

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Jaime Mears

2008 Churchill Fellow

Two months of training at L'ecole Philippe Gaulier to learn how not to be boring and achieve a beautiful freedom on stage when you have 10000 spotlights on you. An investigation of a unique teacher with a profound philosophy.

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Dated

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INTRODUCTION

The Churchill Fellowship enabled me to travel to Paris in order to study with the world renowned teacher of traditional European theatre practices, Philippe Gaulier, to explore Neutral Mask, Improvisation and Greek Tragedy. The Fellowship also gave me the opportunity to attend Philippe's foundational workshop and the basis of his unique pedagogy Le Jeu. I have tried to include as much practical information as possible so as this report might be of some use to other professionals in my field. This Report provides a summary of my experience throughout the two workshops I attended, a breakdown of Philippe's practical approach to teaching and how it has changed my approach to my practice and my own pedagogy, how I plan pass on the new ideas and skills I have learnt and finally my recommendations based on my experience at L'ecole Philippe Gaulier.

I extend my appreciation to the Churchill Trust for the extraordinary faith they showed in supporting my project and giving me the opportunity to have a truly life changing experience. I have an infinitely greater understanding of my craft and a profoundly different approach to actor training as a result of undertaking studies with Philippe Gaulier. The opportunity to work with a great master of the theatre who has such an utterly unique approach in the class room has been so enriching. Gaulier's intelligence, humor and humanity will stay with me forever. To study in Paris, a city with such a fabulous cultural heritage has also been a great privilege.

Thank you to Andrew Upton at the Sydney Theatre Company, Jean Pierre Mignon And Geoffry Rush who and showed so much faith in my work and supported and encouraged my project in such spectacular ways. Thank you Rosemary Gorman and Robyn Edwards for all the hours they lent me and their invaluable advice and everyone at NIDA who saw my project through from conception. Thanks to my dear friends at the Perch. Finally, thank you to my mother who has given me the courage to follow my dream and helped me in a thousand ways to get here.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jaime Mears
65 Boulevard Garibaldi
Paris 75015
+33 6 75 32 21 21
jaimestar@hotmail.com

The Fellowship of study was undertaken between the 13th of October and the 19th of December 2008.

- The aim of the Fellowship was to learn new theatre skills and traditional theatre techniques from a master teacher with a unique teaching philosophy and develop a more integrated pedagogy of my own. I was able to play with a mad and wonderful bunch of students from 20 countries and as many backgrounds. I collaborated with other students to create original work and prepare scenes from Greek Tragedy which were presented to the class in the final week of Neutral Mask. I was also able to attend productions of several internationally renowned artists and companies.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Seeing extraordinary moments of theatre created each day and remarkable transformations in students with the guidance of Philippe and the application of techniques we learned in class.
- The opportunity to work on a scene from Orestes playing one of the greatest female roles in Greek Tragedy using the principles of Neutral Mask and through that technique finding access to unprecedented freedom, complexity and beauty on stage.
- Seeing Jos Huben an ex student of Philippe's perform at the Bouffe du Nord. Seeing War Horse and August Osage County two exceptional productions from Handspring Puppet and Steppenwolf companies at the National Theatre in London.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- I would recommend acting schools teach a component based on Neutral mask and place more emphasis on Physical discipline and technique
- Create a new class room culture in acting schools which emphasize play, experiential learning, the importance of failure in the process of change
- More opportunities and funding for new companies to take time to develop physical skills, chorus work and complicate in order to devise and develop original productions of real quality and depth.
- Create opportunities by which information can be exchanged with professionals abroad and for bringing to Australia the experience of more international practitioners so the development of new skills is possible

IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION

- Publishing articles promoting the work of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and sharing my experience at L'ecole Philippe Gaulier in both The NIDA magazine and in the EQUITY magazine which has a wide distribution amongst the actors union MEAA.
- Hold workshops with NIDA Open Program, ATYP and the Actors Centre and STC
- Change my class room culture at NIDA by introducing the philosophy of Le Jeu and using the techniques of Philippe Gaulier to engage students in a more joyous experience on stage.
- Drawing from the work of inspirational companies Theatre Du Soleil, Complicite, Handspring Puppet Company, Compagnie du Philippe Gente, Royal de Luxe and Knee High Theatre I would like to create a company of actors to explore new possibilities of devising and performing using techniques I have learned in Neutral Mask and Le Jeu and develop to original theatre productions. I would also like to work with mask and puppet in performance.
- Maintain connections with the group of international students and teachers I have met in order to keep updated with new innovations in theatre making and training.

FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME

11th -12th October Paris, France

Visits to Pantheon, Comedie Francaise

13th October - 7th November, Paris, France

Le Jeu Workshop with Philippe Gaulier

Movement classes with Thomas from Sweden and Lori from Italy

- Movement classes focus on coordination, complicité, balance and lightness
- Improvisation and games introduction to Le Jeu
- Major, minor, complicité and pleasure on stage
- Fixed point
- Movement flexibility, yoga, strength upper body
- Difference between actor and character
- The impulse for theatre/ improvisations
- Working in Chorus basic introduction
- Movement Feldenkrais, basic balances, cartwheels, back flips, stamina
- Rhythms of theatre, Burlesque and the absurd

10th -19th November, Paris, France

Neutral Mask and Text with Philippe Gaulier

Movement Class with Lennart from Sweden and Tinu from France

- Movement - games, developing acrobatic skills, fixed point, analysis of movement
- Explanation of Jacques Copeau, origins of Neutral Mask
- simple exercises exploring moving neutral mask and simple text
- Exploration of water, fire, earth, air using Greek text
- Exploration of Greek Chorus, axis exercise and choreographer
- Exploration of elements of wood, cream, oil, color, silk, glass and metal, light, acid.
- Movement core strength, endurance more complex acrobatics, improvisations using skills
- Work on Death of Hector using elements already explored
- Study of animals, dog, snake, lion, bird, mouse, fly, lizard
- Scene from Orestes, Electra and Antigone using elements of color, seasons and Greek Chorus
- Movement further analysis of Neutral mask and individual physicality
- Last week presentations

11th December, Paris, France

Bouffes du Nord Jos Huben The Art of Laughter

21st December, London, United Kingdom

Theatre National, Steppenwolf production August Osage County

Theatre National, Handspring Puppet Company, War Horse

L' ECOLE PHILIPPE GAULIER

L'ecole Philippe Gaulier is located at the top of an abandoned French Telecom building. On the first day I arrive early with another student Phil from New York. Confused we search the street for signs the theatre school we imagined. A young man with a shaved head is smoking in front of the steps. Eventually I pluck up courage and say brightly L'ecole Philippe Gaulier? My French is still limited to one or two phrases at this stage. He grunts and points at a tiny sticker above a small intercom. An anonymous click indicates we have gained entry. We proceed up 6 flights until we reach a small door on the top floor.

Inside the temperature is sweltering. A scrap of paper on the wall tells us the radiator is broken and can never be turned off... There are two studios one small one which serves as a movement space and the other is where Philippe takes his classes. The main studio is very basic but spacious. There are full length windows along one wall and the first thing you notice about this space is the unusually beautiful afternoon light which streams in. The plaster is white and the ceiling is stripped back and pockmarked. There are some basic floodlights rigged and two flats at one end behind which a curtain hangs full length from floor to ceiling. This will be our stage. Otherwise the space is empty but for a chair for Philippe and some wooden benches.

This very sparse work area is an innovation of Jacques Copeau, the man who, I will come to know developed Neutral mask as a pedagogical technique and created the system of actor training we are familiar with today. In a radical move Copeau disposed of the proscenium arch and made the performing area an open empty space with the qualities typical of Greek theatre, Elizabethan theatre and Commedia dell'arte. It is clear in a stripped back theatre space such as this the primacy of the actor. It fills me with a deep sense of terror. There is nowhere to hide.

Gaulier looks a little like an alcoholic version of Santa Clause. He is jowly, bearded with a fop of mad white tufts poking out from beneath a beret. He has beady eyes which sparkle with humor though we rarely see him smile. Instead he adopts a pan face. Though occasionally he reminds us he was an actor by adopting ridiculous expressions, making up words and stuttering or feigning rage and pretending to assault a student with his little drum stick when they have not answered him correctly. A pair of round red spectacles are perched on the end of his nose. He is dressed in his uniform of cardigan and waistcoat, a silk polka dot handkerchief is tied gracefully around his neck. He wears a pair or fading mauve slippers in the class room. The whole outfit is put together with the utmost care. I'm sure he is aware he looks entirely ridiculous...I have never met a person who takes themselves less seriously.

LE JEU

Theatre is as serious as a child's game

Watch a child in a sand pit or playing dragons and witches or hide and seek. They make for truly fascinating watching... It is this state of being Philippe Gaulier seeks to elicit from all his students. He peels away the unnecessary layers of seriousness, bad make up and characters which we buffer between us and the frightening world. In his class room the game is all important and in the process of having a romp and a joke with our play mates we forget we are in front of an audience. It's at that moment completely enamored with our game, that the audience seeing us restored to the 7 year old we once were, leans forward entranced. At the moment we have forgotten, Gaulier gently reminds us we are in the theatre. He shows us the difference between what is interesting to watch and what is not.

Le Jeu literally translates as play and so naturally the workshop begins with a game. The game is called Balthazar Says and is a version of Simon Says. Philippe holds a drum on which he beats to punctuate his class. BANG! "You shut up now! He begins to shout his orders. BANG. "Balthazrr says Run!" "BANG. Stop running now! Nooooo, there was no Balthazarr says - who stopped? Put your hands up if you stopped! Ah. What do you want?"

This is the part of the game where the running around stops and punishment must be dealt out to those who disobeyed Balthazrr. Philippe asks what you want and you have the following options as reply:

1. Nothing
2. A Kiss
3. Two nothings and a kiss
4. A kiss and four nothings
5. Four nothings and two kisses

The explanations of these are as follows:

1. Nothing - you want nothing, Philippe says 'bon': it is over
2. A kiss - you have to ask someone in the room if they will let you kiss them. If they say yes - then voila! you get to peck them on the cheek. However, if they say no, you must go to Gaulier. Gaulier puts down his drum, wrenches your arm up behind your back and bends you double, so that you wince with pain, then carries out a sequence of torture on you: shampoo (ruffles your skull) guillotine (chops the back of your neck) acupuncture (pinches the flesh on your shoulders) and then Guantanamo (grabs your little finger and bends it backwards) Sometimes you get a Chinese burn, then you're done. Philippe encourages us to denounce each other if we see someone making a mistake.

We play this simple absurd game everyday for 2 months. Rather than tiring of it, the repetition is a delight. We delight in pretending we don't know what is coming next, we feign shock when someone is denounced, we tense with anticipation when someone asks for a kiss, we squirm and screw our faces while someone is tortured... The atmosphere is electric but always light hearted. The delight of everyone feeds the game and so it never gets boring. And this is a key to the whole philosophy of Le Jeu.

“Without the game the actor is lost”. The game gives the actor an immediate focus. It is impossible for instance not to be present when your partner threatens to snatch your cloth tail from behind you in the Game of the Scarf. You take this game into an improvisation and all self consciousness disappears, the attention is placed firmly on your partner where it should be. Whilst this is a relatively simple concept in theory, on stage it’s another story. Philippe’s exercises get more complex under seemingly simple guises. An actor may get up and BANG the drum sounds before they have opened their mouths. Like Lecoq, Gaulier teaches that theatre is born out of silence first. The game, the impulse, the story busts into existence the moment the actor appears on stage. This is quite a different experience of theatre making than at drama school in Australia where the emphasis was on the textual story telling.

Its not that play is a completely new idea for me in the world of theatre. During my three years of professional theatre training at NIDA we played many warm up games, however that exactly how we saw them, a warm up to the real stuff, the serious acting we were about to do rather than the essence of what we were about to do. I felt I had to work hard on stage, to apply myself, to concentrate on conjuring up an imagined past or a feeling about a fellow character...to be another person. Inevitably a week into performance of a show, our frustrated and bemused director would say to my cast “just have fun” but by that stage, in performance, we’d forgotten how. In an effort to be perfect, to act well, we had begun to take ourselves seriously. Thus we were boring.

If you forget the game in an improvisation in Philippe’s class, if you fall back into the old pattern of trying to act well, BANG. The drum will sound...”Was she boring?” Philippe asks someone from the audience. At first it’s difficult to say out loud what we have all observed to be true..That when any actor loses this pleasure of the game they become painfully boring to watch. “Yes, she was boring” someone ventures tentatively..“top level boring” Philippe agrees.

YOU CAN BE ACADEMIC WHEN YOU ARE 90

“The game opens your imagination, then you become interesting. Without fantasy you are a pain in the arse.”

There is no theory component to Philippe’s classes. Its not that theory is not important, just that it’s irrelevant. One could theorize for months about what happens in Philippe’s classes. Finally it’s the experience which is invaluable as a teaching tool. Whilst the concepts of Le Jeu seem relatively simple, in practice, pleasure on stage is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. What is interesting to watch, we learn, is the impulse and freedom of a moment. Philippe is trying to draw from us moments of life on stage. “Life is poetry” he tells us “something artistic is horrible”. The game creates living moments of pleasure and excitement the energy generated from people who are focused and completely present. The game will generate an energy which is palpable. A person enjoying themselves on stage is beautiful to watch.

Philippe can sometimes be frustratingly oblique in his explanation of an exercise. He rarely tells you what to do differently in order to achieve pleasure or stay in the moment. He never tells you how to be funny or indeed how to act...He simply lets you discover what works by trial and failure. In class you have flop after flop. While this is incredibly frustrating it becomes a much more effective way of discovering what works. Generally on stage you know you have flopped because you are not having fun.... So how do you build a discipline of fun in the classroom? A place which traditionally teaches children to stifle the natural urge to play and dream and disciplines us to 'act our age'. Indeed how do we bring this fun to the workplace when the pressure is on to present a product to a critical public? Our instinct is to impress, with our talent, with all the tricks we have up our sleeve. We leave the theatre self satisfied, we are safe; our vulnerability has not been found out. The audience leaves impressed by our acting but essentially untouched. Together we have shared nothing.

At L'ecole Philippe Gaulier the first thing you notice is that nothing is taken seriously. "Acting is as serious as a child's game". That shameful secret out in the open we are free to enjoy ourselves being silly. Philippe constantly reminds us we are engaged in the game. The game of learning. The game of life. After you have had your inevitable flop he will stand you in front of the class and begin to insult what you have done in the most hilarious and outrageous ways. "Do you say, Bah oui,...this piece of theatre changed my life! Or it was boring like the pharmacist in Sceaux?..Two possibilities!" Philippe leaves no room for hypocrisy. The tension is broken as we all laugh uproariously. Failure is made ok. We are learning what works and what doesn't. To 'fail' is an important part of the process and openly acknowledged as such. Philippe maintains the actor must have a 'crisis' born out of frustration on stage from which something unexpected and original springs.

Remembering back to my professional theatre training the focus was always result oriented. The environment was super competitive. The threat of being kicked out always loomed. The standard had to be high. The crisis was to be had in the privacy of your bedroom but not on stage...Most teachers have good intentions concerning their students growth. In the class room students were supported and encouraged. Constructive criticism was the order of the day...given you performed to standard. With directors there was always a little more pressure on them to produce a good performance from the students in particular when we performed to the public. It is here Philippe is able to deviate from the teaching styles of most drama schools. The school is entirely process oriented. He invites anyone to attend his classes and has absolutely no vested interest in you other than helping you to be a beautiful actor. If you want to change then you need to flop, that's all there is to it.

According to Philippe if a performance is going to be good on stage (given you are working with a wonderful play) it needs the following elements. The 'fantasy' or the imagination of someone needs to be activated by **the game** (which we have dealt with). Other essential elements are complicity, fixed point, the role of major and minor, impulse and rhythm. Each element is explored through an exercise. As it's the game which sparks the imagination and gives pleasure naturally each exercise is framed in terms of a game which is played in its simplest form first in front of an audience and then gradually develops into the skeleton of a performance.

Complicite is defined in the Robert Dictionary as a profound understanding between people which is spontaneous and often unexpressed. Philippe describes it as when two actors discover in each other ‘fellow feeling’ and become caught up in the game between each other and the audience. The complicite becomes stronger as they feed off the joy of being ‘true accomplices’. Complicite requires the development of sensitivity and awareness on stage. Physical complicite is also a focus of our movement classes and is developed using exercises which require the class to act as a whole organism, for instance in chorus movement or in partnered work.

One very good physical exercise we used was with a wooden pole which was balanced between two people using only one index finger each. In order to keep the pole from falling the partners have to move harmoniously, instinctively guessing the next movement of his partner and discovering a mutual rhythm.

Fixed point provides a focus which serves as the punctuation of an actor’s performance. A moment of pause. The body is poised and energized ready for the next impulse, the eyes are sparkling with the game. A perfect exercise for fixed point is a well known called Grandmothers Footsteps GF. All the students line up along the back wall, except for one student, Grandma who is near the opposite wall and has their back to the other students in the game. Between Grandma and the other players chairs are scattered through the space. The players must sneak up and touch Grandma on the back. The task of Grandma is to catch her fellows out by spinning around. If she sees someone move she can send them to the back wall.

Bodies which are dead in performance come alive in this game... Actors become energized and the intense focus creates a point of interest. In the juxtaposition between movement and fixed point the audience observes the actors enjoying their game and the developing story is made clear by this punctuation. Much humor is born from the fixed point. If the punctuation takes the actor by surprise in GF and catches them in an awkward position it surprises and delights the audience to watch how the actor maintains his fixed point during these moments. The fixed point becomes a physical reference point for the actor to work around. If everything moves around a fixed point the physicality of an actor becomes clear. Exploring different physical fixed points in movement allows us to explore different physicalities.

“When I move my forearms, without moving my head and scarcely moving my legs, the audience thinks I am imitating an idiot rippling his pectorals on the beach. If I shake only my legs, I look like a nervous person who fidgets and is excitable, uncoordinated and hyperactive. What does a philosopher do when wracked with profound thoughts? He shakes his head without moving anything else at all”

Philippe Gaulier The Tormentor.

Whilst these are simple observations and possibly even caricatured the physical discipline of using a fixed point is not at all common to those actors with a typical drama school background. Though fixed point works becomes far more important during Neutral Mask a

weak physical life and a general unconsciousness of my body makes for unclear communication on stage and the humor of situations is lost. Philippe maintains the body can communicate a story so much more effectively...The audience is given a clear message which is followed by the text.

Major and Minor are the opposing roles ever present in theatre. Major is the character who enters first, the star, they are larger than life, they fill the stage with pleasure of being loved, their voice is dynamic, confident happy to be the centre of attention, happy to gently mock their partner Minor. Minor is waiting ever watchful for the moment they take their partners cue and leap into the role of Major. Until then minor is content to be quiet, let their partner shine. Minor will often look to play they opposing rhythm of Major. The nature of the opposing roles make it certain one will hate the other says Philippe yet the major minor game must always be pleasurable.

A wonderful example of a major minor exercise, which also incorporates a strong fixed point, is The Game of the Scarf. Two students have long strips of fabric hanging out of their pants and the game consists of trying to take the other persons scarf by moving here and there and dodging about. One person is nominated to set the rhythm..The other student follows this rhythm. Both students can set the rhythm by taking the other ones scarf. When the teacher shouts stop. Both actors must stop look at each other and show a “fixed point”. The winning student (the one who has successfully stolen the others scarf) shows the joy of being in Major. They tease their looser friend in minor, playing about with their friends scarf until minor manages to get hold of it, when there is a new fixed point. The new winner is in Major. Watching this exercise is quite amazing. Different stories emerge with different groups of partners, according to the rhythm set. Watching Alex and Christina in this exercise one was reminded of Katherine and Petrucio in Taming of the Shrew. The scarf game is then added to an improvisation in which actors must create a scene that is underscored by the game.

Impulse in theatre is likened to the impulse which governs all life. The impulse is for play. When Philippe talks about play he talks of a universal desire for life which can be observed in all living things. The movements of Nature which explode at springtime for example, wild horses galloping, copulating, whinnying. The play of dogs, cats monkeys and so on. “Everyone plays” Philippe says “so as to discover life, nature, sex and light.” Play is as vital function as breathing or laughter. Impulse is also tied very firmly to the concepts of complicity and major and minor. When we ask about our impulse to begin performance Philippe tells us it must begin off stage.

In order to experience the impulse we play a simple game which we then take into performance in increments. Initially two students sit on chairs opposite each other. They each have two guards who stand behind them. The opposite guard to the student on the chair gives the signal for movement by winking and the student must leap out of their chair without being touched by their guard. Each time you get out of your chair without being caught you run to the front of the stage and say how many points you have. We observe the pleasure of the student who wins...The energy of the impulse to leap out of the chair and the complicity between partners. Once the students have mastered this the two students in

the chairs must improvise a simple conversation about breakfast or the weather whilst playing the game. We see how the game gives another life to the dialogue and takes the pressure of performance from the players. The final stage of the game is when the four students go behind the flats of the stage so we hear the conversation from behind the wings and then suddenly we see an actor burst onto stage with the joy and pleasure of someone who has won (the pleasure of Major). The actor is to stay on stage for as long as the pleasure lasts. At first this may be only for a few seconds. Learning to sustain the pleasure and the impulse is difficult but experiencing this exercise is so much more helpful than understanding the exercise intellectually.

Rhythm is another lesson of Le jeu. The opposing Rhythms' of Major and Minor are explored first. When two people work with the same rhythm they are boring. As the workshop moves into the last few weeks we explore different rhythms with the voice. We look at the rhythm of familiar characters, radio announcers and politicians. We see what happens when we impose the rhythm of the sports commentator on a love story. We can take different rhythms from nature animals the seasons, we learn from Philippe everything has an intrinsic rhythm we can learn to mimic.. Finally we begin to use opposing rhythms to explore character in improvisations where actors use a fast rhythm for their movements and a slow rhythm with their voice.

OPEN SURGERY ON THE SOUL

One of the most important lessons of Le Jeu was the difference between the actor and character. This is a distinction that most actors have trouble with. The acting training I received in Australia draws primarily from a psychological approach to character development, primarily from Stanislavski and to a lesser degree the American teachers Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasburg. This relied heavily upon research into the background of the period the play, a thorough investigation of the actions, motivations and objectives of the character and exploration of emotional states using emotional memory exercises in order to create an interesting and multifaceted character. The character became a kind of rubix cube of thought, action and word the actor must puzzle out. If the colors aligned, poof, the actor would transform. It was a trick of self deception. A kind of alchemy which allowed you to 'be' someone else. In a way the nature of the technique necessitates a self centered focus.

Philippe's proposition is a simple one; the actor is not the character. The audience comes to see the actor playing the character. If you play the character the audience is cut off from the essence of what is living and beautiful inside of you...It is the life in you which brings the character to life. "An actor wakes the character who is sleeping in the book. She says wake up I am going to have fun with you". The actor is having a beautiful game with the audience. It's a game of pretend. It's the first game we play as children. I do not have to be anyone else but I have pleasure to pretend I am. The pressure to 'be truthful' is relieved. "Theatre equals the false" says Galier, its all lies, spiel, invention and deceit. "The Kingdom of the apocryphal" is a more joyful place than

that of the authentic, the true and the sincere. It is the game of our childhood which allows this bewitchment. Our job is to stimulate the audience's imagination by creating a beautiful fantasy around ourselves. Once we have triggered their imagination the audience dreams the character for us. We invite the audience to be complicit in the creation.

Acting with Philippe is an exercise in revealing not concealing who you really are. "The actor must never hide their soul beneath the personality traits of the character" Philippe says. Rather the actor must "allow the outline of the actors face when they were seven to shine through." Gaulier teaches us not to play the character too much otherwise we will become one dimensional on stage. We will be boring.

It is Philippe's Special gift to be able to see precisely what a student needs to release their unique spirit. Oliver plays the fool; he waddles on stage, feigns idiocy and lets out big embarrassed guffaws of laughter when confronted. This character clearly gets in the way of Oliver discovering anything else. Philippe tells him this "little character" is suffocating his beauty. He asks Oliver to sit on a chair and whisper a children's lullaby he remembers. Oliver starts too loudly but as he softens we hear a voice we haven't heard from him. Clear, courageous and quite lovely. His face softens, the little character falls away. Gaulier continues to work with him until Oliver can move about and maintain a tall open posture while singing. Pedro is having trouble with his pleasure on stage. He asks Pedro which girl he fancies and then asks the girl to come and kiss Pedro gently behind his neck as he delivers his text. He giggles and his delivery becomes more vibrant, alive. Kakee has a "made in Hong Kong" smile which she hides behind whenever she feels confronted or embarrassed. It sneaks into all her characters. Gaulier tells her not to show her teeth, he asks her to slick her hair back with water. When delivering text she is not allowed to smile. She morphs into a stronger more extraordinary version of herself. The character she plays comes alive. There are numerous example such as this. Startling transformations occur in students and the result is mesmerizing. Without pushing students become more powerful, interesting and beautiful.

A LESSON IN ACTING

Excerpt From Diary

We begin an improvisation in which you use the impulse of catching a ball from your partner to step into the major role and then talk and move as the major character. At first I panic, what am I going to say, they can all see I don't know what to say, and now I've missed the few seconds of complicity I should be having with my partner, I've failed already and I haven't even begun. I have the ball in my hands and for a moment I am paralyzed with all these thoughts, literally all of them filling my mind in a few seconds of real time. I stumble forward and begin a few words in a loud voice about how nice it is to be in Sceaux, when he tells me to shut up. I am shocked to silence.

"Two words then silence" he says...I say two words....it feels strange, unnatural.

"Three words then silence...You have to calculate how many words you say then shut up,

leave them wanting more”.

“Walk forward, taller” he commands. “.....Body electric.... Energy in eyes”. I begin walking. “BE CAREFULL don’t destroy your movement with the text”.

“Walk forwards, backwards....taller” he says more quietly.

I feel a strange new sensation. My body begins to radiate something powerful, magnetic. I have nothing in my head, just empty lightness no heaviness no memory, just the sensation of being here and now...fully present. What ever I say now is secondary to the movement which is always precise and the centre of my focus. The words have no weight. There is a sense of detachment and clarity.

As the improvisation progressed I was told to walk to the window and quietly whisper a song I knew...Before long I was glancing at the audience, laughing freely, moving with ease and confidence. I spoke about my imaginary grandmother dying. Although I am crying I have an inner buoyancy and detachment. Each gesture has a feeling of vitality about it. Without thinking about it I have taken on the life of a strange Chekhovian character. I am in command of my fellow actors and between us all is an electric feeling of knowledge that we are creating something. Complicite! The whole sensation is of joy...and the joy stems from being free to be beautiful. I allow myself to shine through. I am no longer ashamed.

When an actor tackles a role in major, they aren’t carried by their character or by their own will or by the theatre but rather by the impulse. Their great desire to be loved does the rest. The pleasure of acting is what makes the difference between a good and a bad actor. The bad actor is troubled by their character. With a good actor, their pleasure (thus their casual ease) guides them. It illuminates their face, like a child who is playing. The face of the child who is playing is smooth, mysterious and transparent.

Philippe Gaulier The Tormentor

NEUTRAL MASK

The Neutral Mask has no problems, no past, no future, no suffering. He sleeps peacefully. The light comes on, he wakes, and he follows the impulse of the sun or the impulse of nature, the impulse of a peaceful fire, the impulse of the ocean

On the first day of Neutral Mask Gaulier asks us if we know who developed Neutral mask. There is some vague muttering. Commedia dell'arte and Greek theatre are volunteered. It is a surprise to learn Neutral Mask as a pedagogical tool for actor training was not developed until the 20th Century. The technique sprung out of the theatrical revolution happening at the time driven primarily by Constantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Edward Gordon Craig and a Frenchman named Jaques Copeau (1879-1949).

Copeau, Like his contemporaries was frustrated by what he saw as indulgent acting and lifeless theatre. He saw the need for a “new style of actor”. This actor needed to be a creator and a communicator, a skilled technician capable of developing their emotional imaginative and physical instrument. Copeau established his own theatre school, L'ecole du Vieux Colombier, where he began to use masks as a teaching tool. He also experimented with mime, though his classes has nothing to do with the silent mime common to the Parisian Boulevard Theatres of the 18th and 19th century. Copeau was also responsible for reviving improvisation, which had no living tradition in France at this time. The school was the genesis of the careers of the two major mask pedagogists of the century Michel St Denis and Jacques Lecoq. Philippe Gaulier studied with then taught alongside Lecoq at L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq.

The neutral mask according to Gaulier is a neutral point of reference through which we can rediscover movement. We use the mask as a tool through which we discover and learn to assume a neutral state that exists before action, a state of balance from which it will be easier to understand and express imbalances and conflicts. When wearing the mask, we attempt to enter a state of openness, a forward moving, physically engaged curiosity with the world around us. Philippe likens this state to one of innocence. The mask has no past or future he tells us, it is a blank canvas. By learning how to respond to the imagined through the observation of the elements, materials and animals, students are given the opportunity to find radical new ways of working on stage. The mask also serves to shield the initial timidity we might experience while we are finding new ways of moving and expressing ourselves.

We begin our mask work by ‘moving’ the essential elements of Earth, Fire, Air and Water. Seven students begin on stage wearing a white mask which is symmetrically aligned and ‘neutral’. Philippe will give us an element for example water. He usually begins by giving us a few images, gentle flowing water, a stream which develops into more turbulent rushing water and then later a raging ocean. Each element has an intrinsic rhythm and energy however as in the case of water, any one element may have many

different forms and rhythms. Students naturally take to one or two elements very easily. The key is to find pleasure in moving that particular element.

You need to be moved by the images of the particular element you are working with not the sound of the word or how you think it looks. If the images give you pleasure your imagination is then ignited, which gives you an internal impulse for movement which is pleasurable. In some ways the element or material 'moves you' rather than the other way round. The speech must come through this movement but can never destroy the beauty or flow of the movement. The material is not only there to help you find a physical expression for a character or a text but also to help you find emotional expression for a text.

An actor can play all of Greek Tragedy using the essential elements, Philippe tells us. It is an extraordinarily surprising and effective way of working. The Neutral Mask gives you a wonderful freedom. The actor enjoys strong images without feeling. Gaulier talks about the rhythm of fire and its burning being close to the anger of Achilles or Hecuba:

“When the body imitates volcanic eruptions, the anger reaches unprecedented heights. If the actor enjoys placing the words of the text on the impulses of movement, without destroying the movement then the audience says that never before has such almighty anger exploded in the theatre.”

Philippe Gaulier The tormentor

Once we are comfortable moving elements the mask is removed and we begin to experiment overlaying some text from Homer's The Illiad on top the new movement we have found. It is remarkable that the same piece of text can change so radically. The rhythm, dynamic, color and emotional life of the actor changes utterly with each new element. I was privileged to see some truly spectacular moments of theatre happen during these experiments. After the main four elements we begin exploration of other elements and objects such as wood, glass, steel, cream, oil, acid, chewing gum, rubber. Some of these new elements lend themselves very well to comedy.

We begin a week of animals. We are asked to go to the zoo to study one animal to present to class. We are all taken through a physical exploration of a variety of other animals as a way in to character. Gaulier then uses the movement we find to begin improvisations. Hilarious and unexpected characters emerge. We also get the opportunity to work with the dynamic of color and the seasons. During this time each of us is assigned a scene from Euripides Orestes, Antigone to prepare for the end of term. It is entirely new for me to explore such weighty text without any psychological analysis whatsoever. It is revelatory for me to play a scene from Euripides Orestes as Clytemnestra without once having to wonder what it would be like to be a woman who kills the father of her children. Instead I allowed myself to 'be moved' by the elements of a storm, the color red and ice. An extraordinary textured emotionally complex scene emerges. The sensation was of effortless and pleasurable movement. The physical strain I normally associate with performance is gone.

Movement class also provides us with an opportunity to explore the neutral mask and develop our fixed point which has become crucial this term. Movement class is taken by Len and Tinu. These two practitioners also studied at Lecoq (1981-1983). They have attended workshops with Ariane Mnouchkine, Dario Fo, Giorgio Strehler and Augusto Boal. They have also worked as actors and directors on 4 continents and 25 countries in such companies as The Gothenburg Opera, Théâtre de la Ville (of Gothenburg), Swedish nationwide theatre and many different universities and theater companies in Sweden and France. Len and Tinu are also keenly interested in the analysis of body language and communication so a great deal of our work with them is analysis of our own physicality and the exploration of the Neutral mask as a point of reference.

Obviously, with the mask on, a student's physical peculiarities become more pronounced. It is interesting to discover that a person's body can communicate in ways they are utterly unconscious of. Observation we soon learn is critical in learning how to achieve true neutrality. Your vision is limited in the mask, you are unable to see your body and have limited view of the space you work in. Your movements need to become precise and succinct. The mask also necessitates an enormous amount of concentration, the actor must remain 'in the moment'. No opportunity is provided to switch off. Nor does it allow for an actor to become emotionally indulgent or else run the risk of losing contact with their body and destroying their movement. The work must always be executed with lightness and detachment. Michel St Denis, one of the great mask pedagogists says Neutral mask permits the acting student:

"...to experience, in its most startling form, the chemistry of acting. At the very moment when the actor's feelings beneath the mask are at their height, the urgent necessity to control his physical actions compels him to detachment and lucidity."

Eugene Gwilliam 'Elemental Theatre'

We spend a great deal of time on chorus work with Philippe. We learn the dynamics of a chorus, how the chorus forms in The Axis Exercise and the principles of stage balance. We also do exercises with a chorus leader "the coryphaeus" which Philippe describes as the "lynch pin of the chorus whom everyone else revolves around". We each have a chance to experience this role. This chorus work requires the group have complicité. It is incredibly challenging but entirely useful. Chorus work is often a weak point in many professional productions.

Every day is a highlight for me over this workshop. It is an entirely new way of creating theatre. It is extraordinary to watch some students who have little to no background in acting work with some of the most difficult text imaginable. This kind of theatre is usually reserved for the theatrical elites. Greek theatre transcends the normal...An actor cannot show a hint of his domestic world. They are playing in the kingdom of the gods which require the actor to show a heightened state of reality.

CONCLUSIONS

It is invaluable for a student to study with a master of their particular craft. It has been a profound experience to 'be worked' by someone who has a gift for bringing out the genius in his students. Studying with Philippe Gaulier is a once in a life time opportunity and I feel I have a wealth of tools to bring back to Australia along with fresh ideas about theatre making and teaching.

Both workshops I attended, Le Jeu and Neutral mask have shown me the importance of rigorous physical training. All of the techniques not only require lightness and dexterity in the body but also an awareness of physical expression. Physically, I am more connected and conscious of my body and have a new strength and confidence having developed new acrobatic skills.

Through use of the fixed point, complicité and rhythm exercises I have seen my potential repertoire open up. As an actor I feel my capacity to find pleasure in performance has also been awakened. Students produce more lively and interesting work when the emphasis is taken off their character and placed instead on the game and complicité with their partner. I am inspired by the possibilities for my performance to become more vital, energized and more interesting to watch.

In terms of teaching, I have learnt a great deal from an exceptional teacher. I feel that the exercises from Le Jeu and in particular Neutral mask will make for a more well rounded and vastly more effective pedagogy than the one I have been using. I am now clearer as to how to provide my students not only with an effective technique but guided by the philosophy of Le Jeu, I can help them not to hide their unique beauty behind unconscious defensive mechanisms. Given permission to show their vulnerable self, rather than the one dimensional character, the actor's performance opens up to subtle nuances and hidden power.

I have a firm belief in the values of experiential learning now and what is interesting to watch and what is not. In the classroom it is important students learn to see for themselves rather than being told what to do. Both teacher and student can lighten up and use the principle of le jeu to take the process less seriously. This not only promotes more experimentation but the atmosphere of play will become the guiding principle for students to judge their work. It is clear to me that play is in fact as vital to life as breathing and should be the foundation on which all lessons and performance rest upon.

Neutral Mask has been a profound experience for me and has led me to reassess my technique on stage. Though I am aware this is the beginning of my own journey in this work, I feel I now have access to a range of movement and expression I never thought possible. The chorus work has shown me new dimensions and possibilities not only for performance but for creating theatre. For the first time I begin to feel confident about the prospect of directing my own work.

As a teaching tool it is clear to me that Neutral Mask is invaluable. The benefits for new students to acting are numerous. By shielding timidity, it can help with concentration, diminish a student's self-consciousness, strengthen inner feelings and lead the student to develop physical powers of outward expression. So often students graduate from drama school still lacking a strong consciousness of their body. Neutral Mask helps students and professionals alike to find a way into Epic texts that are sometimes so difficult to represent on stage. It has also given me clear guide lines for useful improvisations for students to find characters.

I plan to disseminate information about my fellowship and my findings in the following ways:

- Publishing articles promoting the work of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust and sharing my experience at L'ecole Philippe Gaulier in both The NIDA magazine and in the EQUITY magazine which has a wide distribution amongst the actors union MEAA.
- Hold workshops with NIDA Open Program, ATYP and the Actors Centre and STC.
- Hold workshops for HSC students
- Hold a talk for NIDA full time students to encourage further training and also promote the Churchill Memorial Trust.
- Change my class room culture at NIDA by introducing the philosophy of Le Jeu and using the techniques of Philippe Gaulier to engage students in a more joyous experience on stage.
- Drawing from the work of inspirational companies Theatre Du Soleil, Complicite, Handspring Puppet Company, Compagnie du Philippe Gante, Royal de Luxe and Knee High Theatre I would like to create a company of actors to explore new possibilities of devising and performing using techniques I have learned in Neutral Mask and Le Jeu and develop to original theatre productions. I would also like to work with mask and puppet in performance.
- Maintain connections with the group of international students and teachers I have met in order to keep updated with new innovations in theatre making and training.

RECCOMENDATIONS

In order for students and professionals alike to not only have a creative freedom and exceptional beauty on stage but to create theatre which is vital, moving and inspirational;

- I would recommend acting schools teach a component based on the European tradition of actor centered theatre training in particular on the principles of Neutral mask which strengthen physical awareness, discipline of technique and promote a more expansive range of emotional, vocal and physical expression.
- Create a new class room culture in acting schools which emphasize play experiential learning, the importance of failure in the process of change and generally encourage a sense of the ridiculous. I would also try to encourage a non competitive atmosphere as an actor who is competing to be noticed, not to fail or to avoid humiliation is by nature boring.
- Allow more opportunities and funding for new companies to take time to develop physical skills chorus work and complicate in order to devise and develop original productions of real quality and depth. By involving writers, directors and designers in this creative process we can also open up opportunities for more integrated and effective productions.
- Freeing up new spaces for the development of these companies and productions and most importantly alternative spaces for performance. For example more spaces like the Carriage Works Theatre which cleared space in old train sheds for rehearsal and alternative performance spaces.
- Create opportunities by which information can be exchanged with professionals abroad and for bringing to Australia the experience of more international practitioners so the development of new skills is made possible.
- Inviting more international performances into Australia in order to inspire local industry and promoting Australian theatre by involving ourselves more in the international Theatre Festival Circuit.