



Jacques Lecoq and States of Tension

Laurence Cuthbert

We began with the framework of Lecoq's states of tension as interpreted by Wright, exploring their capacity to develop characterisation and dramatic tension.¹ A two-person scene was devised in which one character had committed a murder and the other entered the space seemingly oblivious. In accordance with Lecoq's recommendation to "begin with silence" and allow speech when "silence becomes too highly charged,"² the scene was non-verbal excluding a single line to end it.

Initially, the sequence was cluttered and indistinct. Movements were overstressed, with the "killer"'s hands constantly trembling and fumbling with a mimed knife in an effort to portray conflict and panic. We then incorporated the third tension state – described by Wright as "one movement at a time" – encouraging actors to eliminate imprecise physicality.³ The subsequent isolated precision of the actor's movements – from polishing the knife to wiping her hands on her trousers and preparing a cup of tea – made her character appear methodical and obsessive, and the scene benefitted from a more purposeful momentum and focus.

We similarly experimented with the tension state of "neutrality." In approaching this, Lecoq employed a mask to achieve a "state of perfect balance and economy of movement."⁴ While a mask was unavailable for our scene, we explored neutrality in accordance with Wright's idea: that it is "essential" in providing "depth and contrast to all the other tension states."⁵ The results proved effective: in encouraging the actors to remove extraneous tension from the body, such as raised shoulders or deep, broken breathing, the scene became much more disquieting. The result allowed us to understand the value of stillness on stage, and that an individual's performance, however "neutral", will remain bound to audience interpretations depending on the scene's context.

Tension states may also be used to heighten a contrast on stage, and exploit it for dramatic effect. While we now began with one actor in neutral, the second actor entered in the "laid-back" state, carrying less tension still. He swung his arms loosely by his sides and swayed his hips as he walked to indicate relaxation, before slumping into a seat and leaning back with almost no tension. Referring the actors to explicit tension states provided them with a clear instruction on how to coordinate their body physically, and the resulting clarity of their contrast enhanced the scene's dramatic irony and tension.

I was particularly struck by the versatility of tension states as a framework: aspects of them remain applicable to styles such as naturalism, particularly "neutral." Stanislavski's description of "95% excess tension when an actor observes anything onstage" underlines his own emphasis upon neutrality.⁶ Meanwhile, Lecoq aimed to "approach improvisation through psychological replay", while intending to "never lose sight of the root anchoring [performance] to reality."⁷ Lecoq's teachings should not, therefore, be regarded as obstructive to naturalistic performance. Nor should they be viewed in opposition or as mutually exclusive: instead states of tension may be another means of approaching naturalistic performance. Crucially, tension states possess the fluidity to be applied to different modes

¹ John Wright, *Why Is That So Funny?* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006). pp. 103-22.

² Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique)* trans. by David Bradby (London: Methuen Drama, 2002). p. 29/30.

³ Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴ Lecoq, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁵ Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁶ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. by Jean Benedelti (Oxon: Routledge, 2010). p. 94.

⁷ Lecoq, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

of performance. Lecoq's principle, to "offer... a method of working"⁸ and allow the actor to apply it however they wish, underlines this.

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Meyerhold and Biomechanics

Meyerhold aligned the actor's body with that of an industry worker's, emphasising a necessary economy of movement. He discussed biomechanics as a system of "laws" for an actor to follow in order to create "maximum productivity" as in any form of work.⁹ While it may be assumed from this that his mode of performance must be rigid and disciplined, in fact there is scope for experimentation and fluidity. Our primary challenge as actors was negotiating this fluidity in Meyerhold's practice and understanding its boundaries.

In groups, we devised a brief sequence portraying the delivery of a letter, using *The Government Inspector's* opening as a stimulus. Meyerhold believed "the theatre should employ only those movements which are immediately decipherable; everything else is superfluous."¹⁰ In this instance, the overarching objective of the letter's delivery rendered any nuance in character "superfluous": instead the journey was conveyed through physicality, and we worked as an ensemble. Settings and movements were stripped back to become as economical as possible: considering the efficiency of Meyerhold's etudes, we worked on creating symbols which would be simple for an audience to interpret. To efficiently indicate the setting of a farm, we relied upon one actor making the sound of a cockerel while squatting and cocking their head at erratic intervals, while later we lined up in a row and circled our arms forward in unison to enact a moving train.

In describing Meyerhold's biomechanical exercises, Pitches highlighted the "emphasis upon collective, collaborative action... the ensemble is in effect bound by a common cause."¹¹ Working with three other actors, the priority therefore became distribution of space between us and mutual spatial awareness. This was most significant in the horse-riding sequence. Initially we had the actors forming disparate trees and shrubs across the stage, with the "horse" moving quickly through them. However, the image was confusing and did not demonstrate us working together as an ensemble. Rather than use an actor to portray the horse, then, we opted to suggest it through the movement of the "rider", extending one leg after the other in "climbing" onto it and then riding on the spot. Two other actors then stood closely on either side and became trees which the horse was running past. Our physical bases remained rooted and solid, while our upper bodies moved in synchronised circular motion to signify the speed of movement. In this sense, we retained a strong centre of gravity whilst conveying the "rhythm" and collaboration which Pitches associated with Meyerhold's practice.

Meyerhold also claimed a "skilled worker in action" possessed "rhythm" and "stability."¹² As we explored options for concluding the sequence, I formed the shape of an aeroplane, extending my arms wide and leaning far forward whilst lifting and stretching my left leg behind me in parallel, "suspending" myself in motion. However, this position hindered my movement, and a resulting lack of balance left me uncertain of my centre of gravity. By removing this segment, I retained stability and the sequence maintained a comfortable rhythm.

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⁸ Franc Chamberlain and Ralph Yarrow, eds., *Jacques Lecoq and the British Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 4.

⁹ Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Edward Brown (London: Methuen, 1991). p. 198.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹¹ Pitches, quoted in Robert Leach, "Meyerhold and Biomechanics", from *Actor Training*, ed. by Alison Hodge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) 2nd edition. p. 33.

¹² Meyerhold, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

Characterisation through Laban

Laban's physical approach to theatre is exemplified in his reference to a kinesphere, divided into three planes – horizontal, vertical and sagittal – for the actor's body to move in.¹³ In contrast to Stanislavski's circles of attention – which imagine the actor's surroundings in terms of psychological "layers"¹⁴ – the more pragmatic form of the kinesphere encourages the actor to begin with physicality. Laban's dynamics similarly assert a focus upon physicality in devising a character, rather than psychology and emotion.

In the workshop, I developed a character using Laban's pedagogy. By expanding my kinesphere, I allowed myself more space to negotiate. Focusing on the sagittal plane, I walked with a swinging forward stride while leaning backward from the hips and drawing the chest out slightly. This formed a shape which was led by the feet, suggesting an extroverted character with an assured youthful energy. We then explored Laban's "efforts", defined according to their weight, timing and level of focus.¹⁵ Those which were sudden and light, such as "dab" or "flick", suggested to me a skittish or restless character in their quick, abrupt movements with a lack of weight. Meanwhile, those which were sustained and strong, such as "press" and "wring", denoted anguish, aggression or authority in their locked tension and even movement. Finally, we fused these efforts with Lecoq and Wright's tension states: I incorporated the "laid-back" state to ease tension through my body and explore the opposition between a smooth, fluid walk and the erratic hand gestures of "flick". I ended with a character who moved as a compulsive pickpocket attempting to be inconspicuous. The innate conflict presented in this character was made manifest in the juxtaposition of tension state and effort, while interaction with other characters of opposing efforts allowed for both humorous contrast and dramatic tension.

Using Laban's efforts alongside Lecoq's tension states provided a surprising range of possibilities for nuanced characters. It encapsulated a theatre which begins by appealing on a visual level rather than an emotional or intellectual one, accommodating various ideas from other practitioners on the module. Lecoq also prefers actors to "begin by playing very large", before finding "the nuances in a more intimate way of playing." Indeed, he perceives and condemns a prevailing discipline that "students... begin by playing 'small', and then gradually enlarge their performance."¹⁶ Meanwhile, from Meyerhold's perspective, "a theatre built on psychological foundations is as certain to collapse as a house built on sand."¹⁷

The primary concern in this instance is whether physical characterisation is effective in the long term. Frantic Assembly, while exploring characterisation through physical means, claim "physical discoveries made in an initial session cannot possibly hold true" throughout the process.¹⁸ However, as an actor I felt liberated by applying Laban's theory as a starting point: the aim would be to structure rehearsals accordingly, beginning with physical characterisation and then allowing the characters to grow and change as the piece evolves.

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Bibliography

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¹³ Kitty Winter, character movement workshop notes (2017).

¹⁴ Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. and ed. by Jean Benedelti (Oxon: Routledge, 2010). p. 102.

¹⁵ Winter, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, p. 79.

¹⁷ Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, p. 199.

¹⁸ Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, *The Frantic Assembly Book of Devising Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2009). p. 36.

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Jacques Lecoq developed an approach to acting using seven levels of tension. These changed and developed during his practice and have been further developed by other practitioners. The following suggestions are based on the work of Simon McBurney (Complicite), John Wright (Told by an Idiot) and Christian Darley. There can of course be as many or as few levels of tension as you like (how long is a piece of string?). This is a guideline, to be adapted. You can train your actors by slowly moving through these states so that they become comfortable with them, then begin to explore them in scenes.