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Pitches, JD (2007) *Routes or Roots: the Technical Traditions of Contemporary Physical Theatres*. In: Murray, S and Keefe, J, (eds.) *Physical Theatres: a Reader*. Routledge , Abingdon , 46 - 54 (8). ISBN 0-415-36251-2

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This is the author's version of a paper accepted for publication in the **Physical Theatres: a Reader**

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Published chapter:

Pitches, JD (2007) *Routes or Roots: the Technical Traditions of Contemporary Physical Theatres*. In: *Physical Theatres: a Reader*. Routledge , Abingdon , 46 - 54 (8). ISBN 0-415-36251-2

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/97804153625...>

Routes or Roots: the Technical Traditions of Contemporary Physical Theatres

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INTRODUCTION

The punning of 'routes' and 'roots' is a favourite game for theatre practitioners. Jatinder Verma, Artistic Director of Tara Arts, and seasoned thinker on the migration of ideas and practices over time, is one of many contemporary thinkers to have enjoyed the verbal play of terms to illustrate his perspective on theatre making. Discussing his 2002 trilogy, *Journey to the West*, Verma makes the following distinction:

Chris Arnot: So is this epic play an attempt to identify [your] roots?

Jatinder Verma: It depends how you're spelling the word...I prefer to think of it as r-o-u-t-e-s. Roots lead backwards. Routes are more progressive, leading you to make connections with others. I'm not interested in the particular village in India where my grandfather came from. My identity is located on the road.ⁱ

An inveterate creator of epic theatre and, in his own words, 'always looking for the grand narratives' (Plastow 2004: 86), Verma is nevertheless suspicious of the regressive connotations associated with the word 'roots'. Instead, he sees himself on an advancing intercultural journey, one that, significantly, he locates 'on the road.'

Eugenio Barba, director of the ensemble Odin Teatret, sees things differently. Barba is actively seeking a line back to his grandfathers, in an effort to compensate for what he calls his professional orphaning:

In my family of professional *ethos* there are no parents. There is an older brother, Jurek – Jerzy Grotowski. Many uncles and relatives: Vakhtangov, and Copeau, Brecht, Decroux, Sulerzhitski, and Artaud. Ahead of them all, the two grandfathers: Stanislavsky and Meyerhold.

(Barba 2003: 108)

For Barba, there is real merit in looking back, in recognising and acknowledging the practices that have shaped his work, and in determining which figures ultimately are part of the tradition of Odin Teatret. Importantly, in this personal history, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold are not identified as ‘masters’, but as ‘two small traditions’ (ibid), and as such their differing styles and approaches militate against the unilateral fixity of a single progenitor. It is roots Barba wants to unearth, not *the* root.

Taken together, these statements by Jatinder Verma and Eugenio Barba represent two poles on a continuum of physical theatre histories and their juxtaposition here raises a host of difficult questions. To identify just a few: what value do practitioners and critics place on past practices and how are these judgments made? What constitutes a tradition itself and how are these lineages agreed or disputed? What are the politics underlying the establishment of a tradition? How do traditions evolve and how are these evolutionary processes affected by specific cultural influences and contexts? In short, what are the mechanics, spoken or unspoken, underlying the construction of a tradition.

Physical Theatre is fraught with its own terminological problems, partly because as a singular form it is borne out of a paradoxical mix of imprecision and pigeonholing. It is now a commonplace to bemoan the excessive inclusivity of the term, which shares with its recent colleague, the Creative and Cultural Industries, a remit too broad to be in any way meaningful. Yet at the same time, many of us are all too familiar with ‘Physical Theatre’ as a shorthand label,

used by companies (and by the mid-scale British theatres which host them) to identify a particular set of techniques drawn mainly from contact improvisation and contemporary dance.

Both too confining and somehow not confining enough, the term Physical Theatre is clearly problematic, not least because its ambivalence resists that key aspect of a tradition which allows for a reference point to be drawn between practices, that function which Eugenio Barba describes as the: 'means of orientation for the conquest of one's *difference*' (Barba 2003: 115, his emphasis). It is helpful to be reminded that difference not sameness can often define a practitioner's place in a tradition and that the plotting of the *roots* of a given set of practices is always in tension with the examination of the potential *routes* those practices might navigate in the future.

This collection proposes a taxonomy of Physical *Theatres*, plural, and this is the first step towards delineating how a number of different traditions of corporeal performance have developed. The next step is to examine in more detail the technicalities of these practices and to assess this tension between difference and similarity. Two examples might suffice in the short space of this essay to illustrate the complexity of this exercise: Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) and the French tradition and Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) and the Russian tradition of physical theatres.

COPEAU AND THE FRENCH TRADITION

For Copeau, there were two traditions of French Theatre and both are expressed in rather polarised terms: the 'true' or 'original' tradition (Copeau 1990: 145), by which he meant the spirit of innovation and discovery embodied in Molière and the false or 'supposed tradition' or what he called the 'mechanical habits of certain actors' (Rudlin 1986: 26) trained at the National Conservatoire and performing at the Comédie-Française after Molière's death. According to Copeau, truth is associated with something 'spiritual' and 'pure', falseness with routine and detachment and he sought to rewrite the tradition of French acting accordingly, consciously

effacing the work of generations of actors and placing his own project as a direct continuation of Molière's:

I am seeking to bring works closer to the 'true tradition' by freeing them from the contributions loaded on them for three centuries by the official actors [of the Comédie-Française]. The important tradition is the original one.

(Copeau 1990: 145)

In his quest to 'return to sincerity', Copeau dismissed much of his country's theatrical heritage as *cabotinage*, 'the total mechanisation of the person', as he called it in a lecture delivered in New York in 1917 (ibid: 253). Where Meyerhold had turned to the *cabotin* as a model of popular, unabashed theatricality and the potential saviour of the Russian theatre tradition (Braun 1991: 122-3),ⁱⁱ Copeau saw it as evidence of a moribund theatrical culture. Much of his writing is underpinned by this assumed polarity of the sincere versus the artificial and it becomes a touchstone for the construction of his own tradition: he venerates Aeschylus (and Greek Drama in general), Noh theatre, Molière, *commedia dell'arte*, and his contemporaries Stanislavsky and Antoine; he abhors the National Conservatoire, the Comédie-Française, Dumas *fiils* and the bourgeois comedy of the nineteenth century. Above all, he places huge emphasis on the revivifying potential of youth and on the importance of unfettered play:

Children teach us authentic inventiveness. Enhance their games...Learn everything from children. Impose nothing on them.

(Copeau 1990: 12)

From the Greek theatre, Copeau drew inspiration from the chorus as a model of collective energy, discipline and musicality; from his work in *commedia*, Copeau saw a vision of a bare stage, also inspired by the Spanish popular theatre and Lope de Rueda's 'four trestles and five planks' (ibid: 83); from the Japanese Noh form, he imagined a theatre of simplicity and poetry;

from his love of the medieval mysteries, he planned open-air theatre events and from Antoine's early work at the Théâtre Libre, Copeau witnessed a director ostensibly pursuing the same goals: authenticity and sincerity, fuelled by the energies of the young.

Doubtless, such a short summary hardly does justice to the legacy of Copeau but my purpose is different here – to outline the intersection of a range of different theatre traditions in the construction of the Copeau tradition. The main source in English for his commentary on practice is Copeau's *Texts on Theatre* (spanning the years from 1913-1945).ⁱⁱⁱ In these writings, Copeau locates his work in an evolutionary context of his own making, setting up 'reference points', as Barba puts it, which are both meaningful for the development of his own practice, as well as to the audience of his theoretical texts, an audience operating at one remove (at least) from the repertoire of the Vieux Colombier. As a member of this second level audience it is easy to see Copeau's concern for the Popular Theatre tradition and how this fascination intermingles with his love of the Deep Traditions, embodied in Aeschylus and Aristophanes. A reverence for antique forms is also reflected in his passion for Noh and the Japanese theatre's long tradition of performance characterised by formidable levels of technique and control.

But Copeau was not simply a nostalgic: he also looked to contemporary Europe and to his own native France for a means of orientating his work. The physiologist and educationalist, Georges Hébert's 'natural gymnastics' were one important source of inspiration, for example, and Hébert served for a brief period as a movement teacher at the Vieux Colombier (Evans 2006: 64). In an open letter to Antoine in 1913, Copeau indicated how cognisant he was of the way in which such contemporary reference points might be read. Celebrating Antoine's 'sincerity', Copeau made the following statement:

In reaching out to take your hand we are conscious that this binds us to a beautiful tradition of labour and courage.

(Copeau 1990: 212)

What is noticeable in this self-declared inter-praxis is the extent to which Copeau is *beginning* a tradition of body-based transmission, not working from learnt practices himself.^{iv} The traditions he calls upon in his own writings are often distant ones - his project is to *revive* the spirit of, say, Aristophanic comedy, given its historic demise, or to *become* a multi-skilled man of the theatre, à la Molière. Whilst Noh was a key research area for Copeau as early as 1916, he did not see any Japanese performance until 1930 and the playfulness and improvisation skills he derived, in part, from *commedia* were co-taught with his collaborator and actress Suzanne Bing. Bing came to the Vieux Colombier with previous acting experience in France and Germany and displayed a demonstrable talent as a teacher in her own right, something acknowledged by Copeau in a commendatory letter: 'through her experiments...she furnished me with the elements of a method of education for young actors' (Copeau 1990: 255). In many ways, then, it was the distinguished list of Copeau's actors and pupils who formed the new, living tradition, experimenting as they were on a day-to-day experiential basis with the techniques of the past: Bing herself, Charles Dullin and Louis Jouvet, Jean Dasté, Michel St Denis, and Etienne Decroux.

This final point raises a further question for our list: how do we value different modes of transmission in the development or delineation of a tradition? Physical theatres by their very nature tend to sustain themselves on body-based modes of transmission. This is most obviously true of the great traditions of East and South Asian theatre practice, based on the passing on of elaborate, codified gestures from master to pupil: the Noh theatre, again, or the Kathakali dance of southern India. Significantly, these practices often depend on the longer rhythms associated with training in a 'family' (Allain and Harvie 2006: 213), as with the *commedia* tradition in Europe also, and it was precisely this dependence on the infrastructure of an acting family which Copeau was trying to revivify with the Vieux Colombier. In the absence of an immediate master, he had to become the father-figure and build up the family from scratch. He may have appealed to a rich

set of traditions in the framing of his own practice but there is an unavoidable and significant lacuna in the journey back to his founding fathers.

STANISLAVSKY AND THE RUSSIAN TRADITION

Stanislavsky was also driven by the desire to revolutionise the stage and to combat artifice at every step. According to his collaborator Nemirovich-Danchenko the roots of 19th century Russian theatre practice were rotten and thus it was necessary to:

Reconstruct [theatre's] whole life...to change *at the root* the whole order of rehearsals and the preparation of plays.

(Carnicke in Hodge 2000: 12, my emphasis)

Where Copeau railed at *cabotinism*, Stanislavsky lamented the Russian star system and the extended histrionics of Romanticism. He too revered the *commedia dell'arte* as well as having his own contemporary models to draw on – Ludwig Chronegk from the Meiningen Troupe, Tommaso Salvini, the Italian actor. Like Copeau, Stanislavsky turned professional later in life – in fact both were thirty-four when they respectively launched the Vieux Colombier (in 1913) and the Moscow Arts Theatre (in 1897).

As founder of the modern Russian tradition, Stanislavsky's name is associated with an even longer list of luminary pupils and influences than Copeau's; having uprooted the old traditions Stanislavsky forged himself a position as the progenitor of a new root of twentieth century Russian actor training. For the American director and co-founder of the Group Theatre, Harold Clurman, his influence was even greater:

The Modern Theatre stems from Danchenko and Stanislavsky - and from their joint creation, the Moscow Art Theatre.

(in Cole and Chinoy 1954: 421)

Unlike Copeau, though, and in spite of his position as the founder of a Russian (or even Western) Modern Theatre, Stanislavsky's direct connections to the living traditions of acting in Russia are clear and undisputed. These 'strong native roots', according to Toby Cole, underpin 'a straight line of development' (ibid: 415-6) from Mikhail Shchepkin (1788-1863), through the playwright and director Ostrovsky (1823-1886), to Stanislavsky, a lineage Stanislavsky is happy to corroborate in *My Life in Art*. Shchepkin is:

The pride of our national art, the man who re-created in himself all that the West could give and created the foundations of true Russian dramatic art and its traditions, our great lawgiver and artist.

(Stanislavski 1980: 80)

We might add to this list Alexander Fedotov, who trained at the Imperial Maly Theatre, in the Shchepkin school of Realism, and then went on to direct Stanislavsky, before he turned professional, at the Society of Art and Literature. Fedotov took to Stanislavsky's imitative histrionics like a surgeon, seeding in the young actor the Shchepkinian principles of 'real life and stirring passions, in all their truth' (Cole 1954: 422). Interestingly, it is the fact that Shchepkin treated his pupils as a family, which Stanislavsky highlights in his eulogy.

With Copeau working as a theatre critic and writer, and Stanislavsky operating as an actor and emergent director before both the Vieux Colombier and the MAT were launched, it is not surprising that their relationship to the French and Russian traditions, respectively, would be different. Put simply, the roots of Copeau's practice are more literary and historic than Stanislavsky's, even though the latter owes a clear debt to Aristotle and, more generally, to Enlightenment thinking. More contentiously, I have used the words 'living tradition' to define the embodied transmission of ideas experienced in the studio or laboratory, not as a means of criticising Copeau's declared roots, but to highlight that his project was to *revivify* the dying

connection between France's popular theatre tradition and the early twentieth century French theatre movement, to forge a *new* evolutionary line.

What unites the two tradition-makers is the astonishing diversity of practice to emerge from their one starting point. If 'difference' defines a practitioner's place in a tradition, Stanislavsky's legacy is a living tradition *par excellence*. Some of the more notable names in that tradition read as a roll call of modern theatre innovators: Vsevolod Meyerhold, Eugene Vakhtangov, Michael Chekhov, Richard Boleslavsky, Maria Ouspenskaya, Alice Koonen, Maria Knebel. In turn, the *routes* of this tradition extend to America via Strasberg, Adler and Chaikin (even though the latter rejected his Method training outright). They develop further in Russia, touching Tovstonogov, Lyubimov, Yefremov, Dodin and Vasiliev. They branch off into Polish theatre in Grotowski's work and inform much of Barba's thinking in Denmark and Odin Teatret, as already noted. In short, the Stanislavsky tradition is in some way implicated in most of the key contributions to physical theatre practice in the last century. Indeed, it crosses over into the Copeau tradition as well, with the 1922 visit of the MAT to France, following a correspondence of some six years between the two directors (Copeau 1990: 215-19).

CONCLUSION

So we find ourselves back with the conundrum of imprecision first identified with the term Physical Theatre. How to escape this, and is it possible to delineate precisely a tradition (or traditions) of physical theatre praxis?

I would like to suggest two means by which this problem might be reviewed, to offer a potential focus for the reader, in advance of sampling the many traditions identified in the following section.

The first, is a call to remodel the image of a tradition in one's imagination. A tradition is often thought of in linear terms, indeed my own use of the verb 'delineate' trades off this metaphor: we talk of 'tracing the line back to *x*' and 'what is the lineage of *y*'. Yet any botanist will confirm that

root systems are anything but linear and, depending on the age of the organism, can spread over wide distances and form into complex configurations. In doing so, they characteristically cross over and tangle with other root systems and may surface in a location which is not easily related to the organism itself. The complexity of the multiple traditions evident in this essay clearly highlights a similar tangling of histories and practices, fuelled by political, cultural and rhetorical forces as well as by the practical demands of an efficacious training. Far better, perhaps, to imagine a forest, rather than a line, where each influential practitioner is separated out at ground level but unavoidably intertwined below as their roots grow out to support their individual branches. Think, too, maybe, of these trees forming a canopy, which is similarly interleaved far above our heads, as the routes of those ideas are forced into contact with each other.

The second, relates to this distinction between routes and roots, for evident also in this short essay is a strong sense of these two terms coexisting, on a continuum, rather than being in any way separable. It is more a question of roots *and* routes than roots *or* routes. Traditions of Physical Theatre, particularly, have to negotiate a balance between the past and the future, specific to the form in question and this is no more evident than in the work of Copeau, touched upon here. Consider, as a final thought, Copeau himself, evaluating the influence of the Deep Tradition begun by the Greeks:

It is not a question of comparative history, where the past is compared to the present, like dead things to living ones. It is rather a close wedding of knowledge and practice, of renewing one's good faith in ancient traditions and rhythms, of reviving not the actual forms of the past but that spiritual bond which unfailingly puts us in contact with their principles.

(Copeau 1990: 40)

Copeau's words offer us a telling formula for the interplay of roots and routes and capture compellingly the motivation for all of these traditions: the need for a sustainable forest...

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Notes

ⁱ From *The Guardian*: 'Staging a Survival', by Chris Arnot, Weds March 13th 2002.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Meyerhold's essay, 'The Fairground Booth' (c.1912): 'It seems to me that we should apply ourselves to the study and restoration of those theatres of the past in which the cult of cabotinage once held sway'. Braun 1991: 123.

ⁱⁱⁱ Copeau's works have been posthumously edited and collated in French, currently in six volumes, entitled *Registres* (1974-2000).

^{iv} See, for example, Maurice Kurtz: 'Jacques Copeau, the critic, editor, playwright, director, actor and founder of the Théâtre de Vieux-Colombier, could lay claim to no theatrical or literary tradition in his family'. Kurtz 1999: 3.