

Letter No.3: to Etienne Decroux

Cher Monsieur Decroux,

What do you say to those for whom our art form appears too perfect and therefore too elitist? Uh-Uh! Save your snorts! There is a tension here: it can indeed appear to be beautiful for beauty's sake. Where in the art form is the militant socialist of your youth?

I've thought about an audience attending their first performance of corporeal theatre. A bit like a first-time exposure to the music of Hildegard von Bingen, Indonesian Gamelan, Noh Theatre, or high-end slam poetry. Moments of being touched by a strange beauty. A deeper understanding takes familiarisation, time, and reflection. First, though, is touch – an inner stir. Reflection follows.

Entr'acte¹ was fortunate to always have a review in major newspapers. Initially struck by the on-stage beauty, some thoughtful critics wondered out loud 'what does it mean?'. Excellent. In those days I was wanting in the crafting of dramaturgical ideas for the program notes to help them and relied on our wonderful administrator. I was hugely reluctant to frame responses. All my time and energy went into the creative process itself, working to create an ensemble, teaching; as well as mothering. Our work, like all art, needs to be received through an imaginative mind. Imagination is like a muscle or a language – it must be exercised to be strong! Courageous audiences and critics shared their deeper interpretations and insights. This is as it should be; a movement doesn't mean one thing. It suggests and provokes meanings. Attempting to articulate our feelings or thoughts on a 'new' subject (which at first might seem 'exotic', hopefully not esoteric) is akin to trying to speak about spirituality. Hard work for some of us. I welcomed the effort others made to say what our work meant to them. Equally, it is marvellous to sit and be moved and not know why. It is, at times, sufficient.

¹ Entr'acte Theatre Ltd (1979-99), a corporeal theatre company co-founded by Pierre Thibaudeau and Elisabeth Burke in Australia.

In a seemingly contradictory twist, I think any 'cult of perfectionism' was undermined by your crafting of an aesthetic principle based on the notion of "*la politesse*". I'm sure I have notes somewhere of you saying you could have used the word 'altruism' but your mother would have better understood the word "politeness". That awareness of generational understandings was something I, too, had when submitting an assignment for my master's in ethics: I'd studied and understood the philosophical jargon but chose to write it in educated English so my mother might also read it. It worked excellently, in both senses: she read it, and I'd only signed up to study one subject, but a high distinction encouraged me to complete the degree.

Today the word politeness can suggest 18th-century manners or courtly decorum. I caught your hardening glare. I know. Not so. So let me write what I've come to think: there was something utilitarian in your reckoning of the word. You articulated '*politesse*' with the inflection of a militant socialist. You forged it into a tool to break our habits

You found beauty in openness; when you said to a student "*que c'est beau!*" you were not commenting on their skin or hair but on how a spirit or intent shone through their movement. This beauty was not sweet but compelling – at times perhaps even terrifying. I'm thinking of figures like "The Victory of Samothrace". Diverging for a moment, in 2015 I was in the Sydney French Choir and at Christmas we sang an English translation of a Basque hymn, *The Angel Gabriel*.

The angel Gabriel from Heaven came / His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame...

Whilst singing I surreptitiously ensured my weight was over my toes, heels on the ground, and I ghosted my outstretched arms up in that high back oblique. Since then, if I do the Samothrace figure, these days just for myself, my mind quivers between Samothrace and Gabriel. Awesome. Terrifying. The aesthetic and the moral become one. Perhaps I was not diverging, there is something of this oneness in your concept of *politesse*.

It is an unusual aesthetic principle and practice. Politeness is about a kind of openness to and availability for others. I don't recall any of your figures having arms akimbo: on the contrary, students struggled to reveal less-seen parts of the body. When the corporeal actor gives something to another, they reveal to the audience their open palm, the inside wrist and even the inside elbow (that bit of our anatomy with no name in English. In French "sanguine", the place from which blood is extracted). The gesture itself is an effort. By contrast, when offering something to another where the audience only sees the back of the hand or a sunken chest, the so-called act of giving is perceived as a "state of ungivingness" – to coin a new word. The unopened form suggests greed, cheating or something like rolling the eyes and muttering "whatever!". We never 'studied' these baser instincts. Was this because you saw us all arrive at your studio as relatively self-centred individualists? Your classes were unauditioned; but were we to have had an audition where you asked us to give another a glass of water, most of us would have shown the back of the hand, not the palm. Not because we were necessarily greedy but self-conscious: neither self-aware nor aware of the other. You worked hard to break down these habits. We needed to lose ourselves to be capable of representing others. Or not even. Just be. Fully. In the moment.

For most of us, a neutral stance is not natural – we add 'ticks' like slumping our shoulders, thrusting out our chests, jutting our chins, keeping our weight on our heels, and so on. I sense you held that a character with nothing to hide is open, vulnerable, and softly strong. This openness, this studied neutrality, was a pre-condition to learning any walk or character. It became a style. Some find 'style' a disparaging word. As you know Jean Dorcy thought the word was vague, preferring the phrase "concentration of actions". However, Richard Schechner understood "stylists strive for means to pierce through or go beyond the masks of everyday life so that the essential man can be revealed". On this, he was on the same path as you. In breaking our corporeal habits, we reshape our ways of thinking.

I remember being struck by a political undercurrent to *la politesse*: a worldview of shared commonalities, a lingua franca of a tolerant society. Although when I knew you, you

seldom ventured out beyond your front door, you taught students from across five continents and your aesthetic emphasised the commonalities between all peoples regardless of ethnicity or class. Some manners could be called universal, they are immediately understood and beyond argument: no nation approves of spitting at or poking others or screaming at elders. To be clear, you did not teach us behavioural etiquette or deportment. God forbid! Rather, your emphasis on *la politesse* was a way of discerning how to be open and frank to ourselves and to others. Learning how to have an open, neutral body was, *cher monsieur*, much; and beautiful. I sensed in this aesthetic a worldview that was not hierarchical. Forgive me for saying that it was, well, 'un-French'.

For me your pattern of instruction was the same. I mean both un-French, and more like a spiral than a vertical straight line. Sure, because of numbers you had *débutants* and *anciens*, but you did not, for example, sub-divide curricula into bespoke courses for beginners, intermediate or advanced students, as did most theatre academies. (Of course, some advanced students did extra creative development with you). There was no syllabus: in all classes, a figure or walk was taught randomly across the year. This meant after several weeks or months, when we returned to say a given walk, we found we had mastered in the interim a tiny detail of rhythm or form such that re-learning was a deepening experience, not just a repetition. This cyclical learning was different to the curricular mindset of many western education institutions. These days when most tuition in the arts, from conservatoria of music to acting, takes place in tertiary education institutions, I feel very privileged to have learned from you in this ever-deepening way.

I will end these musings on politeness as an aesthetic principle with a comment and a question. You wanted us to be open both within our creative ensemble and with the audience. Was there, additionally, an implied call on us as artists to stand up for others? I couldn't quite sense your reaction there. Let me explain; I'm exploring a thought that only occurred to me when reading about Georges Hébert's *Méthode Naturelle*. For him physical fitness meant being strong and able for others. I want to ask if these ideas were exciting or dull to you. But I can sense it opens a bigger discussion - I'll pick these threads up another time.

Psst, I know you are reading these letters, because you've not yet asked me to stop.
Doesn't every teacher want constructive feedback?

Warm regards,
Elisabeth