisatory approach.

Despite the undoubted quality of La Compagnie des Quinze’s work the pressures of communal living, the demands of international touring and the lack of money all became too much. They tried to set up a laboratory and school of their own in Aix-en-Provence; but the project only lasted six months. Years of experiment and innovation could not in the end give them the financial success necessary for survival. As the company disbanded in 1935, Saint-Denis sought a new base for his own work. The success of the company’s performances in London, and the support and recognition offered him by many of the leading figures in British theatre at the time, all helped to persuade him that the studio and school of which he dreamed might find a successful home in London.

The actor Marius Goring, who had worked with La Compagnie des Quinze in France, introduced Saint-Denis to George Devine⁶, who became a close ally in the foundation of his new project, the London Theatre Studio. The new school opened in 1936, based

⁶ George Devine (1910-1966) was later to found the English Stage Company at the Royal Court in 1956.

in a disused chapel in Islington. Strikingly different from the drama schools of the period in its emphasis on paring away the actor's comfortable habits, and on developing skills in physical expression, improvisation and ensemble acting, the school's chief problem was that it was preparing students for a theatre that did not yet exist. The British theatre industry was not yet ready to make use of the skills that these actors had acquired. Despite its successes, the London Theatre Studio was brought to an abrupt halt by the outbreak of war in 1939.

Saint-Denis' success as a director and his reputation as a teacher meant that when the Old Vic Centre, an ambitious project centred around the Old Vic Theatre, was planned in the years after the Second World War he was a natural choice for the leadership of the elements that focused on experiment and education. The Old Vic Theatre School (1947-1952) was to be linked to the Old Vic Centre, a working theatre with a classical repertoire, as well as to a young company, the Young Vic. Saint-Denis was able once again to return to the development of his vision, in a context that more or less mirrored the Vieux-Colombier model.

The Old Vic School, in Saint-Denis' mind, had a clear focus on the 'evolution of new theatrical forms' (Saint-Denis 1982: 53), with silent improvisation, ensemble performance and the natural physical expressivity of the actor at the heart of this process.

We have [...] to form an actor equipped with all possible means of dramatic expression, one capable of facing up to any challenge and meeting the demands of today's and tomorrow's ever-changing theatre, an actor who is

capable of participating in these changes and who is himself inventive enough to contribute to them.

(Saint-Denis 1982: 80)

The Old Vic School was hugely influential in the later development of the drama conservatoire system in the UK, and many contemporary drama schools still share its basic ethos and structure⁷. Saint-Denis also influenced theatre training in France (L'École Supérieure d'Art Dramatique, 1952-1957), Canada (The National Theatre School of Canada, 1960) and the USA (Juilliard School Drama Division, 1968-1969), building similar models to his initial enterprises in London.

In 1962, Peter Hall asked Saint-Denis to join the RSC as one of its three founding directors, alongside Hall himself and Peter Brook. Hall's ambition was to establish the RSC as one of the great international ensemble companies. Although Saint-Denis was by this time suffering from health problems, Hall recognized that there was no one else with Saint-Denis' track record and experience. Saint-Denis' main role was to lead on the establishment of a studio for training and for experiment. The plan was to provide training and experimentation opportunities for members of the company, but also to have a specially selected nucleus of ten young actors with whom he would work more intensively. The 'curriculum' for the young group would include voice, movement, improvisation and mask-work. They would perform contemporary plays and some experimental work, as well as understudying and playing small parts in the main company (Saint-Denis 1982: 74). In effect they were to be an ensemble within a larger ensemble, nurturing the central ethos through a return to the core skills which

⁷ Several of the leading figures in the history of British drama schools during the last half of the twentieth century have been former colleagues or pupils of Saint-Denis: John Blatchley, Litz Pisk, George Hall.

underpinned it. The project was eventually curtailed by the financial imperatives driving the company as a whole. Saint-Denis' health also deteriorated to the point where he found sustained engagement difficult. Nonetheless the work of Buzz Goodbody⁸ at the RSC's Other Space and the continuing commitment of the RSC to company skills development and experimentation all would not have happened without Saint-Denis' initial impetus.

The Legacy, Jacques Lecoq and after

Copeau's and Saint-Denis' legacies are profound and extensive, so much so that their influence, their practices and their pedagogies have become an almost invisible part of the fabric of our contemporary theatre scene. Echoes of their work and their approaches to theatre are clearly evident in the practice of major theatre organizations, major international drama conservatoires, the work of leading international directors⁹, and in the ensemble ethos and working methods of companies such as Kneehigh and Footsbarn. So much of what is now taken for granted – devised performances, theatre workshops¹⁰, physical theatre and mime – had its origins in their experiments and working methods. Copeau sought to bring a unity to theatre – 'the unity between the written word and its performance; actors, scenographers, musicians and authors forming a whole, even down to the last stage-hand' (Strehler in Copeau 1990: 243).

As with all attempts at collaborative creation, success and failure are in part defined

⁸ Mary Ann 'Buzz' Goodbody (1946-1975) was associate director at the RSC in charge of The Other Space (1974-1975). She was the first female director to be employed at the RSC. Her intimate productions of Hamlet and King Lear were heralded as seminal interpretations.

⁹ Such as Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Simon McBurney.

¹⁰ Charles Dullin set up his own 'Atelier', or workshop as 'a laboratory for dramatic experiment' (Dullin in Copeau 1990: 223). He chose the name because 'it seemed to correspond to our idea of an ideal corporative organization in which the strongest personalities would submit themselves to the needs of ensemble collaboration' (Dullin in Copeau 1990: 223). This was one of the first explicit examples of what we understand as a theatre workshop.

by the ways those involved resolve the tensions between clear vision, leadership, unity and coherence, and democratic process, diversity and renewal. The writer and dramatist Roger Martin du Gard, writing in 1917, near the start of Copeau's theatrical journey, expresses very well the power of Copeau's vision for an ensemble, but also hints at its cost:

There is an indefinable but undeniable unity between all his conceptions – his stage, décor, choice of plays, *mise-en-scene*, acting, costume ... He is looking for *workers*: artists of the second rank who can carry out someone else's idea once they've grasped it. He's open to advice. But in future I doubt whether he will entrust the smallest decision to anyone else. There's nothing for us to say. We are in the presence of a creator of genius who has a clear vision of an ensemble which includes not only questions of performance but even the actors' moral lives: the creation of a simple and honest society of theatre workers, a troupe involving everything down to educating children at schools of rhythm and gymnastics.

(Roger Martin du Gard in Wardle 1978: 56)

The influence of Copeau's and Saint-Denis' teaching can be seen in the structure, syllabi and teaching practices of many of the western world's leading drama schools and conservatoires. However, the contemporary theatre school that most impressively lives up to the pioneering spirit of Copeau's enterprises, showing the same desire for innovation, ensemble creation, and the rejuvenation of the great theatre territories, is the international school set up in Paris by the French theatre, mime and movement

teacher Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999)¹¹. Lecoq, who trained initially as a sports coach and a physiotherapist, had briefly been a member of Jean Dasté's Compagnie des Comédiens in Grenoble, where he trained the actors and played small parts. In 1948, while in Grenoble, Lecoq met Copeau, and through Dasté he would have had experience of many of Copeau's ideas and practices, and of Georges Hébert's natural gymnastics. After a period performing, directing and teaching in Italy Lecoq opened his own school in Paris in December 1956, and since then the School has taught several generations of actors, directors, writers and theatre artists.

From the 1960s onwards, a key part of the school's teaching has been the *auto-cours*, a weekly element of the course within which the students are required to create their own ensemble work in response to themes and provocations. Although the overall shape and structure of this process was designed by Lecoq, he allowed students the freedom to discover their own theatrical voice within this part of the course. The process takes the student from a point where the *auto-cours* functions initially as an extension to the students' experience in the improvisation classes, towards a point where they are challenged to explore the use of different theatrical devices in order to present their investigations into particular milieu. The work done in the *auto-cours* eventually therefore deals explicitly with the processes of production, playwriting, 'the necessity of collaborative work in the theatre' (Lecoq 2000: 92) and the value of 'placing oneself at the service of others' (ibid: 94).

During their two years at the school, students 'discover strengths as directors, authors, actors' (ibid: 93), and gain an understanding and experience of the internal dynamics

¹¹ For further information on Lecoq's work, see Lecoq (2000, 2006) and Murray (2003, 2010).

of a theatre ensemble – its struggles, tensions and crises. In the second year, the exploration of dramatic territories such as tragedy, bouffons, Commedia and clowns¹² provides the students with models for the ways in which the ensemble can function both to create and to present theatre. The challenge to the student is to create a new theatre in which the integration of text and improvisation, collaboration and direction, and the actor's understanding of the creative and playful potential of the moving body, is achieved with a similar level of poetic integrity. This is a difficult process, as the problems previously confronted by Les Copiaus and La Compagnie des Quinze attest. Lecoq's pedagogy, though it owes a clear debt to Copeau's earlier work, is finally more successful in its production of self-sustaining theatre ensembles; probably because Lecoq was more fascinated by his students' own journey than either Copeau or Saint-Denis, and therefore more able to let them go their own way.

Copeau, Saint-Denis and Lecoq are important because they represent a consistent and organic approach to ensemble theatre training and making, based on the physical skills of the actor, which has informed the training of ensemble theatre makers and the practice of ensemble theatre throughout the twentieth century. Their work has stressed the importance of the theatre company as a self-sufficient theatrical unit, the worth of a shared theatre vocabulary based on common training experiences, and the value of embedding a culture of ongoing training and development within a company or school. Their work has drawn on historical ensemble traditions such as the Commedia dell'Arte and re-invigorated these traditions for the modern audience, and through their students and disciples they have achieved nothing less than a change in the theatrical landscape of Europe and beyond.

¹² See Lecoq (2000: 108-150).

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