

## INTERNATIONAL Philippe Gaulier

# The fine art of serious clowning

After studying and teaching with Jacques Lecoq, Philippe Gaulier founded acting schools in both England and France, influencing generations of new performers. **Nick Awde** speaks to the man behind 'le Jeu' to explore what makes his technique so enduringly popular



## PHILIPPE GAULIER TIMELINE

**1943:**  
Born in Paris, France

**1965-67:**  
Studied at the Theatre National Populaire before moving to the Ecole Internationale de Theatre Jacques Lecoq in Paris.

**1960s:**  
Worked as a clown and bouffon.

**1971:**  
Became Lecoq's assistant and taught at the school.

**1980:**  
Left the Lecoq school and founded Ecole Philippe Gaulier in an atelier in the 17th arrondissement, Paris.

**1991:**  
Invited by Arts Council England to move the school to the UK.

**2002:**  
Moved to Montreuil, France.

**2005:**  
Set up school in Sceaux, south of Paris.

**2007:**  
Published *The Tormentor (Le Gegeneur)*, a book of his thoughts and exercises on the business.

**2011:**  
Moved to Etampes.

In a comfortable hall just off a sleepy square in a small town south of Paris, the final touches are being put to Philippe Gaulier's expanded acting school. It's busy in the new admin office – the architect has arrived to give things a last once-over, the phone rings to announce a last-minute tranche of money towards the refit, then happy tidings of a new Gaulier grandchild. Professional and personal partner Michiko Miyazaki-Gaulier fights with the key to the new front door, while there's the clatter of coffee cups as the students mill about on a break.

Gaulier stands in the middle of all it, visibly proud of this new space for his Ecole Philippe Gaulier. "The school started here five years ago and we had to do the administration on the stairs and put the costumes on the stage. So Michiko and I earned a bit of money, paf! We bought the neighbours, and now we have a dressing room and an administration office."

Where did the cash come from? "Money comes from us, from the school. It's our money and we are proud of that. We never received a subsidy here and we have never asked for one kopek from the French government. We can say 'fuck you'. And a free school is always happy to say 'fuck you'."

It's an attitude that helps to explain a man whose school has created a quiet revolution in UK theatre since the 1980s, with former students including Emma Thompson, the founder members of *Complicite* – Simon McBurney, Annabel Arden and Marcello Magni – Cal McCrystal, Sacha Baron Cohen, Helena Bonham Carter, Told by an Idiot's John Wright and Roberto Benigni. More recent alumni include Red Bastard (aka Eric Davis), Dr Brown (Phil Burgers) and Trygve Wakenshaw.

The school also has a strong sense of family, as Gaulier points out: "All our teachers were students at the school. They

always want to come back to show what they've learned. We don't take teachers from other places. They're boring and don't understand the spirit of what's going on here."

His own experience has given him insight into that idea of passing on the flame. "I was at Jacques Lecoq's school before and I was not that bad a teacher later. So after I started my own school, it seems I am still not that bad – so they come."

Gaulier was born in Paris in 1943 – "when it was full of Germans" – and went straight into theatre after leaving school. "I left my family and I went to theatre school, the Theatre National Populaire. We had good teachers: Gerard Philippe, Alain Cuny. It was a good time." He then went to train with Jacques Lecoq, staying on to teach at his Ecole Internationale de Theatre Jacques Lecoq for a decade.

Leaving Lecoq in 1980, Gaulier set up his own school in Paris, building his courses around 'le Jeu' or the 'Game'.

"We discover the 'complicite', we start to be friends, like when we play games like cowboys and Indians when we were kids." And, as Red Bastard and Dr Brown attest, Gaulier is also big on clown and bouffon, a dual nature that he developed himself as a performer – "I was a clown for 10 years – I did a lot of clown shows". And the difference between being a clown

**'Everybody thinks it's good to be good. I tell students you are allowed to be bad. It's good to be bad. Everybody was bad at some time'**

and a bouffon is a subject close to Gaulier's heart. "The clown imitates an adult to make us believe now he is an adult. He is like a child, he imitates in order to say, 'Daddy look at me now that I am an actor'. But he has no opinion about being an actor. The bouffon imitates in order to say this person is a piece of shit. To imitate Jean-Marie Le Pen, to say this one is a horrible person. So the bouffon is intelligent, he parodies to denounce the horrible fascist people. The clown does not understand what he is. He looks like what he does. The bouffon is like Goya's Black Paintings. Totally different."

Britain got the chance to discover the Gaulier style close-up when he spent the whole of the 1990s in London after Arts Council England invited him over for what was originally planned to be just one year. He moved from Highbury to Kentish Town and then Cricklewood. After returning to France, he ended up in Etampes, which is to Paris as, say, Woking is to London.

With all those changing spaces, has Gaulier kept the same structure of courses? "No. Here in Etampes we have two rooms to work in. When I was in Cricklewood we had a sort of church, a fantastic open room of about 450 square metres, almost all our present building. But with one room, it's not easy because we had two or three classes. So, for example, the movement teacher would work with one group, I would come after as he moved to the next group, so it all went faster."

As for method, did Gaulier take a lot of Lecoq with him? "No, no. It's not the same at all. When I was a teacher at Lecoq I didn't practise what he did. On some points I was okay but on many I wasn't, and that sometimes got Lecoq pissed off. But I did not want to accept his style, I did not like it. So after 10 years there I said, 'I'm going to do my own school,'

PHOTOS: ECOLE PHILIPPE GAULIER



Gaulier has built his schools around his method of 'le Jeu', or 'the Game' and encourages his students to learn to play

but if you see my students you'll also see they have so many different styles that you can't say they come from Philippe Gaulier's school. I am happy with that. I don't give a style to my students. I want to give freedom, not my style."

The secret to that individuality lies in playing 'le Jeu'.

"I think the Game is a great pleasure. Even if we play a scene where 'my grandfather's died', it should be a great pleasure to play. But when a teacher with a method that comes from Stanislavski, Strasberg or the others says you have to look inside you to feel the pain when your grandfather died... Well, I don't like psychologists in theatre. I don't teach sick theatre, I teach beautiful theatre that's alive."

The other side of the Game, however, is that Gaulier teaches through relentless negative criticism. If he thinks you're rubbish, he'll let you know instantly, although in most cases the resolution is a positive one. "Everybody thinks it's good to be good. I tell students that you are allowed to be bad. It's good to be bad. Everybody was bad at some time. So in this school you are allowed to be bad. But you will be bad a lot and I'm not going to be your nursemaid. In fact, it's a good tunnel for you to discover something. Stay bad and at the end there is something."

And that something is? "Freedom. It was in my case, too. When I was a student at Lecoq's school, for the first year I always said to Lecoq that I wanted to do the exercises, and Lecoq always said: 'Not you, Gaulier!' One year! And then in the second year I found I was free as a performer. So don't complain. You have to be happy to be bad because it's a good way to discover."

Just as there isn't a typical Gaulier graduate, there isn't a typical Gaulier student. They have always come from all around the world, and currently there are performers from places as diverse as Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, China, Hong Kong, Germany, Canada, Ireland and the UK. "People come because they know I am not classical. I don't sell the same salad as my colleagues. I hate that sort of thing."

The application process is also refreshingly different: "Name, cheque. No letter of recommendation and no photo or showreel. If I don't like you, if you are not polite, I kick you out. That's it. And everybody progresses."

As for his opinions on the state of theatre in general, Gaulier mischievously denies that he has any. "No. It's not my job. I can see beautiful theatre and I can see shit theatre, and that's okay – my opinion does not help anybody. It's what I teach that helps people."

## 5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PHILIPPE GAULIER

1. Gaulier's teachings are based on his concept of 'Le Jeu' or the 'Game' – finding the joy of performing – while also in the vein of Lecoq by using the 'via negativa' or 'negative way', ie, encouraging students to find their own way through negative criticism.

2. Courses at the Ecole Philippe Gaulier are spread in workshops across two years (October-June, and there is also a teaching year), and the intake is up to 90 students each year.

3. The first year covers the Game, neutral mask (as created by Jacques Copeau) and Greek tragedy, mask play (Basel carnival and commedia dell'arte), melodrama, Shakespeare and Chekhov, and writing and devising a show. Each workshop lasts four or five weeks.

4. In the second year courses vary. A typical year includes clown, bouffon, vaudeville, Shakespeare and Chekhov, writing and devising a show. Each workshop lasts about 12 weeks.

5. Since 1980 the school has visited and taught all over the world, and now concentrates on cities such as London, New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Barcelona, Berlin and Toronto.

## FURTHER READING

- **Resource website:** filmichiko.com
- **Buffoon Plays (Pieces Pour Bouffons)** in English and French, by Philippe Gaulier (Editions Filmiko)
- **Actor Training** by Alison Hodge (Routledge, 2010), Study of major acting teachers, including Gaulier

# WORLD NEWS

## National theatre day



### ITALY

Italians are being given a national day to celebrate theatre across the country with venues offering free performances. October 22 has been designated as 'la Giornata del Teatro' (Theatre Day) in an agreement signed between the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism and the Italian General Association of Performing Arts. With both state and independent theatres participating, morning performances will be reserved for schools, and the rest of the day will be open to the general public.

## New artistic team



### AUSTRALIA/ BRISBANE

Queensland Theatre Company is setting up an artistic team

from around Australia to guide the Brisbane-based theatre's programming and direction. New artistic director Sam Strong has appointed a national team made up of 10 practitioners from Queensland, the Torres Strait Islands, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. The team comprises 60% women, 30% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and 70% Queenslanders. Strong said: "They are the eyes and ears paying genuine attention to artists and their work in various cities throughout Australia, and overseas."

## Blue Man world tour



### SINGAPORE

Blue Man Group has announced world tour dates beginning on March 29. Launching

at the Sands Theatre in Singapore, the tour, which incorporates a live band, will visit Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch in New Zealand for the first time, with more dates to be announced. Produced by Nick Grace Management, Lunchbox Theatrical Group, Sliding Doors Entertainment and BASE Entertainment Asia, the tour is part of a season celebrating the group's 25 years in business.

## Broadway debut



### US/BROADWAY

Cirque du Soleil Theatrical's first show Paramour will open on March 25 on

Broadway at the Lyric Theatre, with previews from April 16. Directed by Philippe Decoufle, this is Cirque du Soleil Theatrical's first show created specifically for Broadway. The green light came only after the company negotiated deals with Actors' Equity Association for the show's 16 actors, and with the American Guild of Variety Artists for its 22 circus performers.

## Black theatre co's 45th anniversary



### CANADA/ MONTREAL

Canada's oldest black theatre company is spearheading its 45th

anniversary season with productions by three black Canadian women writers. Black Theatre Workshop, an English-speaking company based in francophone Montreal, is staging Djanet Sears' *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God*, Binti's *Journey*, adapted by Marcia Johnson from the novel *The Heaven Shop* by Deborah Ellis, and Anne-Marie Woods' *She Said/He Said*. As it has done for more than 25 years, the company is touring schools and community centres in the greater Montreal area for Black History Month.

## Prison workshops for young performers



### DENMARK/ HORSENS

Applications are open for European ensembles of young

performers aged 18-30 for a 10-day workshop on the theme of prisons in Denmark. Freedom Prison will take place at the former gaol of Faengslet, now a museum, in Horsens in May 2017. Around 130 participants will live and work inside Faengslet, stage their own productions and collaborate on the Freedom Prison Show. Organised by the Komediehuset Theatre, the project is part of Aarhus European Capital of Culture in 2017. The deadline is March 1. [bit.ly/FreedomPrison](http://bit.ly/FreedomPrison)

## Range of accessible events at festival



### NEW ZEALAND/ WELLINGTON

The New Zealand Festival, which opens in Wellington on

February 26, is continuing to add to the event's all-round accessibility. All programme and access information is available in alternative formats, while its website offers details for each venue including toilets, hearing loops and parking. Shows include an audio-described performance of Kneehigh's *Dead Dog in a Suitcase* (and *Other Love Songs*), plus a pre-show touch tour, and New Zealand Sign Language-interpreted performances of New Zealand comedy *Te Po* and Melbourne Theatre Company's dance piece *Complexity of Belonging*. There is also a relaxed performance for *Chalk About*, a dance piece by Scotland's *Curious Seed*.

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