**Chapter 1**

**The French Theatrical Avant Garde**

**Nigel Ward**

Revolutions in the arts rarely begin at a precise moment. They are the gradual consequence of a series of events, the influence of new ideas, the shifting of opinions, the arrival on the scene of new generations of artists with new ideas. But if the theatrical *avant garde* in France could be said to have begun at a single instant, it would be 10th December 1896 at the *Théâtre de l’Œuvre* in Paris, at the opening night of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*.

More precisely, it could be said to have happened with the speaking of a single word.

That night the actor Fermin Gémier tottered on to the stage in the person of Père Ubu, a bloated figure based on Jarry’s own drawings for a puppet. With movements and voice modelled on those of the playwright himself, Gémier uttered a single word. The word was an obscenity – lightly transformed by Jarry’s linguistic playfulness. *Merdre*.

The outrage produced by this single word brought the performance to a temporary halt as the audience erupted into mayhem. Something was happening on stage that caused offence and confusion. It was the birth of a new way of making theatre.

This was not simply a case of polite society being offended at the use of bad language. ‘*Merdre*’ was the opening word for a theatre which would transgress and shock. It was matched by the absurd and disturbing sight of the bloated, vulgar figure of Ubu himself. This was a theatre in which the old conventions were not simply to be challenged, but to be openly and deliberately violated. On the brink of a new century, Paris was witnessing the first stirrings of an artistic revolution, preparing itself to become the capital of that revolution. And everything on stage that night spoke of this change.

The set had been designed by artists Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard and Toulouse-Lautrec. They jumbled images whose effect was crude and confusing, depicting a strange mixture of locations as though drawn by a child. The actors moved and spoke awkwardly – the play had been written for puppets and Jarry wanted the actors to be masked. The narrative was crude and fragmented. The writing deliberately snubbed conventional notions of decorum and of the beautiful.

Two years later Stanislavsky’s production of *The Seagull*, would usher in a new theatre based on Realism. But Jarry was already looking beyond that to a theatre freed from the limitations of psychology and mimesis. This would be a theatre of the imagination, offering to take its audience to worlds beyond their experience.

W.B. Yeats gave the most famous description of the evening. He had been a vocal supporter of Jarry on the night, but this experience nevertheless troubled him as he recorded the experience afterwards:

I go to the first performance of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, at the Théatre de L’Œuvre… Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hotel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say, ‘After … our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm… what more is possible? After us the Savage God’.

(Yeats, 1922: 222)

Overnight a polite, decorous theatre of civilized values and elevating principles had been replaced. This new theatre would be less predictable, less rational. It would appeal to the senses as much as to the mind, focus on the body as much as on language, and challenge convention, rather than reinforcing the status quo.

Jarry himself was to be remembered long after his premature death; his influence the spark that lit the fuse for a new generation of theatre makers. In the audience of *Ubu* was the young Jacques Copeau, who would be central to the revival of mime and *commedia* in French theatre. Another passionate advocate of Jarry would be Antonin Artaud who named his company *Théâtre Alfred Jarry* and who would dedicate his life to the idea of a theatre in which visual language was primary. The body of the actor, rather than the words of a playwright, were to be central to this new kind of theatre. Artaud’s passionate disciple, Jean-Louis Barrault, would translate these ideas into his own explorations of the body in performance.

A new tradition was being born. This was the tradition that made possible the work of Jacques Lecoq.

When he wrote that ‘I came to theatre by way of sports’ (Lecoq, 2000: 3), he was describing a theatre made possible by *Ubu*. His first inspiration, physical trainer Jean-Marie Conty, had been friends with Artaud and Barrault and was interested in the connection between physical training for sport and its possible implications for theatre. Later, Copeau’s daughter Marie Hélène and her husband Jean Dasté invited Lecoq to join their company, *Les Comédiens de Grenoble*, teaching him the principles of mime and mask work that they had developed with Copeau.

The logocentric theatrical tradition had been radically challenged. Theatre was shaking off the reliance on the spoken word. But perhaps Yeats’ fears were misplaced. In place of the poetry of language, a new poetry was being made, a ‘*corps poétique*’.

This was the Savage God that had been released upon the stage.

\* \* \* \*

As the twentieth century began the theatre was reinventing itself. Traditions of acting, writing and stagecraft were all being challenged in an effort to revive a form that had begun to feel stale and mannered. Playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg turned to Naturalism, a style of writing pioneered in the novels of Zola. And even though this was a style with firm literary roots, its adaptation into the theatre began to beg questions about the role of language and the possibilities of the physical body of the performer. In his famous preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg explores the possibilities of making a performance that goes beyond language: ‘Where a monologue would seem unrealistic, I have resorted to mime, which leaves the player even more freedom to create’ (Strinberg, 1976: 100).

In Russia, Chekhov was pioneering Realism in the theatre, with Stanislavsky establishing the role of the director as a crucial figure in training the actor and developing the actor’s technique. Again, although this was a theatre deriving from text, there was an increasing focus on the limitations of language. Famously, for Stanislavsky, the text was less important than the subtext that lay beneath it. The actor needed to find ways to show this through physicality and exploration of emotion, memory and desire. This new approach to theatre in turn required a new kind of actor, forged in a new kind of systematic training in newly established theatre schools.

While Naturalism and Realism explored new ways of presenting a recognisable world on stage, more radical experiments were occupying the *avant garde*. Picasso and Braque began to develop Cubism, Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg explored atonal music, Ruth St Denis began to break with western dance forms. The theatre needed to do more than revisit the literary experiments of the middle part of the nineteenth century.

Radical theatre makers, those influenced by the avant-garde in other disciplines, began to treat Realism itself as a mainstream tradition in need of overturning. In Russia, theatre makers such as Vsevelod Meyerhold rebelled against Stanislavsky, turning to Constructivism and Biomechanics as an approach to the physical training of the actor in ways that embraced new ideas and new technologies. In Germany Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht developed Epic Theatre, an approach influenced by Hegel and Marx, to overturn the status quo of theatre – and society itself. In his travels across Europe Edward Gordon Craig sketched new models of theatre, creating visions of theatre drawing on the unrealised potential of the changing circumstances of theatrical production: flexible use of space and the affective power of lighting.

As these experiments broke out around Europe, nowhere was the intensity of experiment as great as in France.

Paris quickly established itself as the cultural capital of Modernism. It was here that the radical new generation of writers, artists, musicians and performers gathered. Many of them came from around the world, drawn to a city that embraced artists and that erected, at its heart and as its symbol, a giant statement of modernist aspiration, technological mastery and aesthetic daring: the Eifel Tower.

The confluence of talent led to extraordinary collaborations and meetings. In 1910 Stravinsky was writing the music for *The Firebird*, to be choreographed by Fokine for Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes and danced by Nijnsky. By the time he composed *Pulcinella* in 1920, the set was being designed by Picasso.

As Modernism gripped Paris, so its theatre makers began to grapple with its implications to remake theatre. Figures such as Jacques Copeau and Antonin Artaud began to imagine and create new ways of making performance, new models of performing.

In their dissatisfaction with the contemporary condition of theatre these practitioners set up a vision of a theatrical future, one that was often based on its past. The past offered idealised visions of a popular theatre in an integrated society, a society in which theatre had been a valuable social and even religious event rather than a marginal activity for privileged groups.

Different practitioners would look to different models of past theatre to rediscover the vital force that had since drained out of the theatrical form. For Edward Gordon Craig the ideal was the theatre of Shakespeare, with brilliant writing presented in a truly popular form, accessible to all. For others, influenced by the early writings of Nietzsche, the ideal was Greek theatre, especially its origins in religious ritual, with its use of music, movement and intoxicants to lead its celebrants to an ecstatic state. For Jacques Copeau, who would emerge as the pre-eminent stage director in France after Antoine, the ideal past was the theatre of Molière whose actors had mastered the art of matching the physical discipline and improvisational freedom of *commedia dell’arte* to great writing.

This tension between technology and primitivism, between the future and the past, between the radical and the traditional is a contradiction that runs through the work of many of these theatrical innovators. Copeau was to reject modernity by retreating to the countryside. Craig found himself sympathising with Fascism. The desire to move forward into a new way of training the body of the performer takes its cues from an attempt to recreate the lost tradition of the *commedia*. The past is romanticised and idealised to offer an inspiration for the future. Lecoq inherits this tradition: ‘We rediscovered the humanity of the tragic chorus… the *commedia dell’arte*, which had grown inflexible, did a back flip and turned itself inside out… comedy embraced the burlesque and the absurd with the renaissance of cabaret and variety shows’ (Lecoq, 2000: 12).

The future was to be found in a rediscovery of the past. Copeau never saw himself as a radical: ‘We started over again. We turned backwards in order to check what we knew, learn what we did not know, experiment with what we vaguely felt’ (1990: 169). His ideas were rooted in literature and he believed passionately in the primacy of the written word, yet he was the man who perhaps more than anyone else was to be responsible for the rebirth of improvisation, mime and the techniques of the *commedia*.

Copeau set himself the task of recreating the conditions in which the greatness of the theatre of Molière – ‘our perfect model’ (Copeau, 1990, p. 143) – could be reborn. To do this he would address every aspect of theatrical endeavour: the nature of theatre architecture, actor training, the vocal and physical presentation of the actor on stage, the role of text and improvisation, the role of training.

Copeau established his theatre, the *Vieux-Colombier*, in which performance and stage space were stripped back to their bare essentials, a style that came to be known as the ‘*tréteau nu*’, the ‘bare boards’ of an unadorned stage space. This was theatrical minimalism, with sparse staging, producing a theatre dependent for its power on the capabilities of its actors and writers alone.

Copeau was creating a void to be filled by the theatre of the future: ‘We must leave a margin for evolution, an empty space for the poet to fill in sooner or later’ (Copeau, 1990: 89). This empty space was to be filled with words, the poetry of the next Molière. But in the meantime he used this theatre to stage fresh productions of the classics, finding a fluid physical acting style not subordinated to the text.

Copeau’s 1920 production of *Les Fourberies de Scapin* was mounted on a bare stage with a simple wooden platform. The play’s comedy depended on the free movement of the actors. The stripped back stage environment meant that nothing would impede the clarity of this movement. Michel Saint-Denis described the resulting fluency of the performances:

The younger actors could leap on to the platform with an exuberant wildness, while the older characters were obliged to climb the steps laboriously. There was a perfect integration between the characterisation of the different roles, the ‘physical’ acting, and the acting space.

(Saint-Denis in Rudlin, 1986: 73)

Crucial to Copeau’s investigation of acting technique was the study of the *commedia dell’arte*. To all intents and purposes this was a lost form, the memory of which had become confused in nineteenth century romanticisation of figures such as the Harlequin. Copeau began to work with his actors on the *lazzi* of the *commedia*, to develop physical skills. These experiments involved the inclusion of masks and the acquisition of mime skills. Copeau, the director for whom text had been pre-eminent, was taking its abandonment further than almost any director of his generation. The revolution in Copeau’s thinking was gradual, but total. Leaving behind the theatres of Paris he retreated to the Burgundy countryside to develop his work in seclusion with a dedicated group of actors.

Molière had worked with performers who benefitted from all the physical aptitude of their experience of commedia. His heir would need actors similarly skilled. And although the new Molière-playwright stubbornly refused to appear, Copeau found himself sowing the seeds for the tradition of physical theatre as we understand it today. His influence was disseminated by his collaborators and students, notably Louis Jouvet, Copeau’s nephew Michel Saint-Denis and Étienne Decroux. Lecoq himself described this tradition and the lineage he had inherited; in *Theatre of Movement and Gesture* (2006) he names key figures in the tradition: Michel Saint-Denis, Léon Chancerel, Jean Dasté, Charles Dullin: ‘It was with Dullin that Étienne Decroux, Jean-Louis Barrault and Antonin Artaud would give mime its first autonomous drive, based on Copeau’s ideas: the actor on a bare stage, redefining theatre’ (Lecoq, 2006: 41).

This concern with the origins of the theatrical was heavily influenced by the early writings of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche established the context within which many of the concerns of the twentieth century’s theatre practitioners would develop their ideas. His concentration on the origins of theatre and on the subsequent obscuring of those origins is echoed time and again by Adolph Appia, Gordon Craig, Antonin Artaud and others. In particular Artaud’s notion of theatre having its origins in dance and music derive directly from Nietzsche: ‘the tragic art of the Greeks was really born of the spirit of music’ (Nietzsche, 1967: 104).

For Nietzsche the conflict at the heart of theatre is between the Dionysian, which is based in chaos and spontaneity, and the Apollonian, which is orderly and rational. It is in the tension between the two that Greek tragedy develops. Apollo implies the presence of music and instils that music with rhythm and form, whilst Dionysus brings to it emotional power, wildness and unpredictability.

For Nietzsche the key moment is when the wildness of the Dionysian ritual is tamed by the order and control of the Apollonian instinct. This is the moment when theatre becomes dominated not by movement and music, not by wildness and improvisation, but by order, control, and above all by text. The introduction of play text means, for Nietzsche, the foregrounding of mind over body, of predetermination over spontaneity. It means the undermining of the Dionysian principle and leads, by inexorable logic to the world of theatre that faced the practitioners of the *avant garde*; a theatre that is safe, predictable, enslaved by language, by the rational, by polite convention.

Of all the practitioners who would rage against this model, no one would do so more forcefully than Antonin Artaud.

For Lecoq, Artaud was one of the pioneers of physical work in this period. But where others worked to develop and refine the athletic body, Artaud worked from illness, pain physical limitation:

Antonin Artaud understood the mobile human body like no champion of the stadium could. His injured body, taken out of orbit because of an ‘error of nature’, had an acute sensitivity to the equilibrium of forces… His neurosis launched unfinished transverse lines that could reach no end point. This corporal dynamics can be found in all his texts.

(Lecoq, 2006: 84)

Artaud was a theatrical visionary. The extremity of his ideas and lifestyle, combined with the fragility of his mental state meant that for most of his career his ideas about theatre could only be expressed through his writings. Many of these remained unpublished until after his death. His influence has nevertheless grown far beyond any he achieved during his life. *The Theatre and Its Double* (1970), the slim volume of his writings brought together and published by his friends to help support him as he languished in a mental asylum, secured his legacy. In it he sets out his ideas in ways that eluded precise definition and absolutely avoided formulas for the making of theatre. This is not a book filled with practical exercises and clear guidelines for the actor.

Instead Artaud reveals his vision of theatre through a series of metaphors: cruelty, plague, the double, alchemy, metaphysics. The images are an attempt to translate into language ideas that Artaud felt were beyond the limits placed by logical structures of thought. He was to maintain a sustained assault on these structures even while the effort to be understood required him to acknowledge the power of the enemy. If his writing at times tends towards incoherence it is because coherence itself is to be undermined. The revelation of the new theatre could not be produced by the written word; it would happen, finally, only through its physical embodiment in performance.

His rejection of theatrical tradition is absolute. He calls for ‘no more masterpieces’:

‘If, for example, the masses today no longer understand *Oedipus Rex*, I would venture to say *Oedipus Rex* is at fault and not the masses’ (Artaud, 1970: 55)

In searching for examples of the kind of theatre of which he dreamed, Artaud did not only look to the past. When he saw Balinese dancers perform at the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris, he realised that he had witnessed the kind of performance that demonstrated the new theatre that he dreamed of. Knowing little or nothing of its cultural context and meaning, Artaud projected onto what he had seen his own vision of an idealised theatre. The essay that he wrote describing the experience ‘On the Balinese Theatre’ became a key part of *The Theatre and Its Double*. It describes the dancers as ‘moving hieroglyphs’ (Artaud, 1970: 37), symbols whose meaning could not be directly apprehended by the rational mind, but whose movements impacted directly on the audience, bypassing the rational and thus accessing a deeper response: ‘The dancer’s feet, by that gesture of parting their robes, dissolve thoughts

and feelings and return them to their pure state’ (Artaud, 1970: 48).

Artaud’s fight was not only against theatrical tradition, but also against the very basis of western philosophy. This was represented by the Cartesian split between mind and body, two distinct and opposing principles. In the western tradition it was the task of mind, through thought, rationality and self-control, to subdue the body, with its base instincts. Artaud could see this tension being played out all around him. The western ballet dancer trying to demonstrate a lightness that denied the pull of gravity, the weight of the performer. The western actor tamed into the condition of a puppet, mouthing words and obeying rational orders. Western theatre merely reflecting the banality of the every day, held in check by all that is polite, reasonable and logical.

Artaud sought to overturn this Cartesian division and to elevate the body, to return it to its primal place as the site of performance. Theatre became the instrument of his ideas, because theatre provided a space in which the body could act as a central, inescapable fact. The flesh, the sweat, the blood, the pain, the physical immediacy of the performer could act directly and viscerally on the physical person of the audience. His ‘cruel’ theatre was to be one in which this physical experience was to be exalted, rather than hidden and language would be just one component in the music of performance.

When Père Ubu kick started a revolution it had been with a word, but it had also been delivered by a figure of inescapable corporeality. The tradition of text and diction, of theatre as a branch of literature, had been ruptured. Copeau’s search for a new Molière was to be frustrated. Instead he had laid the ground work for a new approach to actor training and for a the renewal of a form of theatre in which the role of the playwright and language was made redundant. The mime skills which he developed became the basis for the tradition of French mime to this day. Artaud had engaged in an even more profound revolution, one in which the theatre had emerged not as the decaying site of an ancient tradition, but as a vital space in which the very basis of western philosophy and thought could be challenged and re-forged.

For both Artaud and Copeau the essential core of performance lay in the physical person of the performer. It lay in their training, their plasticity, their endurance, their courage. Both strove – through training or in dreams – to make a new kind of performer. One whose physical mastery embodied a central truth: that before all else, performance was to be composed by the body of a performer, moving through space and acting viscerally on its audience. It fell to their successors to translate these ideas into practical forms. Ideas and dreams needed to be developed into practice and training in the work of the next generations. In Lecoq’s work these projects were to be realised. The stiff awkwardness of an Ubu would develop into a moving figure embodying a new poetry. The physical presence of the actor had taken the stage and if it did speak, the sound would be guttural, earthy, funny, offensive. And would challenge its audience to join it in the new world of the Savage God.

# References

Anders, F. (1959). *Jacques Copeau et le Cartel des Quatres.* Paris: A.G. Nizet.

Artaud, A. (1978). *Ouevres Complètes* (Vol. 4). Paris: Gallimard.

August Strindberg, t. M. (1976). *Plays: One.* London: Methuen.

Copeau, J. (1990). *Texts on Theatre*, *.* (ed. J. Rudlin, & trans. N. Paul. London: Routledge.

Lecoq, J. (2000). *The Moving Body.* London: Methuen.

Lecoq, J. (2006). *Theatre of Movement and Gesture.* London & New York: Routledge.

Nietzsche, F. (1967). *The Birth of Tragedy.* (trans. W. Kaufmann) New York: Knopf Doubleday.

Rudlin, J. (1986). *Jacques Copeau.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shattuck, R. (1968). *The Banquet Years.* New York: Random House.

Symons, A. (1913). *Studies in Seven Arts.* New York: Dutton.

Yeats, W. (1922). *The Trembling of the Veil.* London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd.