

## ETIENNE DECROUX

*By Marco De Marinis*



Decroux was born in the 19th century (1898, to be exact) and remained active in his school in Paris into the 1980s. He trained, then, in the great period of the historic avant-garde of the early part of the century, began his career as theatrical creator, researcher and pedagogue towards the end of the 1920s, gained major public recognition first in France and later throughout the world between the 1940s and the beginning of the 60s. When all was said and done, he had been involved in teaching, almost

without interruption, for more than half a century having among other students Jean-Louis Barrault, Marcel Marceau, Marise Flach, Ingemar Lindh, Yves Lebreton, Thomas Leabhart, Corinne Soum and Steven Wasson.

These simple facts alone should caution one against speaking of Decroux and his work in the singular and, even more, from thinking of corporeal mime as something that can be contained in a single formula that could be defined once and for all. Such caution is moreover absolutely necessary when considering all the “founding fathers” of contemporary theater; but it is particularly important in reference to the author of *Words on Mime* (1963) and not only for the chronological reasons I’ve just mentioned.

It is not enough to recall that Decroux spanned literally a whole century of theatre revolutions; one must hasten to add that he did so as an active protagonist, deeply involved--despite a certain distance he tried to interpose early on between himself and the rest of the world--and, above all, that he did so as a tireless researcher,

forever dissatisfied with the results and forever reaching with tremendous spirit to surpass them.

There are then *several* Decroux, that one could identify first of all by the many seasons of his very long theatrical career, beginning with the training at Copeau's school in 1923/24, until his death in 1991. But aside from this *diachronic* plurality (to which, moreover, he holds no exclusive ownership) we find in him as well a *synchronic* or vertical plurality, no less important, that concerns the different levels on which Decroux's artistic and pedagogic research developed, more or less consciously.

In speaking of synchronic plurality, I'm not thinking principally of the well known fact that Decroux, besides his work on mime, was also a professional theatre and movie actor, as well as many other things. I'm referring to something more important, more essential, even; that is, that possibility of pinpointing, as I just said, several levels within his artistic and pedagogical research in the area of corporeal mime.

I think it is possible to point out at least *three different levels*, closely tied to one another, of course:

1) There is, first and foremost, Decroux as the inventor of corporeal mime as a new theatrical genre, a genre founded on the rigid exclusion of words and, in addition, strongly codified: a rarity in the West, as we all know. His repertory included more than a hundred pieces, most of which lasted only a few minutes. There were a few exceptions, as for instance his first production *La vie primitive*, in 1931, and *Petits soldats*, in 1950.

2) There is then Decroux, the researcher of a *pure, essential, theatrical art form* based of course on the aesthetic use of the human body, but without rigid exclusions and also without the obligations of strict codification/formalization.

3) Finally, there is at least a third Decroux: that is, he who carried on for an entire half-century one of the most rigorous, thorough and systematic investigations that European theatre has ever known, on the foundations of the art of the actor; that is, on physical action on the stage, its techniques, its principles, its dramaturgy.

It's obviously not a question of determining the major or minor importance of these three Decroux. And yet, I think the deepest and most lasting contribution Decroux made to the theatre of the 20th century and bequeathed to future generations belongs to this third level.

If we attempt to examine, outside any consideration of genre, the questions posed by the creator of corporeal mime during his complex career as artist and teacher, they are really the same ones that drive the work of the other masters of the new

contemporary theatre: what does it mean to produce *actions* on the stage? What enables the actor to move authentically that is, in an effective, credible way? How can the actor become an artist--that is, a creator and dramaturg, using what an actor has at his/her disposal?

Decroux' relentless technical research on the actor reveals its double opposite potentialities: on the one hand, a necessary plunge to the heart of the problems that stir contemporary theatre in order to reach the level of art; on the other hand a privileged path from among those taken by contemporary theatre in order to go beyond theatrical presentation, beyond art and oneself, by means of a radical questioning of its *worth* and *meaning*.

*Translation: Sally Leabhart*

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Ryszard Cieslak, 1965