

JACQUES COPEAU

By Patrice Pavis



Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) was a French actor and director, but he was also one of the first reformers of the theatre, and undoubtedly the first French theatre person to propose a complete training for the actor. But all his great plans aimed at radically changing the theatre by staging classical plays in order to rediscover them, make them accessible to a larger audience, and thus pave the way for a new dramaturgy. He did not produce a new dramaturgy, nor did he really change the situation of the theatre, but he was successful in one thing: in understanding the new task of the director and in helping him to use the actors in the best possible way.

His interest for literature precedes and maybe surpasses his work on the theatre. In 1909 he founded the “Nouvelle Revue Française” which he controlled until 1913 when he opened the theatre and the school of the Vieux-Colombier. After the war and his departure for New York in 1917, he reopened the school briefly (1920-1924). He then left Paris and settled in Burgundy with a group of students and actors. With the “Copiaus” he performed in villages, and this paved the way for “decentralisation”. He did not really leave Paris for good, as he staged plays at the Comédie Française with three other members of the “cartel” (Jouvet, Dullin, and Baty). During the German occupation, he was appointed Administrator of the Comédie Française (1940-1941), an unfortunate choice as he was in charge of expelling the Jews from the Comédie.

It is therefore difficult (for me) to raise a monument to Copeau or even a modest laboratory, but I am more than ready to consider his work on the mise-en-

scène, both practically and theoretically as a remarkable achievement, which is as valid as a long-term and indestructible laboratory.

But was Copeau actually in search of a laboratory? He certainly never used the term and he was more a “bel esprit” and a “littéraire” than a scientist. He belonged more to the humanistic tradition of the hermitage and the monastery than to the factory of constructivism or biomechanics. His intention was to educate (more than to train) the very young actors teaching them the main principles of dramatic art, the basics of movement and the intuitive laws of acting. In this respect his school was one of the most systematic and well thought out acting schools ever invented. Its curriculum remains the basis for many contemporary schools.

So the laboratory remains invisible, consisting of a clear, systematic, innovative conception of mise-en-scène. An intellectual construction, perhaps, but an edifice which informs the whole theatre life. The laboratory would indeed remain an empty edifice or box, if it were not supported by an intellectual construction, an understanding of a production as a mise-en-scène, i.e. as a system organizing all the materials of the theatre for the spectator’s gaze.

Copeau’s definition of the mise-en-scène summarizes all the important elements of the director’s tasks and should be studied in any theatre school:

”By mise-en-scène we understand the drawing of a dramatic action. It consists of the ensemble of movements, of gestures and attitudes, the harmony of facial expressions, of the voices and of the silences; it is the totality of the stage performance which stems from a single way of thinking, which conceives it, regulates it and harmonizes it. The director invents and imposes between the characters this secret and invisible bond, this reciprocal sensibility, this mysterious correspondence of links, without which the drama, even if it is interpreted by excellent actors, loses the major part of its expression.”

(*Registres*, I, pp.29-30).

At the origins of mise-en-scène, we have the impression that since the eighteenth century or even since Racine and Molière, we live in an interregnum, in which no new way of acting and staging has been invented. The so-called innovations are not really new, they are often technical improvements without any goal. This is why Copeau is suspicious of technical improvements or of formalistic experiences à la Meyerhold or Tairov. Copeau is concerned that the principles of interpretation would be at the mercy of well educated, but soulless performers. It could easily lead to the useless invention of pleasant things which do not help the spectator to understand the play better, but simply cover the text with sensational signs. The director should rather “invent inside”, i.e. “fill with reality, saturate with poetry all that is done and said on

stage, but without exaggerating the meaning, without overrunning what I call the pure configuration of masterpieces” (p. 199).

We might indeed be here in the most logocentric conception of theatre, but this idea of filling the text can also be seen as a way of constituting the text and its meaning from within by trying out different situations of enunciation. Sooner or later the classical notion of harmonious *mise-en-scène* will break apart, and the need for a laboratory where things can be artificially reassembled, for instance in the Grotowski or Barba ways, will of necessity emerge.

But Copeau does not go so far. He moves to the country but keeps an eye on Paris and becomes obsessed with the notion of “poor theatre” before its birth, of faithfulness, of sacred texts (be it Molière or the Bible). He therefore cannot invent new ways of writing and staging and his own plays are a failure, because he is frightened by the possibilities of a provocative *mise-en-scène* which would question the centrality of the word.

Therefore the laboratory of Copeau closes upon itself and becomes a place where nothing else happens. What began as a new practice of the stage becomes a series of rigid rules, a logo-centric and ethno-centric view which will be attacked by the next generation, particularly in the popular form of Planchon (rather than of Vilar), who spoke of *mise en pièces des chefs d'oeuvres* (the breaking in pieces, the tearing apart of classical canons and conventions).

Thus what remains are not the remnants of a school, or the scars of a struggle, but the dialectical practice of *mise-en-scène* as an ongoing struggle between centrality and periphery, between recognizable style and expressive novelty, between a single aesthetic event and the continuity of a permanent school. Everybody is free to choose his lab, in the same manner as everybody has a right to choose the prison of his dreams.



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