

DRAMA *Works*

Styletasters 3
(Laban and Lecoq)

EXTRACT

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**SAMPLE EXTRACTS FROM STYLETASTERS 3: RUDOLF LABAN AND JACQUES
LECOQ**

EXTRACT ONE:

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESOURCE

Ironically, this work started with a desire to write about Steven Berkoff, about whom I have written in other resources, especially in *Exploring Physical Theatre* and *Artaud through Practice*. I have directed Berkoff's *Metamorphosis* and *Agamemnon* also and had much fun with them both. So I started looking at those who had influenced him most and Laban and Lecoq were the obvious starting points since, after Webber Douglas, he trained at both the Laban School of Dance in London and L'Ecole Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris.

Why doesn't Berkoff figure here then? Because there was simply too much to say about those other two! Berkoff will figure, with another practitioner to be decided, in *Styletasters 4*, due to be ready in January 2020.

I knew a fair bit about Lecoq already, and used to do many workshops based on his ideas but Laban was foreign territory. The more I read about them both, the more intrigued

I became and the more this resource grew. It is still a style taster however, since a complete overview of both of these would be impossible for a school to encompass in ordinary lesson periods and the short time allocated to any section of a syllabus.

The resource follows the pattern of my previous two Styletasters resources. The history of the practitioner's lives are analysed to show how a particular event led to a particular direction in the practitioners' thinking. The theories are then explained and, finally, those theories are tested and explored through practical work. This is by far the longest section on each practitioner.

I have tried to put over a real flavour of both these practitioners, whose link with each other is their focus and analysis of movement and the potential of the human body. Of course I have had to leave some elements out, but in each case I have chosen those that would be most useful for a student-led devised project based on either practitioner.

RUDOLF LABAN 1879 - 1958

INTRODUCTION

Many people will have heard of Rudolf Laban through dance and through his famous system of dance notation and will wonder why he is part of a drama resource. What has a dancer and dance choreographer to do with actors?

The first thing I would say in answer is that the further theatre has progressed since the mid-twentieth century, the more the lines between dance and drama have blurred. In Physical Theatre you will often find danced passages - to underline the emotion of a piece and sometimes as a way of exploring subtext, as Frantic Assembly does. There are no rules any more which say one thing is drama and another thing is dance. Look at such works as Kneehigh's *The Wild Bride* or *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk*, for instance, where dance is central to the action. As an expression of joy, sorrow, tenderness, loss, there is nothing like the expressiveness of the body to put these - and more - emotions over. Dance is already integral to our mainstream theatre. Many actors are trained in both disciplines and both actors and dancers cross the boundaries easily between the two.

No dancer and no younger actors will be unaware of Laban's studies of the movement of the human body. Many of his ideas on movement impact on acting, particularly when searching for a character and his exercises have been parodied by many drama practitioners.

This resource introduces Laban at a basic level, concentrating on the main theories and testing them out through practical work. The idea, as it is with all the Styletaster files, is to give a coherent but abbreviated 'taster' of the practitioner's theories and an understanding of what the ultimate aim of his ideas would be. Your students won't become dancers or dance/actors from this resource, but they will find tools to help their acting

work, which might result in a desire to study Laban further.

SAMPLE EXTRACT TWO:

THE THEORIES EXPLORED PRACTICALLY

by following through the following, the students should become accustomed to Laban terminology and how to use his ideas.

1. THE BODY

a] Stand in the neutral position. Laban calls this simply STANCE. Most actors, whether they credit Laban for it or not, will recognise this as the basic neutral mode in which the body is relaxed but poised ready for movement at the same time. Feet are apart no further than the width of your shoulders, toes facing forward. Shoulders are down, head facing front, back straight, arms loose by your sides, but no part of your body is rigid or fixed.

Rock slightly from heel to toe. Then rest slightly rocked forward. Notice how your whole body feels ready in this position. At the clap of a hand you can instantly, and with minimum effort, begin to walk, or run. The STANCE is a position which broadcasts that the actor is 'ready for anything', alert.

b] Explore the movement of different parts of your body, enjoying the shapes and patterns you can make in the air. Make all movements as harmonious, unhurried and beautiful as possible. Enjoy the feeling that harmonious movement can induce in you for:

head and neck

one arm at a time, then both together

one hand at a time, then both together

torso, enjoying the movement of the spine

pelvis, feel the way that the whole body adapts to its different positions

right leg, then left leg - if you like, for greater freedom of movement and appreciation of the beauty of their movement, lie on your back for this. Enjoy using the feet and ankles alone, then the lower leg up to the knee, then the whole leg.

Discuss afterwards what kind of shapes and patterns your different limbs made

which pleased you particularly, or you found satisfying, and demonstrate these, to help the discussion.

iii] Since Laban's theory of movement is based on circular movements, revisit some of the above and spot the circular shapes your body is making.

iv] To explore different body shapes using will, feelings and/or environment, try the following:

Divide the group into half. One half watches and comments, when invited to, on the other half's work. Then swap over. Use this method for each of the following.

Establish positions of strength. The whole body should be an illustration of strength. You will it to become so with all your might. Hold the position and establish a breathing pattern that underpins and helps you to FEEL strong. Breathing might be slow and deep, and might include outward breaths with the mouth open. [Allow the students to find their breathing to underpin the feeling by themselves, unless they need a starting point. I have only given my suggestion as an example.] **Now retaining the feeling of strength with accompanying breaths, conjure up a place you might be in and move through it. Perhaps you are a labourer having to move huge heavy objects from one area to another, for instance.**

Next establish a timid worrier of a person: position/ shape ... feeling ... breathing ... place or environment.

A caring person: position/ shape ... feeling ... breathing ... place or environment.

An angry person.

A ditherer.

You can add as many as you like.....

SAMPLE EXTRACT THREE:

2. THE KINESPHERE AND SPACE

a] **Adopt the Stance position [see above] and explore all the space around yourself whilst keeping your feet rooted. Everywhere you can reach is your personal space, your Kinesphere. Reach up high, around to each side on every level from head down, twisting your body where necessary, ending with the lowest levels, by your feet.** By doing this you have moved through the three Levels: from High, through Medium, to Deep.

b] **Line up the class at one end of the studio [or preferably a larger room, such as the school hall or gymnasium.] Everyone runs as fast as they can towards the other**

end, stopping short just before hitting the wall. Stand still and feel the air you have displaced coming back like a wind into your face and onto your whole body. A large group of bodies doing this can create quite a blowback.

In a smaller way you can prove the same thing by fanning your face with your hand. Two hands can create a very perceptible breeze.

This is to prove the idea that Laban uses about space. Air might be invisible to our eye but it is still an entity, and when you move through it you displace it, just as when someone moves into your Kinesphere or personal space, they displace the air around you and push their own space into yours. It is an intrusion, which can be mutually agreed and therefore friendly, but it can be unfriendly or inappropriate.

c] Move around the room, making circular movements with your arms, feeling the movement of the air against your skin.

Push the air with your

chests

faces

palms

Lie on your backs and push with the bare soles of your feet.

d] In pairs, explore what happens when one person invades the other's personal kinesphere. You might react with aggression - seeing this invasion as an act of aggression in itself - or you might feel intimidated. When you have explored and noted the body shapes you make when being invaded or invader, choose one of the following situations to develop.

A practised charmer is chatting up someone who is impervious to his/her charms.

One person accidentally bumps into the other on the crowded pavement.

A bully picks on a nerdy newcomer to the school.

A customer is returning a faulty item to the shop where he/she bought it.

An office under-manager has been told to fire an under-productive member of staff.

When watching these, which I have deliberately left open to all manner of interpretations, notice the changes in body language used by the pair. If there is a change of 'power' during the action, is it clear? How is the space between the pair used?

Watch one or two of them again WITHOUT speech, so that the whole focus centres on the relationship between space and the two bodies inhabiting it.

Try freezing the action at intervals, by means of a clap, to observe this relationship. Discuss the body shapes, the **energy** or **will** which motivates them and the couple's use of space.

SAMPLE EXTRACT FOUR

4. BODY WITH EFFORT

2.] **effort and weight.** The two ends of this scale are **strong** and **light**. If you put your whole weight behind what effort it takes to push, pull, lift etc. then you are using the strong end of the scale. Then the scale decreases until you are barely using any effort or weight at all and your muscles are only lightly engaged.

The child when learning to walk very soon finds a way of keeping balanced so that he does not wobble or fall over. From the first moment we struggle to walk we are fighting against the pull of the earth's gravity. When we are in balance we will stand lightly, as in Laban's Stance position. [See also Boal for some good exercises about gravity and the constant battle we are having with it. It is in *Styletasters 2: Brecht, Boal and Brook*].

With the whole group doing this, try the following out of balance situation:

Work your way along a train, carrying a tray with a cup of coffee. Other people are coming past you and the train rattles from side to side at best and lurches at worst.

Stand on an underground train, your case braced between your feet, one arm extended to grasp a bar or handhold, designed to keep you from falling. Show how your body adjusts as the train races along, crosses over points and comes into a station.

A group [3 or 4] of you are leaving a party where you have had too much to drink. At first you are travelling in the same direction and supporting each other, arms round shoulders perhaps, until one by one each must separate to head for their own homes.

It is fun to play with the idea of weight. Let's start with light movements.

Imagine you are stepping onto a sandy beach. It is very hot and the sand is burning. Cross over to the nearest bit of welcome shade, making minimum contact with the baking ground.

There is someone after you; you can hear him on the other side of the door. You know the floorboards creak. Creep into a better hiding position, tiptoeing as lightly as possible.

There is a snake sleeping in the sun a couple of feet ahead of you. You know they are sensitive to vibration. Reverse as carefully and lightly as possible.

Dip into a bubble blower and extract it. Wave or blow gently to release the bubbles and try to catch one on your hand without breaking it.

And now strong movements.

The floor is covered with cockroaches. You are trying to stamp them into oblivion [poor things!].

You are in control of a large machine which is worked by a heavy foot-pedal. Press down hard to get the machine to work to its maximum. Then gradually decrease the weight you are putting on the pedal. Note how your body has to brace itself for this. It might even help to have someone whose shoulder you can lean on as you decrease the pedal super slowly.

You are carrying a bucket to an outside tap to fill it up. The tap hasn't been used for months and has rusted up - it'll need effort to turn it on. Fill up the bucket and carry it away. Notice the difference in the musculature of your body from carrying the empty bucket to the full one.

Working as a whole group, lift a large light piece of cloth - silk perhaps, or parachute material. Feel the wind catch it and brace yourself so that it doesn't fly away.

Again as a whole group, imagine a heavy metal girder that is as long as the numbers in your group. The group will be standing along alternate sides of the girder. Bend at the knees to work your fingers under it and, watching the rest of the group carefully [a metal girder cannot bend!], carefully lift it until you are holding it on your right or left shoulder [depending on which side of the girder you are]. The extraordinary weight of the thing must be evident, as must its solidity be. This exercise needs to take TIME!

Weight is fun to play with when finding a character too. **Imagine that the heaviness of your body is situated in your head, your chest, your bottom, your hands. Play with the idea and discover what different characters emerge. How would your character walk, sit, stand and speak? Often a way of moving will suggest the way a character thinks and speaks too. A lumbering character with its weight in its knuckles, pulling them down like a gorilla, suggests a type of person too.**

What about the opposite, where your head is floating like a gas-filled balloon? Or your backside is heavy and pulling you downwards, but your hands want to take off and fly away? Play with a number of similar ideas....

SAMPLE EXTRACT FIVE from 5] THE EIGHT EFFORT ACTIONS

The body is capable of an enormous range of movement. As well as breaking the effort the body makes in time, space, weight and flow, Laban whittled the basic movements that all humans use everyday down to eight basic effort actions. These effort actions are:

Press

Flick

Wring
Dab
Slash
Glide
Thrust
Float

Before exploring these effort actions with the exercises suggested below, **brainstorm the group to see what actions they come up with for each one. Encourage them to use not just arms, but legs, feet, heads, torsos.**

Next see if they can demonstrate what a human being in which one of these effort actions has become more habitual than the others might be like. What type of personality is someone who makes a habit of pressing, or thrusting, or gliding their way through life? What kind of job might they be attracted to? How might they be as a friend or in a relationship?

The work you have already done on **effort** with **time, weight, space** and **flow** will also be used with the eight effort actions. The principles work together to give a broad range to each of the actions...

SAMPLE EXTRACT SIX:

For the next exercise **choose two students at a time and give them a pair scenario. Give each one an effort action to work with. They must also use speech. The rest of the group watch and stop the action as soon as one of the pair loses their character, either in the way they use their bodies or their speech patterns. After one such stop they have a chance to continue, taking more care to stick to the personality suggested by their effort action. But the next stop, they must sit and allow a new pair to have a go.** None of the dialogues will go on for long; it is hard to keep to one effort action only. In reality, a character would keep moving from one to another, as the situation demands.

Here is a list of possible scenarios:

a customer returning a faulty item to a shop. The customer is a floating personality [including speech remember] and the shop assistant is a thruster.

With another pair you could reverse the above efforts.

A mother [using press] has been awaiting her daughter's return. She promised she'd be back by ten but it's after midnight before she comes in. The daughter uses glide.

For the next few hand out whatever effort action you'd like to each of the pair:

an audition or an interview for a particular job.

**a parliamentary candidate lobbies someone he/she meets in the street
someone in too much of a hurry has knocked into another person on
the pavement and hurt him/her or caused the victim to drop something. An
altercation ensues.**

**A teacher talks to a student about why the student is not handing in
his/her work.**

A blind date set up by a friend of one of the pair.

**Two girls out shopping for a new outfit for a party to which they are
both invited.**

Any of these scenarios will be quite different with a different set of effort actions. Try this out and do not always feel the need to use a different scenario. If you use the same one but with a different couple of effort actions [or if you swap them over between the two characters], an entirely different interpretation or way of looking at the scenario is revealed...

SAMPLE EXTRACT SEVEN:

JACQUES LECOQ 1921-1999

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Lecoq has arguably been the most influential teacher of theatre for modern times. Most of the great present-day practitioners have studied at his school and because of him the style of theatre known as Physical Theatre or Visual Theatre has flourished and reached out its tendrils throughout the world.

Like Laban it is the body, its movement and its potential that is his starting point and, like him also, it is the working of the body through sport and daily activities that first intrigued him. But whereas Laban seeks to find a language that will pin down physical movement and fix it like a butterfly pinned to a sheet of paper [though he encouraged loosing the chains of tradition in dance] Lecoq's study of movement leads him to do the opposite, to free it from any chains whatsoever. His students were [and still are - despite the master's death, the school still flourishes] encouraged to find ways to explore the world of human passions anew, to improvise and keep open, to study nature and the environment of things as well as people in order to create new and surprising means of physical expression. At all times his students were and are encouraged to remain free, playful and open in their approach....

SAMPLE EXTRACT EIGHT: **from THE THEORIES THROUGH PRACTICE/**

OBSERVATION AND IMITATION

...Try this with another natural element: fire. First have each student conjure up in their heads their own picture of a fire. Begin with it being lit - its first stuttering attempts - watch it as it takes hold of the wood/coal or whatever material each one imagines, then as it reaches its climax, end with its dying down to embers. Once again, don't be literal in your approach - think of the shapes fire makes, the essence of it and use your body to show that. Try it first from a static position, then move around the room as fire at full heat.

In pairs, have a fiery argument with no words, simply using jabs, thrusts, spikes - flames and the spitting of sparks - with your body. Don't forget the head.

Now add speech but repeat the moves from your argument without words.

In largeish groups [5, 6, 7] become a bonfire from when it is first lit through its blazing strength until it settles and dips into hot ash.

Remember and repeat your moves from this exercise and change the situation as follows:

each group is now at a party or a club

change the situation to spectators of a rock concert

a political rally or a protest meeting

a football match or the finish of an exciting Olympic race.

In each case the group fire moves are used unaltered, except perhaps in the direction you are facing. This is important; it is how images and symbols are found that are surprising and therefore memorable for an audience.

Normally, when a group looks for a stage metaphor they work outward from the human starting point. In other words, two *people* arguing, or a group of *people* at one of the events listed above. Lecoq's method is to start with the imitation of an object or a natural phenomenon, the copying of which will lend all sorts of unusual and extraordinary movements to the actors, and then to use it unaltered in a human context. The results take the actors away from the obvious towards the unusual which is more visually exciting and memorable for an audience.

Test the difference out, remembering the unusual effect of the group bonfire at the event chosen above. Have a group move as people, themselves even, at that event while the rest of the students watch. Then have a group show the bonfire version.

The difference is what I mention in the section on Theories Explained. The actors reproducing the exact moves of the bonfire, which is remembered and repeated without alteration, are OFFERING an image to the audience, who will read it as they will. There is

no attempt to manipulate the metaphor - to say human beings in this situation are **like** ... the actor is dissociated in such a case from his/her own feelings - s/he is offering a bodily memory only, a repetition. The rest is up to the viewer who will read into it what s/he likes, but are more likely to see the poetry of the moment because s/he has been surprised into it....

SAMPLE EXTRACT NINE: from MOVEMENT

...Analyse different activities and notice how the body is working. Which bits push themselves forward, up or in which ever direction necessary, and which pull? Try simple activities to analyse and feed back as a group. The objects in the following are imagined.

Bend to pick up a pin, kick a ball, reach up for a jar on a high shelf, then reach up for a large but empty suitcase. Twist to reach that itch high up in the middle of your back; reach down with one hand to restrain an eager dog while unlocking the door.

Now feed back to the rest of the group, noticing in as much detail as possible what your body is doing. For instance, when you reach round for that itch on the spine, what is your neck doing, the spine itself, your shoulders - and so on?

This is the kind of breakdown and analysis of movement that fascinated both Laban and Lecoq. For mime in particular you need to understand your body, all its working parts, as an engineer would understand the interlocking cogs, wheels and levers of a machine.

Lecoq talked often about his task as a teacher being to put obstacles in the way of his students. It is in the solving of such problems, finding ways around the obstacles, that the students make new break-throughs of discovery.

The next exercise mimics this idea in movement terms.

Explore what movements your body is capable of under the following constraints:

your shoulders cannot move - what movements of the head and neck are still possible?

your pelvis cannot move - what movements of the chest and torso are still possible?

What happens if your feet are fixed?

What happens if you are on all fours but your hands are fixed to the floor?

Try a pairs race, where parts of the body are stuck together and other parts are forbidden for example they have to cross the studio from one side to the other without touching the floor with their heels and stuck together by the two right elbows. Feel free to make up your own constraints for this.

Working with such constraints and obstacles makes you think about the body with a new awareness.

The analysis of movement is always ongoing and is combined with your observational skills, so that as you become better at it you notice how people's stance, walks and movement are influenced by age, by gender, by their emotional state, by what they do for a living - their work - by the circumstances they find themselves in.

As a homework ...

SAMPLE EXTRACT TEN:

Working in pairs, explore the idea of subconscious, conscious and passive modes of movement further.

Together come up with situations where the following three subconscious actions might take place:

I throw I lift I twist

For these the body just reacts without thought or planning.

Next try the conscious mode. Under what situations might you have to

Throw yourself? Lift yourself? Twist yourself?

Finally, try the passive mode where your body is propelled by another or by an outside force.

I am thrown I am lifted I am twisted.

To experience being passively pushed or pulled, try this pair exercise which is an adaptation of one of Lecoq's own. **The pair are puppet and puppeteer. The puppeteer stands behind the puppet and touches any part of the puppet's body with a light push. The puppet allows the push and goes with it, but returns as soon as the puppeteer's hand is moved back to the neutral position in which he started. Try different speeds and rhythms of doing this. Then vary between a push and a pull - always light in touch.**

Swap over so that each experiences this.

In threes explore the idea of being off-balance. The person in the middle is pushed and pulled between the other two. This will cause off-balance staggers, from which the central person has to right himself.

Make sure that all three experience this feeling.

Follow this by having the whole group moving round the space on their own, exploring the different ways of moving from balance into off-balance, back to balance and then to another off-balance, and so on.

Lecoq used this idea of being off-balance as a preparation for tragedy. In tragedy the central figures are often sent off-balance by circumstances or forces working against them. Think of King Lear staggering around in a storm on the heath, Macbeth after seeing the

ghost of Banquo at his feast, and so on. What other tragic figures can you think of? Physically they are reeling under the pressure of what happens to them. The Physical Theatre actor will show this visually.

As a whole group, explore this idea further with the following improvisation...

SAMPLE EXTRACT ELEVEN : from SOUND, SILENCE AND SPACE

SOUND AND SILENCE

Inspired by Edward Gordon Craig's new ideas about space, Copeau 'made the emptiness of the stage tangible.' Within this space training of the body encompassed rhythmic and natural movements that encouraged spontaneity of the body. Inspired by this Lecoq was equally intrigued by silence and the theatrical contrast that can be achieved with sound.

Using the whole group try to create silent crowd scenes of the following:

exhausted refugees

soldiers lined up and facing the enemy, waiting for the start of action

the aftermath of the battle

a vigil in a church or public building after the death of a well-loved iconic figure

captives - ordinary folk -rounded up by enemy soldiers, waiting for transportation they don't know where

sitting a paper in the examination hall

a sit-in to prevent some event happening, the destruction of a habitat,for instance

In each of these the quality of the silence is subtly different. See if you can identify and comment on the differences. Is the difference communicated by muscle tension, inner feeling or something else?...

SAMPLE EXTRACT TWELVE:

Lecoq became fascinated with the movement of a number of bodies in the space of the stage. This came from his working with Greek choruses. This section then explores the idea of the chorus in space. Lecoq's comment that he cannot imagine tragedy without a chorus, has had a lot of influence on groups like Complicité, on Berkoff, on Kneehigh and countless others. Chorus-group work is an effective way of communicating the emotion of what is happening to an audience, or commenting on it, or preparing the ground for what is to come - just as the Greeks did in their plays...

...Create a series of crowd scenes and experiment with the idea of one still figure in the middle. What effect does that have?

Often the Greek chorus helped externalise the emotions of the main character in the play. Try finding groupings, using the space carefully, with a series of three [e.g.] bodily positions. The group move through the series of three, to externalise the following emotions:

despair anger terror pity unrest alarm

All these movements must have everyone working absolutely together. The solo person in these groupings is standing still and expressing with his face [unless masked - decide] and body language the same chosen emotion.

Now try as many of the above emotions as you like and watch the effect of having a single person in the grouping doing something completely different. He could be standing completely still and staring out over the audience; he could be displaying a contrasting emotion - laughter for instance, against, say, anger or unrest; anger against despair; or just plain blankness which can be very unsettling to an audience....