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## **Playing outside the frame: revealing the hidden contributions of the women in the French tradition of actor training**

**Cass Fleming**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the seminal work of Suzanne Bing. It considers her close collaborations with three other women: Margaret Naumburg, Marie-Hélène Dasté and Jessmin Howarth. To reveal this network of women an alternative form of historiography is developed which dismantles the patriarchal 'Master Teacher' narrative of the French lineage of actor training from Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis and Jacques Lecoq. It presents a feminist (her)story of the collaborative work of these women that does not seek to locate pure origins, or engage with notions of singular ownership, but rather argues their work is better understood as a complex map, akin to a Foucauldian genealogy and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome. The analysis focuses on the centrality of play and progressive pedagogy in the training developed by these women, and how this underpinned the early strands of modern mime and devised theatre in France. These women existed outside the dominant male frameworks of power, and the gendered expectations of women of their time, but their use of play challenged existing conventions and approaches to hierarchy, established new processes of teaching, directing and making theatre, and was much more radical than previously acknowledged.

**Keywords:** Genealogy, Feminist her-story, Rhizome, Play, Progressive Pedagogy, Modern Mime, Devised Theatre.

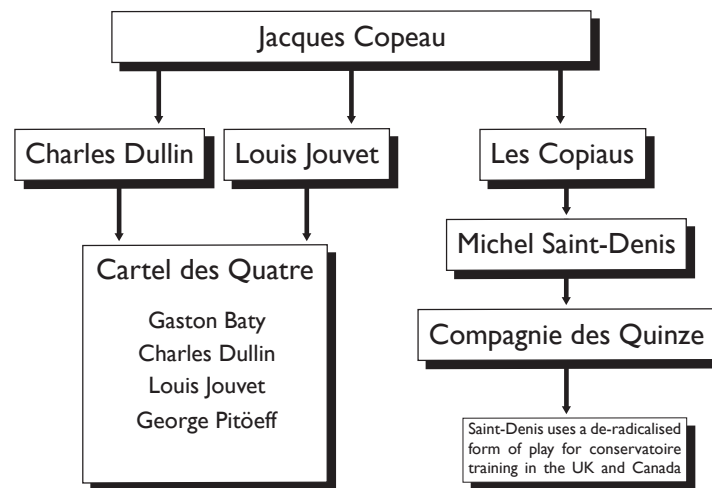
### **Looking outside the frame**

In 1960 Saint-Denis confidently stated, 'Here, in my view, is the main contribution of France to the theatre: men, and a tradition' (1960, p.31). According to his evaluation, French theatre history belonged to a group of men. So, who was Suzanne Bing? Bing (1885-1967) was a visionary actor, actor-trainer, pedagogue, director of studio-based productions and an early devised theatre-maker who made a momentous contribution to French theatre and mime practice. Ironically, it was her practice that formed the basis of much of Saint-Denis's own early work, although he never acknowledged her by name in either of his books (1960, 1982).

In fact, it was Bing who was the link that connected the early practice of the Vieux- Colombier theatre (1913-1924) and schools (1913-1924), the work of Les Copiaus in Burgundy (1924-1929), and the later

practice of Compagnie des Quinze (1929-1935). Moreover, she was the central pedagogue at all these schools and taught the first programme of the Paris school (1920-1921) independently. Despite all this, Copeau appointed Jules Romain as ‘director’ of the Paris School in 1921 regardless of the fact he did not contribute in any significant way to the school and had little interest in actor training (Kusler 1979, p.33). We therefore need to ask why her work and role has been so obscured? Most traditional (his)stories have either overlooked Bing’s work, misunderstood it and/or continue to view it through a restrictive matrix. Bing’s contribution, for the most part, has been subsumed beneath the history of Copeau as ‘le Patron’ and a chain of other male practitioners.

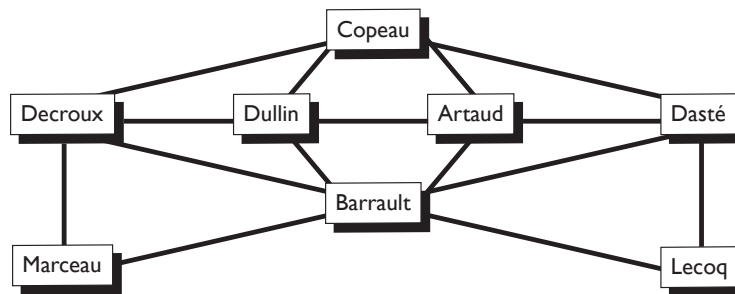
## Linear and Paternal Narratives



The diagram above represents a linear narrative of French Theatre, what Clarke (2009) has termed ‘paternal actor training genealogies’. Clarke argues that, within these models, male practitioners ‘are frequently accepted and revered as canonical’, which ‘serves to discursively construct and uphold a dominant paradigm of a powerful “genealogy of sons and fathers” (Irigaray in Whitford ‘Section 1’ 23)’ (2009, p.25). A number of the male practitioners who worked with Copeau also had much to gain in claiming a direct line of descent and strengthening their own credentials as the standard bearers of his work.

Bing is also absent from the histories of French modern mime, as is shown in Mira Felner’s diagram (1985, p.49) - although she acknowledges the significance of what she terms ‘Bing technique’ (p.96) and Lecoq’s inheritance of this method (p.157):

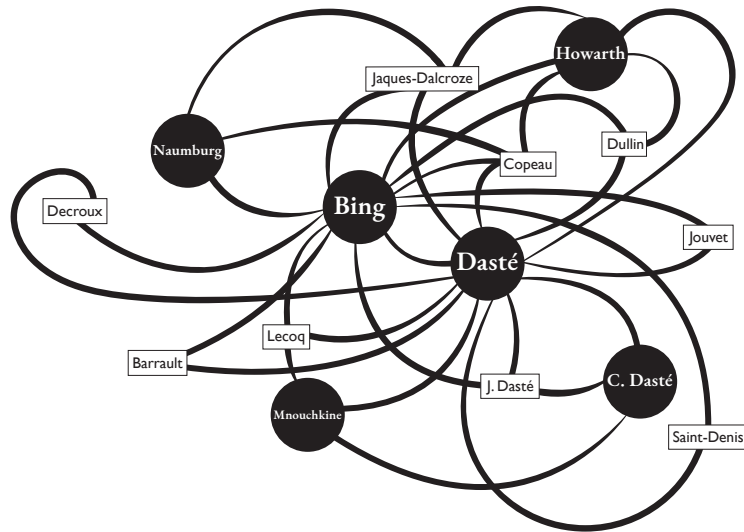
## Genealogy of Modern French Mime



Bing is positioned outside these (his)torical models; and to make matters worse scholars have at times suggested that it was because she did not have a dominating ego that she ‘has been unfairly neglected, due largely perhaps to her own diffidence and deference to Copeau’s memory’ (Frost & Yarrow 2007, p.26).

However, contrary to misconceptions about her passivity, Bing’s later feelings about Copeau were complex and ‘ambiguous’ according to her son (Bing 1983: 20). A re-consideration of Bing must therefore challenge the way in which certain actor training historiographies deal with issues of gender and argue against the use of problematic markers of ‘success’, significance and status in the theatre industry. The seminal work of Kusler (1979), Donahue (1998, 2008) and Kurkinen (2000) started the overdue process of revealing Bing’s work and this has been continued by Evans (2006), Fleming (2013), Evans and Fleming (2018) and Rudlin’s later work (2000). To foreground the work of Bing, this article borrows selectively from Foucault’s ideas about history and genealogy (1977A, 1997B) and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the rhizome (1987), along with Feminist forms of historiography and her-stories (Rowbotham 1977, 2011; Scott 1999). In combination, these alternative forms of historiography move away from linear historical mappings and become an interconnected, multi stranded web, or rhizomatic growth of roots and shoots, in which the work of Bing is revealed. The previous two diagrams represent male practitioners and their connections. The diagram below reveals female practitioners, their interconnections with each other, and their male collaborators.

## Women are Revealed



While Charles Dullin, Louis Jouvet, Jean Dasté, Jean Dorcy and Saint-Denis all contributed at specific points in time during the history of the Vieux-Colombier Theatre, Les Copiaus, Compagnie des Quinze (and the related schools), none of them, including Copeau himself, were involved throughout the entire process of development from 1913 to 1935. Rather it was Bing who was the imaginatively-embodied intersection between all these developments of embodied play. Bing also negotiated a pivotal, but complex, mixture of roles in this mapping (actor, teacher, researcher, director in her own right, collaborator) and was key to the development of this work in France. Etienne Decroux's perspective is important in this context:

Among those who know the history of this theatre, there are many who know nothing about its school [...] And above all: The role of Suzanne Bing, our formidable leader. Zealously rising to the demands of her task, she forgot herself in its execution. And she is forgotten. [...]

Without her, the school would have remained nothing more than a project, or ended up like the others: chaos. My own profound experience with schools [...] entitles me to say, without being accused to yielding to the pleasure of euphoria: Without Suzanne Bing, there was no one.

(1985, p.1).

Bing was born to a bourgeois French-Jewish family. She trained for two years at the Paris Conservatory of Music and Declamation and subsequently worked as an artist in Paris. In 1910 she had a daughter, Claude, with her then husband Edgard Varèse and following their divorce she joined the Vieux-Colombier as a founder member in 1913. Bing had begun a romantic relationship with Copeau in 1913,

which led to the birth of their son Bernard in 1917. Copeau was, and remained, married, making Bing both a very close insider in the work of theatre and yet in social terms, very much an outsider. Bing established the formal Vieux-Colombier school in partnership with Copeau and their students, and developed their play pedagogy, devising and directorial methods. She was subsequently a core member of, and remained central pedagogue for, Les Copiaus and Compagnie des Quinze, and following the dissolution of the latter company she acted in various French films, taught elocution and gave readings to students at the Sorbonne. Bing also liberally adapted two Japanese Noh inspired plays *Sumida* (1947) and *Kakegiyo the Furious* (1951), which Marie-Hélène and Jean Dasté directed. The Dastés invited Lecoq to oversee the movement of the boat in *Sumida*, and he later explained that it was through this encounter that he first discovered mask work (2006, p.98), which was to become central to his own pedagogy, along with ‘play’. Without embracing this historical complexity we cannot fully understand the development of these practices, variations in approach, and the possible developments of play practice in the future.

However, to fully understand the proposed organic mapping of collaborative propagation and cross-fertilisation, it is necessary to also reveal the other significant women who were central to the development of Bing’s form of play and who start to appear on this more complex map: Margaret Naumburg (1890-1983); Jessmin Howarth (1892-1984) and Marie-Hélène Dasté (1902-1994). The biographies of these women are significant on a number of levels in relation to theatre, dance and art therapy and are discussed by Donahue (1998, 2008) and Fleming (2013) in detail. Marie-Hélène (Maïene) Dasté was Copeau’s daughter who actively engaged within her father’s theatre company and schools. She married Jean Dasté, a fellow student at the Vieux Colombier School, in 1928. She took Dasté as her professional name, which she retained following their divorce, and this will be used throughout this article; her husband will be referred to as J. Dasté.

### **The emergence of play as principle and practice**

When the Theatre du Vieux-Colombier was closed due to the First World War, Copeau opened the first incarnation of the Vieux-Colombier School in Paris, with Bing, ostensibly as his ‘assistant’, between 1915 and possibly 1916. In reality Copeau only attended fortnightly, and this established the pattern that was to continue during all the years of their collaboration; Bing acting as the central and consistent pedagogue. This first experiment involved a group of children at the Club de Gymnastique Rhythmic that taught Emile Jaques-Dalcroze’s technique of Eurhythmics. Copeau and Bing were inspired by Jaques-Dalcroze’s technique of Eurhythmics and also his use of progressive pedagogy. The two hours session they delivered included: gymnastic technique; solfeggio; rhythmic gymnastics; and

games (Copeau 1915<sup>1</sup>). The work with games were of central significance as Copeau had noted '[i]t is there, somewhere between the games and the rhythmic activities, that the initial starting point is to be found for a new method' (ibid) - and it was Bing who led most of these sessions. Bing developed a cluster of ground-breaking play techniques through these early experiments: animal work, ball games, rhythmic play, object transformation games and the use of fables, simple scenarios, songs and other forms of play. Of equal importance was her reflection on the style and manner of her teaching and the way in which she could enable creative embodied play. Donahue notes that there was already a distinct difference between Copeau and Bing's pedagogic style despite their shared goal (1998). Copeau talks of his belief that everything needs to be based on 'discipline' and that the children should be 'living instruments answering to the thought of the leader and master' (1915<sup>2</sup>). In contrast Bing reflects '[t]hose military exercises are a nightmare for me; I was slow, uneasy, but authoritarian' (1915<sup>3</sup>). Rather than leading the students to answer to her 'thought' as the 'leader and master' she started to articulate a different, more flexible, approach that facilitated experiential and student-centred processes. Indeed she reflected after one session: 'I realized that I was keeping too close to them in almost everything' (1915<sup>4</sup>) implying a new form of pedagogy was needed which enabled creative play but that did not over-direct the students or remove their agency as creators.

Lecoq's notion of 'Le Jeu' as a principle of play in training and performance making is now widely recognised within the field of mime, physical and devised theatres and has been discussed in detail (Lecoq 2000, 2006, Frost and Yarrow 2007, Murray and Keefe 2007, Evans and Kemp 2016).

However, it is often only related to Lecoq's own approach, or traced back to the earlier work of Copeau, and intermittently or only partially to the work of Bing. This article resists the dominance of 'Le Jeu' in historical and contemporary discourse and reveals how Bing and a number of other female collaborators, developed this form of embodied play practice many years earlier.

### **Expressive and somatic play**

During the company's two seasons at the Garrick Theatre in New York, Bing worked hard to further develop their practices of embodied play, pedagogy and devised performance making. This development was catalyzed through the crucial exchange with Naumburg, a Jewish New Yorker. Naumburg had studied with several important educators, including: the American philosopher, John Dewey; the physician and educator, Maria Montessori; and Marietta Johnston who developed the method of Organic Education. Significantly, Naumburg had also studied Eurhythmics, and was

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Copeau Archive, University of Kent (45) 18.11.1915.

<sup>2</sup> ibid. (45) 23.12.1915

<sup>3</sup> ibid. 9.12.1915

<sup>4</sup> ibid. 23.12.1915

influenced by F.M. Alexander's somatic practice and the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. In 1914 she established the Children's School using an impure blend of Montessori's method with these other forms of pedagogy and movement influences. In April 1918, Copeau and Bing visited Naumburg's school and were greatly inspired by what they saw. Bing subsequently spent as much time as she could at the school and was able to observe the use of creative play that challenged the models of autocratic education that had dominated in the nineteenth century. Bing led sessions with the children that utilized play, games, animal work, dance and mime improvisation and the use of fables and fairytales but crucially her work was observed by Naumburg and she was able to be mentored in this form of pedagogy.

Naumburg's approach centralized the freedom of the learner and experiential learning, and drew on the notion of self-activity (and spontaneity) and the philosophy of auto-education. The Montessorian belief that the children could become a type of self-directed community was also evident. Like Montessori, Naumburg's work recognized the importance of joy or pleasure in learning, the significance of process over product, and the desire to create harmonious cooperation in the learning environment. Naumburg's belief in the need to develop somatic awareness and a resistance to 'the incessant mechanical reactions of these bodies of ours' and limiting habits appears to have influenced her approach at the school (Naumburg, 1928, p.312). She argued for training 'to become more aware of our own gesture, movements, tone of voice, and general bodily habits' based 'in pantomime and allied arts for the playing of roles' and suggested that this 'might lead us to a more profound self-knowledge' (ibid). Naumburg's commitment to moving children away from mechanized and habitual behaviour was therefore married with her desire to construct spaces for them to express themselves without repression in, and through, the types of play she placed at the heart of the school. Shortly after their stay in New York, Bing and Copeau were to develop their work with the noble mask and neutrality that shared similar goals. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) biological metaphor of the rhizome (a plant stem with many horizontal shoots) suggests that we can view the exchange between Bing, Naumburg and Copeau as an important point of hybridization and mutualism in this respect.

Donahue points out that Bing had a handwritten copy of Montessori's texts in her notes, the conclusion of which she had copied in French "all methods of experimental psychology can be reduced to only one: observation" (CO)' (2008, p.121)'. However, observation for Naumburg was clearly multi-dimensional in terms of the physical/somatic, verbal, emotional, behavioural, energetic and spiritual; Bing's later work demonstrates a significant influence in this respect. In contrast to Montessori, Naumburg also placed play and fantasy at the heart of her approach, 'this marvelous power, which all children possess, to play and pretend, were for once taken seriously as to the groundwork of education' (1928, p. 310). Donahue argues that Naumburg's anti-intellectual approach related to her belief that the teacher should not impose any activity but that the child should be allowed to develop



through spontaneous activities and that ‘much of the material of primitive thinking is brought forth symbolically by the child long before language and writing become accessible as a means of free expression’ (2008, p.120). Naumburg’s approach allowed more space for the non-verbal; thus non-rational play provided a crucial counterbalance to Copeau’s literary and intellectual approach and his tendency to be ‘seduced by the text’ (Rudlin 1986, p.13). Moreover, at Naumburg’s school they were extending the children’s play into what we would now consider a rough form of ‘devised’ performance based on animal folk-tales (Naumburg 1928, p.302). Naumburg also went on to become a leading pioneer in art therapy and the antecedents of this work were evident in her earlier pedagogic approach.

Kusler (1979) acknowledges that this exchange between Bing and Naumburg: ‘helped to prepare her to utilize games and improvisation later at the Vieux-Colombier School’ (p.18). Felner argues that this cross fertilization between the women led to ‘a better understanding of instinctive and natural movement’ (1985, p.39) and was significant to the development of what she terms ‘Bing Technique’ and Modern Mime. However, a more detailed analysis of Bing’s method overall indicates that this exchange with Naumburg not only led to a use of games and improvisation, or a set of discrete mask and mime techniques, but also underpinned her understanding, and subsequent development of, a method based on embodied play for actor training and new forms of theatre-making.

### **Finding the interior music of play**

Howarth was an English Dalcroze instructor, trained in dance and pantomime, who joined the Vieux-Colombier company as a movement teacher in New York; Bing’s encounter with her was also to prove influential. Howarth was employed to train the company in rhythmic gymnastics, dance improvisation and pantomime. Interestingly she also attended rehearsals and Evans argues that it is likely that she choreographed some of the material for the production of *Scapin* (2006, pp.111-112). In Howarth’s reflections on this work she noted that Copeau was not always able to be at her sessions, but that Bing and Dullin were ‘particularly keen’ (1960<sup>5</sup>). Significantly, Howarth used games and improvisation in her teaching of rhythm and musicality in improvisation and movement. However, Kusler (1979) explains that ‘[Howarth’s] lack of experience with movement training and children’s games as part of acting, made her job very difficult. Mme Bing reported that, although some actors relaxed and began to enjoy the dance work, classes were irregularly attended, with some actors in open rebellion’ (p.18). Eventually Bing and Copeau both felt that an application of Eurhythmics in a ‘pure’ sense was problematic. Bing argues: ‘The possibility of using music for exercises in bodily technique has been confirmed by Dalcroze’s Rhythmic Gymnastics [...] However, a natural incompatibility very soon

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* (114/2)

developed between this conventional form of gymnastics and the hidden musical feeling' (c.1920<sup>6</sup>). Her concerns centred on the way in which this technique, based on systematic external musical notion, becomes the 'equivalent to translating what was audible into the visible bodily notation' as a form of physical 'graphics' (ibid). In contradistinction, she argues that '[t]his [rhythmic] sense must come from inside. Exercises are always unsatisfactory if they are not used exclusively to exercise the outer manifestation of the inner sense that one wants to develop' (ibid). She concluded that she was searching for 'the free improvisation created, suggested, by a child's play (le jeu d'enfant), the interior music of this play' (Bing in Copeau/Sicard 2000, p.114).

Foucault suggests that in addition to successes a genealogy should also identify 'the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals [...] that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us' (1977A, p.146). Indeed, although this experiment with Eurhythmics was dismissed as a failure by Bing and Copeau and was not retained in a pure form, Evans argues (2006) that Bing took aspects of this method and incorporated it into their approach to training. Bing was taking detailed notes on 'Mlle Howarth's work in pantomime, which focused on sensory experience, character rhythms, and silhouettes' (Kusler 1979, p.18), all of which linked to her interests in performance and theatre-making, and enabled her to further develop her teaching skills and emerging concept of play. Bing's later exercises demonstrate how she retained, but transformed, four key aspects of Jaques-Dalcroze's technique. First, the specific exploration of rhythm and musicality in relation to different forms of psycho-physical play, such as clapping games, song, movement improvisations, the use of balls, and group compositions performed to music. Second the use and transformation of musical concepts in training, theatre making and dramaturgy, for example the visualization of loudness and softness in space. Third, the use of self-led training by the students and the extension of these forms of rhythmic play into performances. Fourth, the use of play-enabling methods - and the problems Howarth encountered. This enabled Bing to develop her own approach and her 1920-1921 'Diction' class at the Paris school evidences this cross-fertilisation of somatic, expressive and musical forms of play; her notes 'indicate an emphasis on developing the "musical sense"' (Kusler, 1979, p.21). Rudlin's descriptions of a selection of the exercises she later developed for the Musique Corporelle class demonstrate just how significant this sense of rhythm was to become in her form of embodied play (2000, p.69).

After being dismissed, Howarth worked as an Assistant Choreographer at the Paris Opera before encountering Gurdijeff's Movements, which she was subsequently to teach across America and Europe.

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<sup>6</sup> ibid. (6/102)

Howarth's history as a practitioner was also intertwined with personal relationships and she had a child with Gurdijeff, out of wedlock, and was to become one of the central archivists of his work.

### **Play and masks**

Another significant point of cross-fertilisation for Bing also emerged during the tour to America. The teenage Dasté, who had previously trained in Eurhythmics, joined her father and family on the tour. It was during this period that she and Bing carried out the company's first experiments in mask making. Both women had a strong visual imagination, sketched and drew, and had a keen interest in images and form. As Leabhart explains, the tactile 'feel' of making masks is an important form of learning in mask practice (Leabhart 2004: 322) and Donahue (1998, 2008) notes this was a highly significant step for the company. After this period Bing, Copeau, and Dasté, were to use both character mask and what was known as the noble (or neutral) mask to facilitate creative play in training and in performance.

Although information on these experiments is scant, they were carried out around the time when Bing was observing and engaging with Naumburg's use of play, Howarth's use of rhythmic movement improvisation, and with Copeau's long term interest in Commedia dell'Arte. The school notebook (June 1918) describes the 'observation of a robin on the lawn of Cedar Court', presumably Bing's experiment, and goes on to suggest that in the New Comedy they could seek 'comparison of the characters of certain types with the appearance of certain animals' (Copeau, 1990, pp.34-35). This was a considerable breakthrough for the collaborators. However, Donahue notes that although Copeau 'had some intuitive ideas about the use of the mask' based on his work on *Les Fourberies de Scapin* it was clearly Bing – and I would suggest Dasté - who 'had the more practical sense' (1998, p.69) and it was these women who were to go on to develop a comprehensive approach to teaching this area of their school curriculum and theatre-making. Dasté continued making masks for all the later schools and companies and this area of practice added another fundamental dimension to the development of embodied play. On their return to Paris Dasté became an Apprentice Group student at the Vieux Colombier School and an assistant who worked very closely with Bing to develop the curriculum at the school; she later collaborated with her as a fellow actor and devised theatre maker.

### **Play into performance making**

The notion of actors working as creators of their own performance was explained in the Paris school's syllabus '[u]ltimately, *free play* gives way to small-scale productions for which people are entirely left to their own devices, as creators and workers' (Copeau 1990, p.47). Bing developed an extensive set of pedagogic tools that centralized play; she also extended this into devised theatre-making and directing

at the school (Fleming, 2013). This included enabling the Apprentice Group students to work independently in student-led groups and give feedback on each other's work. She introduced various student duties including a log reflecting on their activities, weekly meetings to discuss problems, writing their own versions of the school rules, inventing a school song, rituals and celebrations with masked dancing and games for special events (Kusler, 1979, p.36). Central to this was the system of Student-Monitors that Bing introduced. Dasté played a pivotal role as Student-Monitor and it was she who urged that 'they began developing their exercises into scenarios' (Baldwin 2003, p. 28). She encouraged and enabled her peers and was to remain central to the work of all the subsequent schools and the theatre-making practice following the company's move to Burgundy. Decroux described her role as a 'flexible and blossoming liana' that linked the work and personality of Bing with that of Copeau; forming 'a happy trinity' (1977, pp.2-3). J.Dasté and Jean Dorcy also became Student-Monitors and contributed to teaching the Hébert system of gymnastics which 'facilitated the goal of "the natural development of the instinct for play," through the building of physical prowess and the regaining of instinctive behaviour' (Felner 1985, p.41). Bing and the students subsequently combined aspects of Hébert technique with inner feeling, rhythm and *le jeu d'enfant*.

At the end of the 1920-1921 school year Bing oversaw the student's performance, which was described as a 'charade' and was an early piece of devised theatre. When the school subsequently expanded, Bing's practice continued to underpin the innovative work of the Apprentice Group and led to additional devised projects. In 1922 she used masked play with the Apprentice Group to develop chorus work (*The Little Demons*) for the Vieux-Colombier production of *Saul*, written by André Obey. This represented the first use of this type of extended masked play with non-human movement in professional performance. Bing and the students then took this material further, drawing on their work with Hébert gymnastics, to create the school's end of year production *Play of Little Demons* (1922). In 1924 Bing and the Apprentice students mounted a number of performances for the public before the school closed. They presented two devised mime pieces that had been developed over the year, *The Sailor* and *War* and Bing also directed a Noh Theatre production of *Kantan*, which was the culmination of extensive research and preparation. Although these productions were never to be performed to a full audience, the open rehearsal was a crucial development and impacted on the development of modernist mime and theatre, and of cross cultural performance in France (Kurkinen 2000).

In May 1924 the Vieux-Colombier disbanded and a small group of collaborators and students moved to Burgundy as a re-envisioned training and research company to create a new form of Improvised Comedy. Copeau and Bing were joined by a number of their students including Marie-Hélène and Jean Dasté, Dorcy and Decroux. The form of embodied play that Bing had been using and developing with the students to make devised theatre in the school became the central focus for theatre-making and was

combined with the experiments with Commedia Dell'Arte that she and Copeau had carried out earlier. A number of members left the group and the resultant reconfigured company became known as Les Copiaus, creating another fifteen productions between 1925 and 1927 ranging from original pieces of devised theatre, adaptations of work by Goldoni, Moliere and others, and productions of existing plays. They also continued to invent and celebrate regional social rituals and play as they had at the Paris school, 'their lives were to be dedicated to theatre through playing – celebrating birthdays, homecomings, church holidays, and wine festivals with improvisation, song, dancing, games, and the presentation of new works' (Kusler, 1979, p.51). This form of social ritual started to feed directly into their performance, for example, *Celebration of Wine and Vine* (1925). Throughout all these experiments, the aesthetic remained markedly physical and playful and they continued to use ensemble 'as a visual chorus to create moods, places, times, and events' (ibid, p.64) as they had at the school. They also drew on Bing's object work as a catalyst for transformational play and maskwork (Saint-Denis, 1982, p.177). After periods of sustained absence, Copeau tried to re-assert control within the company but relations deteriorated. Les Copiaus developed four other pieces independently from Copeau. Bing's work with the Apprentice Students on *War* (1924) was further developed and performed in 1927. A short piece *Spring* was performed the same year, allowing them to continue Bing's previous work at the school on animals, nature, the elements and choral work: '[u]sing a chorus and masks, this piece was a "living fresco" of the renewal of spring – the sap mounting in plants and trees, flowers opening, the wind blowing, animals playing in the forest in the midst of people, their work and their loves' (Villard in Kusler, 1979, p.65). The following year they developed this work into *The Dance of the Village and the City* and contrasted images of rural and urban culture. Aykroyd recalls: '[...] they presented machinery in mime to symbolize industrialism. Then the coming of the storm over the vegetation, the havoc wrought and the subsequent joy of life reviving were all beautifully symbolized in gesture and attitude' (1935, p.22). They created atmospheric soundscapes and used minimal dialogue in the piece, as they had done at the school. In marked contrast to Copeau's harsh criticism of this production, Saint-Denis argued that it was at this time that they were 'ready to devise shows that used these special techniques' (1982, pp.26-27) and could, when needed, write their own dialogue as a company. Bing's form of play-based training and devising methodology, developed through this rich growth of collaborations, had led to an exciting new form of theatre.

Following the disbanding of Les Copiaus, Saint-Denis, Bing, Dasté, J.Dasté, Dorcy, Jean Villard and others from the previous ensemble founded Compagnie des Quinze, and they continued to make theatre utilizing the same methods of play. This company also relied heavily on Bing as one of the most experienced and versatile actors (Ackroyd 1935, p15). Their first three productions provide clear exemplars of how the Compagnie des Quinze productions were based on Bing's form of play. In 1931 André Obey wrote *Noé* in collaboration with the company as a simple narrative frame, based on the

biblical story of Noah and the ark. Obey had worked with Bing on the production of *Saul* (1922) and consequently knew of her work and wrote specifically to facilitate it. This production included the use of mime, mask, chorus (one made up of animals, the other of children), work on the elements (miming the rain, the surge of the storm), rhythm, song, sound, *grummelotage* (a made-up language), and character types (Saint-Denis, 1962, p.xii). Obey agreed to work as a collaborative playwright and Rudlin argues that while Copeau 'had not been sufficiently relaxed about his abilities as a writer to share the scripting process with them, in the rehearsal room Obey, on the other hand, was eager to accept the challenge and fully realized that his own work would be metamorphosed as a result' (1986, p.30). *Le Viol de Lucrece* (1931) drew extensively on the previous research and experiments that Bing had undertaken on Japanese Noh Theatre; and *La Bataille de la Marne* (1931) was based on Les Copiaus' continuation of *War*. Compagnie des Quinze disbanded in 1934 and Saint-Denis later became famous for his re-stagings of *Noé* in England; however, he was never able to replicate a production of the same strength that they had achieved in Compagnie des Quinze (Baldwin, 2003).

### **(Her)stories and diversifying play**

This article has demonstrated how Bing and Copeau developed a form of early devised performance, rooted in the play-based methods that Bing had developed with her various collaborators. The actors became their own 'authors', but this empowerment of the actor as creator also changed the type, purpose, and status of the text. This provided a radical alternative to Copeau's original belief in the supremacy of the text and allowed embodied, gestural, rhythmic, energetic and visual aspects of performance to have equality with the spoken or written word. This form of play can be understood in relation to a non-essentialist borrowing of Cixous' notion of 'feminine writing' (*écriture féminine*, 1975) which as Segarra explains has often been described 'as "writing the body", meaning [it] does not rely mainly on rationality but incorporates the body's rhythms, humors, and moods' (2010, p.12). Although this play practice was not writing in the textual sense, the play principle and form of embodied theatre-making can be perceived as 'feminine'. Moreover, in play 'order and disorder commingle becoming both antagonists and allies [...] Simultaneously, it "equilibrates" and "disequilibrates"' (Henricks, 2015, p.19) and this requires both careful facilitation but also an understanding that the outcomes cannot, and should not, always be rigidly controlled. In combination, this can be seen to have led to what we can define as a more queer approach to both play-enabling and embodied playing as a mode of devising. Arguably, the position that Bing, Naumburg, Howarth and Dasté had as both insiders and outsiders by virtue of their gender, ethno-religious backgrounds and economic circumstances, may have made them more able to both hold, and share, power in these processes and to accept the fact that it is impossible to completely determine or control the outcomes from a play-based process. Ultimately, this use of play suggested a radicalism that Copeau could not fully accept; he was not able to follow the inherent

logic of being a play-enabler. By 1924 this strand of practice had become a method of embodied play and a process of theatre-making in ways that Copeau may never have anticipated.

However, in addition to Copeau's resistance to the outcome of their shared project, Saint-Denis' later position in Les Copiaus and Compagnie des Quinze was also problematically patriarchal. Rudlin suggests that we read Saint-Denis' historical narratives about his involvement with the three companies and schools with caution as he 'exaggerates his collaboration in the work of the school: ...[he] was no more than an interested observer of the Vieux Colombier School' (1986, p.132). Saint-Denis' involvement between 1920-1924 had been as general secretary of the company carrying out administrative and stage management duties, although he played one supporting role in 1922. Only after the move to Burgundy in 1924 did he become a full member of the school-company. Baldwin is justified in arguing that between 1924-1929 Copeau was not an effective, consistent or integral leader of the later companies, however, her claim that Saint-Denis simply stepped in to fill this 'void' (2010, p.82) erases Bing's work, her expertise, and her ownership of the form of embodied play which Saint-Denis appropriated. Once again Bing's work was hidden beneath another male practitioner's assumed status, the power was handed down from uncle to nephew in a classic patriarchal lineage. Saint-Denis, as director, and Villard, who also took on a dominant role in Compagnie des Quinze, were directly using this form of play developed by Bing but never publically acknowledged her work. Tellingly, Saint-Denis' accounts of this early work (1960, 1962, 1982) do not acknowledge this application of Bing's techniques in the work of Compagnie des Quinze or in his later work, and this omission has significantly skewed our understanding of early devised theatre. Dasté explained that 'Bing, having designed much of the school curriculum, resented Saint-Denis and Villard's appropriation of the exercises for productions' (Baldwin 2003, p.38). However, as we have seen, they appropriated much more than a cluster of isolated exercises, rather they adopted a sophisticated play-based methodology as a 'first principle of dramatic imagination' (Gordon 2006, p.214) and a catalyst for devised performance.

Saint-Denis wielded an undemocratic power over the rest of Compagnie des Quinze and according to Baldwin was 'often authoritarian in his approach' (2003, p.1) in what was meant to be 'a company of equals, a cooperative in which decisions were taken collectively' (pp. 42-43). Baldwin notes 'a large faction believed the choice of plays, casting, and even directing decisions should be a communal responsibility. Saint-Denis, conversely, believed he had earned his position [...] as Copeau's general factotum and director of several Copiaus productions' (p. 43). After a rebellion the company started to fragment and before long Saint-Denis had lost the core members of the original Vieux-Colombier project and the company floundered. It would seem that Bing and her Apprentice Students longed for the company to reflect a logical progression from their work in the various schools; they wanted an environment in which they could draw on this form of play, write their own 'rules' and develop

collaborative devising processes built on equality, polyvocality and empowerment. This was something that Saint-Denis had not been part of and clearly could not embrace fully. In short, he desired the product of embodied play but did not fully commit to the related processes and structures that it requires. Ultimately both Copeau and Saint-Denis de-radicalised the embodied play that Bing had developed by turning it into a practice that was subservient to the text (writer) and director.

Kurkinen suggests that we call Bing ‘the mother of modern mime’ (2000, p.89); and Felner’s analysis recognises how important ‘Bing Technique’ was to the development of mime practice (1985), but she reaches a less radical conclusion in historical and feminist terms. The complex map of collaborations demonstrated in this article has revealed the significance of lateral collaborations between Bing, Naumburg, Howarth, Dasté, the Student-Monitors and other artists, rather than vertical lines of ancestry, and has thereby challenged Saint-Denis’s claim about the French Theatre lineage and extended Felner’s quartet of male French mimes (Decroux, Marceau, Barrault and Lecoq). We have seen how, the work of these female practitioners was to be central to the practice of Decroux, and thereby his student Marcel Marceau. Decroux also worked closely with Barrault on the development of Corporeal Mime and the latter acknowledges that they owed much to Bing and her ‘masque playing’ (1951, pp. 21-22), and their work was influenced by, and in turn an influence on, Artaud (Kurkinen 2000, pp.177-178). Felner has argued that Barrault’s production of *Numance* used what she defines as ‘elements of Suzanne Bing technique’ passed on from Decroux, to choreograph a ‘ballet of masks’ (1985, p.96). Kurkinen notes that Dasté was in close contact with Barrault during the making of *L’Autour d’une mère* (2000, p.169), which drew on methods of embodied play and has been retrospectively viewed as a seminal early devised performance (Govan et al 2007). Meanwhile, Howarth explained that Dullin went on to use a great deal of the material she developed in America in his later courses at the Atelier, where she was also to teach on occasion (1960<sup>7</sup>). Dasté continued to work as an actor and costume designer with Dullin, Jouvett, and George Baty; she co-founded Les Comédiens de Grenoble, and she and Jean introduced Lecoq to the practices they had helped to develop with Bing. Dasté was also an original member of the Renaud-Barrault Company until her retirement, managed the Copeau archives, and was responsible for the publication of a number of his, and the company’s, writings. Significantly, Dasté and her daughter, Catherine, were also to mentor Arianne Mnouchkine (Evans and Fleming 2018), who has further contributed and diversified this strand of embodied play and who continues to work in Paris today.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* (114/2)



## Conclusion

All four women featured in this article were working from the theatrical margins and were, to some extent, 'outsiders' due to their gender. Bing and Naumburg were also positioned as 'other' by their Jewish ancestry. Bing was working as a single-parent and during her time with these companies she negotiated pregnancy, childbirth, early years parenting, and poverty. Naumburg, Howarth and Dasté also worked as divorced, or unmarried, mothers in their careers at a time when this resisted the hegemonic expectations of bourgeois women - a 'progressive act' in itself (Rowbotham, 2011, p.3). Their various forms of practice challenged dominant ideas about performance making and models of collaboration. While these women did not overtly address feminist issues or themes in their work, and were not politically active in the name of feminism, the quiet radicalism that they contributed to in the development of embodied play, play-enabling and devised theatre was nonetheless highly significant. Bing was never to hold any economic power in the Vieux-Colombier company or schools, or in Les Copiaus or Compagnie des Quinze, nor was she ever given any job titles that reflected the significance of her work, and this is problematic in relation to the history of modern French theatre and mime. Bing's achievements as a woman working at that time are all the more impressive in this respect. Bing's decision not to 'speak' through sole authored texts should not necessarily be seen as a decision to write herself out of history and this does not lessen her significance. Rather Bing's embodied and interpersonal exchanges of training and practice, and those of her female collaborators, now need to be viewed as of equal importance and value to the written publications of Copeau, Saint-Denis, Dorcy and Lecoq, despite these practices being much harder to pinpoint, 'own' in economic or hierarchical terms, and 'control' in the realm of actor training and the theatre 'economy'. Their embodied play was radical and transformative and much contemporary practice is built on the work that they undertook.

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