

Actor Training.

The Aporias of an Object of Study

CECILIA CARPONI

Fall Fellow at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America (2023-2024)

Columbia University

Pre-paper for the seminar on November 28, 2023

In the twentieth century Western world, theatre acting pedagogy emerges as a rich tapestry of research, experimentation, and artistic exploration. These adventures were undertaken within the confines of studios and schools, marked by (few and) often rejected (or directly posthumous) successes, and (many) fruitful failures. Arguably, one of the most important developments in contemporary Western theatre lies in actor training, which has come to determine the entire dramatic process. Consequently, studying and analysing training practices and methodologies extends beyond merely examining techniques—it entails a discourse on the entirety of the theatrical system. For theatre to thrive, it must engage in a dialogue with its audience, serving as a reflective mirror of the present world and a canvas for envisioning an alternative future.

As early as 1984, Fabrizio Cruciani¹ uses the expression “pedagogical situation” (Cruciani 1984: 43) to define the experiences initiated at the onset of the twentieth century. These experiences unfolded

¹ Both Fabrizio Cruciani and Ferdinando Taviani (mentioned further below) took part of the international informal team of scholars and researchers which, from the 1970s to the late 1980s, are responsible for the critical renewal of the European theatre studies tradition.

within schools, ateliers, workshops, and centres that arose *alongside* art theatres², at the behest and necessity of their animators. Their leaders were recognized not only as accomplished directors but also distinctly as pedagogues by the historiography of the last sixty years.

In the same essay, Cruciani delves into the profound impact that schools and pedagogies have had on twentieth century theatre, offering enduring definitions. For instance, he characterizes the school as “the compromise with the existent”, representing a space *between* the current state and the potential, a gymnasium designed “not for what already exists [*l’esistente*], but for what could exist [*l’esistibile*]”. The ultimate horizon of these initiatives is the height of aspiration: an almost chimerical idea of theatre. The school is then “the place where utopia takes concrete form”, or even “the dark and signifying zone in which the imminence of utopia is actualized, in which motivations and meaning and values are sought and born”. The fundamental purpose is to weave together the threads of time, reviving the dialogical flow between tradition, contemporary theatre, and the theatre of the future. It is necessary therefore “learn to build in the present the future [...] and preserve in the present the past”, argues Cruciani. But through utopia, the theatre expresses its need to distance itself from the world. In order to make the promise of its own hypostasis true, “the school is always founded for a social renewal of the theatre and to give concreteness to the theatre of the future and to open vanishing points for the future of the theatre”. Furthermore, Cruciani notes that “the school is the separate place where the present of the future is experienced, a separate community set apart from the city, the theatre, and the ‘normal’ or bourgeois world” (Cruciani 1984: 39-45).

In most cases, in fact, these schools have functioned as vibrant cultural hubs, fostering pedagogical endeavors and nurturing experiments in communal living at the periphery of the theatre³, on the edge of

² The European “art theatre movement” started at the end of nineteenth century, as opposed to the commercial or *boulevard* theatre, that in the first modern stage directors’ perspective did not produce plays that upheld high artistic values. Banal, still under the influence of the combined forces of Naturalism and Romanticism, dominated by ham acting and shabby treatment of both classic and modern texts; the majority of theatergoers went to famous city theatres only aspiring to be entertained, to see and to be seen. The early reformers, on the contrary, were moved by a conception of theatre as a lively art, freed from the primacy of the dramatic literature, and controlled by one person, one “brain”: the director. From 1910-1911, an American phenomenon, named “Little Theatre movement”, imitated in part the ideal of the art theatre movement in Europe, with proponents in major cities throughout the United States.

³ Line that will be definitively crossed by the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s (De Marinis 2016: 21-22).

the social system, involving both human and artistic spheres. The concept articulated by Ferdinando Taviani, the “value of theatre from the point of view of those who make it, and not just those who see it” (Taviani 2005: 295), is a central theme explored by the pioneers of twentieth century director’s theatre and stage masters. In their quest to renew the theatre, they recognized the imperative of extending the rehearsal process beyond the performance itself, delving into a transformative *self-exploration* beyond mere techniques. At times, the pursuit of a final product—the live show—seems almost to overshadow the ongoing creative process.

Beginning with the innovative studies conducted and published in the late 1950s and early 1960s, theatralogy has predominantly focused on the phenomena surrounding the evolution of theatre directing. In the following decades, there has been a notable surge in interest in the theatre acting pedagogy of early twentieth-century pioneers, with ongoing enthusiasm evident today. Similarly, substantial and expansive scholarship has been dedicated to theatre research *masters* born between the 1920s and the 1930s, who were active in the post-World War II theatre scene. However, a noticeable gap exists in the examination of the so-called *golden age* of Western theatre⁴. An entire generation of artists—with rare exceptions—has been largely excluded from studies and historical-critical insights. This generation comprises the direct pupils of early twentieth century innovators, serving as custodians of the diverse outcomes of various research paths and shouldering the responsibility for transmitting these achievements to posterity.

These individuals should rightfully stand out, yet, they often remain concealed, overshadowed by their own originality. Their direct or indirect influence, however, permeates the theatre landscape through subterranean channels, shaping almost an entire century of dramatic arts. The pupils they mentored across different generations form part of an international subterranean network that enriches the cultural tapestry of twentieth-century Western theatre. A poignant example is found in Jacques Copeau’s direct pupil, Étienne Decroux (1898-1991), probably the best known of the *élèves* of the *École du Vieux-*

⁴ This expression, that has nothing to do with the Spanish theatre of the *Siglo de oro*, describes a period of great change within the theatrical culture of the twentieth century, in Europe and North America. The foundation of the Moscow Art Theatre, by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, in 1898, is often acknowledged as a symbolic starting point of a deep and extensive regeneration movement, lasted until the 1980s.

Colombier (1920-1924). He has been described as follows: the corporeal mime encoder and one of the greatest masters of twentieth-century theatre (Taviani 2021: 330). Despite his significant contributions, Decroux remains largely unknown to the general public and is sometimes underestimated even by those well-versed in theatre.

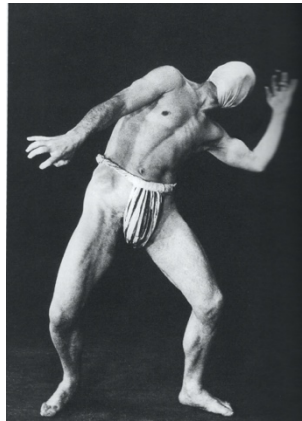


Figure 1. The “visage voilé” by Étienne Decroux, exercise conceived to increase actors’ body expression by covering their face.

Much like Decroux, numerous figures from this generation—connecting (or diverging?) between the era of Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), Jacques Copeau (1879-1949), and their contemporaries, and the subsequent generation of Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999), Peter Brook (1925-2022), Dario Fo (1926-2016), Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999), Eugenio Barba (1936), Ariane Mnouchkine (1939), Julie Taymor (1952) and others—have dedicated themselves to actor training. While engaging in directing performances, managing theatre companies and centers, their primary focus has been on establishing and guiding workshops and programs, varying in structure, for the education and training of actors. The dissemination of pedagogical techniques unfolds organically within these educational institutions, functioning as authentic epicenters for the irradiation of actor training practices. Each school is aligned with a distinct worldview, specific actor and theatre conceptions, particular body and voice disciplines, a unique approach to dramaturgy (how to stimulate the invention of a play, or even how to create it *ex novo*, bringing together writing and acting skills) and so on. Consequently, the trajectory through which an

acting pupil refines their craft profoundly influences and definitively shapes how they perform on stage, collaborate with peers, expressively communicate with the audience, and, in turn, convey the ethical and aesthetic values they embody. To echo Cruciani's terminology, it shapes their "modo di operare" (way of operating) in the theatre (Cruciani 1991: 12).

To understand and historicize the transmission of acting and performance knowledge within theatre schools, it is imperative to embed them within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, investigating the various forms of actor training requires a thorough examination of each case, considering the unique historical, geographical, and socio-cultural circumstances that shaped them.

An illustrative example from the often-overlooked intermediate generation of theatre practitioners mentioned earlier is Michel Saint-Denis. Born in 1897 and passing away in 1971, he was the nephew, pupil, and significant disciple of Jacques Copeau, much like Decroux. Despite being somewhat neglected by theatre historians, Saint-Denis's actor pedagogy is an exemplary case study for two main reasons. Firstly, he was the first to translate his uncle's pedagogical experiments—such as the acting practices rediscovered at the *École du Vieux-Colombier* in Paris and by the Copiaus group in Burgundy (eg. mime, physical acting, improvisation, working with both basic, neutral, or *noble* masks and with character masks, stock characters creation etc.)—into a distinct and defined method designed for transmission. Secondly, he played a crucial role in adapting and leading Copeau's teachings in the Anglophone theatrical world. Saint-Denis conceived, animated, and directed several institutions for actor training:

- The London Theatre Studio (1936-1939).
- The Old Vic Theatre Centre in London (1947-1952).
- The *École Supérieure d'Art Dramatique* (opened in 1953 and still active; Saint-Denis directed it until 1957) at the *Centre Dramatique de l'Est* in Strasbourg, France.
- The Royal Shakespeare Company's Stratford Studio (1962-1967), co-directed with Peter Brook and Peter Hall.

- Since the late 1950s, he served as an “artistic advisor” for the planning of the National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal, which opened in 1960 and remains active.
- The foundation of the Drama Division of the Juilliard School in New York, opened in 1968, where he served as artistic advisor and consultant director since the late 1950s until his death.



Figure 2. Four male (top) and four female (bottom) neutral, basic or "noble" masks of the Michel Saint-Denis tradition. Left to right: four stages of life: childhood, youth, maturity, and old age.

The reconstruction and analysis of the initiatives led by Saint-Denis offer a privileged angle through which to observe a broader phenomenon. Saint-Denis emerged from a decade-long apprenticeship alongside the Patron (as collaborators and pupils called Copeau), and a witness to the obduracy in the utopian quest for an art whose forms remained still unknown: the *Comédie nouvelle*. This envisioned a contemporary approach to producing performances, aiming to redefine the relationship between poet and actor and give rise to a new theatre based on the “rediscovered” or rather “reinvented” tradition of the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Over his extensive career as a professional director and pedagogue, Saint-Denis systematized the acting culture cultivated at the *École du Vieux-Colombier* and later in Burgundy, extending its influence to unfamiliar horizons.

As one of the first disciples of Copeau and later a master to many, Saint-Denis did not merely *passively* inherit the reinvented tradition, but he *actively* appropriated it. In fact, he moved from the dimension of *obedience* to discipline, to the dimension of *mastery*. While Copeau had the character of the *Comédien recite* in the 1926 performance *L’illusion*, “*pour savoir inventer, il faut savoir obéir*” (to invent, one

must know how to obey⁵, just two years later, Saint-Denis contradicted his uncle. In a letter that hinted at the dissolution of the Copiaus group, he wrote, “*pour créer, il faut être maître de sa création*” (to create, one must be master of one’s own creation)⁶.

In preserving and transmitting his training doctrine, Saint-Denis inevitably found himself engaged in a nuanced process of betrayal, falsification, and manipulation. Through his interpretation, the practices of Copeau’s disciples underwent an initial phase of functionalization and adaptation to diverse host contexts, with a primary focus on the British theatre in the 1930s. Subsequently, these practices became enriched through a complex interplay, being contaminated, and hybridized with prompts, elements, techniques, and methodologies from various sources.

Despite this *heresy*, which is “necessarily part of the master-pupil relationship and the natural process of appropriation-transformation of a living tradition” (De Marinis 2013: 240), the experiences and tools acquired by charting new territories persist in the *wiles* and intricacies of doing and making. They constitute an identity heritage, undeniably individual, transmitted through contact, and continue to influence the shaping of consciousness and professional training. This heritage adapts and transforms itself according to the contexts that welcome and integrate it.

⁵ *L’Illusion* was produced by Copeau in the summer of 1926, under the influence of Fernando de Rojas’ *La Celestine* (1499-1514) and Pierre Corneille’s *L’illusion comique* (1634-1660), debuted on October 3 at the Stadttheater in Basel, Switzerland, and toured for the next three years. It represented the culminating experience and the emblem of the Copiaus’ adventure (1924-1929): a group of young improvisers, moved from Paris to Burgundy, following Copeau. The form *Copiaus* is used in Burgundy dialect to mean “Copeau’s children”. The participants believed they were taking part in a brave experiment whose outcome would be the rebirth of a re-energized and *retheatricalized* theater: the enemy to fight was in fact Naturalism, an antitheatrical movement that deprived the theatre of beauty and art. The *scenario* of the performance (preserved in two redactions in Paris, in the Fonds Jacques Copeau, Bibliothèque nationale de France—site Richelieu, F-COL-1/57 and F-COL-1/58), is partially published by Roberto Cuppone (Cuppone 2008). All the translations are mine.

⁶ Letter from Michel Saint-Denis to Jacques Copeau, April 22, 1928. Paris, Fonds Michel Saint-Denis, Bibliothèque nationale de France—site Richelieu, 4-COL-83/107.



Figure 3. Michel Saint-Denis giving a mask workshop at a Juilliard retreat in 1968.

Like the work of many other direct pupils of the director-pedagogues first generation, Saint-Denis' work likely contributed to the gradual abandonment of the utopian aspirations of early twentieth-century research. The experimental pedagogical and training practices of the great masters were slowly stiffened, sometimes immiserated, transformed into *methods* and then *normalized*, gradually “dying out in the schools”.

In conclusion, it is necessary to go back to the beginning. To the “pedagogical situation” mentioned at the opening of this pre-paper Cruciani opposes the “educational institution”, that is, the place where theatrical culture “suffocates of school [...] and dies of theologies”. Within the confines of schools, experiences undergo a process of settling, characterized by a decay resulting from the separation of insoluble components that lose their meaning and value through decomposition. The experiential *vagranicies* (Deligny 1975) become organized and degrade “into didactics”. Cruciani places blame on the “followers” of the forerunners—the pioneers of director's theatre, the master innovators—for succumbing to “didacticisms”. These individuals elevate experimentation to rules, sidelining the essential by prioritizing answers over questions. Such behaviours contribute to the reiteration of a paradigm that gradually tends toward crystallization, losing the vital sense initially sparked by the research, in the attempt to grapple with (and solve) a problem.

However, by systematically studying and analysing the havens and drifts of the generation that I suggest to conventionally call the “first disciples’ generation”, as well as the next ones, it becomes plausible to follow an underground current, largely unacknowledged in its origin. This current has allowed these theatrical traditions not only to endure in written form but also to persist in the actual practices of *doing* and *making*. Through this contact-based transmission, these theatre acting pedagogies continue to resonate in the realms designated for actor training even today. They entered and institutionalized in the performing arts conservatories, shaping the foundations of contemporary and future theatre.

In doing so, the objective is to trace the reintegration of anomalies, deviations from the norm, and exceptional, fiery revolts, as well as the most tenacious, radical, and extraordinary research, back into the theatre system. Practices that originated as *tactics* to unsettle or diverge from prescribed conventions have transformed into *strategies*, or hidden means, by institutions (De Certeau 1980).

Viewing theatre acting pedagogy from this perspective reveals a highly intricate and multifaceted subject of study, and the purpose of “making history” of it (Le Goff and Nora 1974) forces the scholar to face the aporias, hindrances, *wrongfooting*, and dead ends intrinsic to it. It demands the ability to discern the original paths of experimentation from their derivative epigones while remaining attentive to all phenomena, even those whose vocation might appear less noble.

This broadening of disciplinary scope requires the concretization of at least three preliminary objectives:

- 1) Delineating a *family tree* of the transmission of performing arts knowledge, linking current teaching practices to the foundational theatre acting pedagogies from which they stem.
- 2) Drawing a synchronic and diachronic map of various experiences, both of “pedagogical situations” and “educational institutions”.
- 3) Finally, refining and preparing what I would call a “*philology* of theatrical practices”, considering their extraordinary fluidity of influences, with the breadth and caution required by the problems of historical and historiographical study.

Only by accomplishing these goals can we investigate the transformations of performing techniques, developing a heightened awareness—or *conscientization* (Freire 1970)—of the processes through which theatrical knowledge is transmitted by contact, hybridized, and contaminated, and to establish areas of influence and points of propagation, from where different types of theatre making have individually arisen and spread.

Mentioned works

- Cruciani, Fabrizio (1984), *I Padri Fondatori e il teatro pedagogia nel Novecento*, in “Quaderni di teatro”, VI, no. 23, February, pp. 38-46.
- Cuppone, Roberto (2008), “*Moi, je ne joue plus*”, “*L’illusion*” di Jacques Copeau, in “Teatro e Storia”, no. 29, pp. 333-360.
- De Certeau, Michel (1980), *L’Invention du quotidien*, tome I: *Arts de faire*, Union générale d’éditions, Paris.
- De Marinis, Marco (2013), *Il teatro dopo l’età d’oro. Novecento e oltre*, Bulzoni, Roma.
- Deligny, Fernand (1975), *Les vagabonds efficaces: et autres récits*, F. Maspero, Paris.
- Freire, Paulo (1970), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1968], Herder and Herder, New York.
- Le Goff, Jacques, and Nora, Pierre (eds.) (1974), *Faire de L’Histoire*, Gallimard, Paris.
- Taviani, Ferdinando (2005), *Amatorialità. Riflessioni a partire dal “Dilemma” di Osanai Kaoru: Teatro Euroasiatico, teatrologia comparata e l’emisfero amatoriale*, in “Teatro e Storia”, no. 26, pp. 263-313.
- Taviani, Ferdinando (2021), *Teatri, società e modi di produzione* [2000], in Id., *Le visioni del teatro. Scritti sul teatro dell’Otto e Novecento*, ed. Mirella Schino, Bulzoni, Roma, pp. 311-339.