

*Jean-Jacques Lemêtre,  
or the Man in a State of Flow*

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**Abstract:** The following article describes the author's experience during the collaboration (March-July 2023) with the music director of Le Théâtre du Soleil, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre. His activities at the Faculty of Theatre and Film in Cluj, a concert-conference, the workshops with the students and the construction of an "audience course" prepared for the International Theater Festival in Sibiu are presented. Excerpts from students' opinions about working with J.-J. Lemêtre are also provided.

**Keywords:** Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, theatre music, instruments, theatricality, acting, exercises, rhythm, concoctage, cours de public, entrance, feedback.

It is difficult to frame the text that follows, just as the man who is the subject of this writing is not at all easy to include in a definition. From the beginning, however, a few things are clear to me: I am not proposing an apologetic account; I do not review the rich bibliography or videography covering this artist's work; I do not propose a critical analysis of his work and ideas. I just want to describe our meeting with Jean-Jacques Lemêtre<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Lemêtre is the most famous composer of theater music in France. He has been collaborating with the famous director Ariane Mnouchkine for almost 40 years, contributing to the scenic creations of the Théâtre du Soleil, held hundreds of conferences and workshops all



the famous associate of Ariane Mnouchkine at the Théâtre du Soleil, as it was and as it is preserved by my daily notes and feedback from students with whom the French artist worked.

Jean-Jacques Lemêtre was present at the Faculty of Theater and Film of Babeş-Bolyai University twice in 2023, in March and June. The occasions were made possible by the inspiration and dedication of Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, my colleague from the theater studies department and artistic director of the National Theater Cluj-Napoca. At his first visit to our Faculty, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre presented a demonstration called *Journey in the world of unusual sounds. Multi-instrumental mini concert*, followed by a six days workshop and ended with the *Theatre and music* conference<sup>2</sup> held by him at the Cluj National Theatre. Lemêtre's second visit to Cluj was aimed at the realization, together with a group of 17 students, of a work demonstration eventually named *Ludic Scales: a Journey through Theatre, Dance and Music* for the Sibiu International Theater Festival 2023.

## The Character

When we have been introduced, I have to admit that I didn't like the character, a tall guy with a strong-featured face framed by a wild beard and long white hair that made him look like the Father from the *Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo's fresco, from the Sistine Chapel. These details, however, contrasted with the hippie air, the black and white checked shirt, the sleeveless vest, the three-quarter length jeans, and the nonchalant, impetuous demeanor. He seemed determined to ostentatiously reject any convention. He did not have

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over the world, composed film music, and recently won the prize at Cannes for the best soundtrack of the film *Ici le mistral souffle fort* (Here the mistral blows hard), directed by Sabine Jean. Jean-Jacques Lemêtre is also a passionate collector of musical instruments from around the world, with a collection of over 3000 instruments, but also a luthier, artist-craftsman, creator, inventor of dozens of new instruments. He has collaborated with numerous dancers, circus people, therapists, pedagogues and musicians of all kinds from the West and the East (source <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/eveniment-679/teatrul-si-muzica/>).

<sup>2</sup> The conference was held on March 4, in the Euphorion Studio of the Lucian Blaga National Theatre, Cluj-Napoca.

a mobile phone; you could only reach to him by email or by meeting him face to face. As he says himself, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre is the man who feels at home anywhere, including your house. At first, this may make you, the host, feel a sense of unease, but later you realize that, in fact, the unusual guest creates a climate around him that invites to be relaxed, to give up etiquette rules.

The film director Nikhita Mikhalkov, who is unfortunately the author of some recent very controversial public declarations, confessed to the participants of a workshop in Bucharest<sup>3</sup>, in 2007, his anxiety when, at the start of a new project, he had the first meeting with a new production team, because he felt that he had to work hard to live up to his reputation. J.-J. Lemêtre, following the same relationship model, but without any anxieties, does not claim to be recognized *a priori* as a personality, an Artist (as he is), but conquers us by revealing his energy, talent and humanity starting from scratch, in the most natural way.

I sat with J.-J. Lemêtre both in official situations and in private contexts and he is surprisingly equal to himself. He never conforms to the game of social conventions. The suit and tie are as if foreign to him. In concert, in conferences-demonstrations, as well as in workshops, on the street or in a restaurant, Lemêtre always seems ready to surprise, to contradict expectations, to evade any attempt to fix him in a definition. He could be seen as a mirror of his invented instruments, composites, polyvalent and protean manifestations of a man and artist always in the state of flow described by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He defines the “optimal flow experience” as a situation in which attention is freely invested in achieving goals because there is no clutter to fix and no threat to defend against for the person who can organize his consciousness, in order to live in the flow of optimal experience. The benefits of such an attitude are the increase in the quality of life. Approaching optimal flow involves mobilizing an individual to restructure their consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Russian actor, director and producer Nikita Mikhalkov, invited to the B-EST International Film Festival, held a master-class on the theme *The director in 2 poses – outside the filming and in the frame* on April 15, 2007, at the Amphitheater Hall Bucharest National Theatre.

<sup>4</sup> **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**, *Applications of Flow in Human Development and Education. The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 3* (Springer, 2014); *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology. The Collected Works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 2* (Springer, 2014).

Not only the simple presence, but especially J.-J. Lemêtre's speech encourages a person to reevaluate many of one's beliefs, for example those concerning music: Lemêtre showed us that we are prisoners of culturally dictated auditory patterns and that they differ from the patterns of an oriental or an African. He warned us: "We live in a *binary culture*, due to our education; the first words of the child, "mama", "dada", "papa" have two syllables each. We must be able to attack this habit that causes us to prefer "binary" rhythms<sup>5</sup> instead of non-binary ones, symmetries instead of asymmetries, the comfort zone instead of unknown territories." He also attacks the general conception about theater music, whose role, he states, is not to illustrate the stage action, but to be a true partner of the actors in the construction of the role and the situations. The way the stage music appears is also unique. According to J.-J. Lemêtre, the music comes from the intimate connection between the musician and the actors. The French artist revealed to us how he used to sit next to the stage from the very first rehearsal with a small Chinese drum and carefully attend the action. The process seems to be one of "give and take": the composer draws inspiration from the actors and gives back to them their music. He then becomes a kind of guide, an energetic support on which the rhythms of the interpretations are articulated. Naturally, the music and especially the percussions are used by Lemêtre in the actor training as well, with beneficial effects. The proof that Lemêtre has a special competence in "reading" actors – based on his vast experience – comes when, at the insistence of the students, he offers them personal feedback. I am amazed at the accuracy of his observations that resonate with mine, but I have been tutoring these students for a year already.

All these aspects led me to observe Jean-Jacques very carefully. I discovered that he has an inexhaustible working energy, typical of great artists, fueled by an adolescent air. He likes to surround himself with an aura of sensationalism, he is a spectacular man. His speech is so surprising at times that he seems to charmingly fictionalize even his own biography. Once, before the closure of a workshop session, he unexpectedly began to tell us a story regarding his origins. He told us that his mother was a Romanian Gypsy

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<sup>5</sup> By "binary rhythm", J. J. Lemêtre refers to rhythm in 4 beats.

refugee, that came from a village located in the north of Romania, and that his father came from Newfoundland. He declared that he feels half gypsy, half Newfoundland, “half land, half water”. He then declares himself a disciple of an eccentric New York street artist of the 70s, the blind composer Moondog<sup>6</sup>. Like many great artists, J.-J. Lemêtre fascinates his collaborators and disciples. He offers but also claims total dedication.

## The Shaman

Next, I will evoke some of the key moments of J.-J. Lemêtre’s presence, as recorded in my daily notes.

On the day of his *Mini multi-instrumental concert*, in Cluj, the artist arrives at the Harag György studio, located on the first floor of the Faculty of Theater and Film, just a few minutes before the beginning of the event. He spreads the 70 precious instruments he brought to Cluj on two improvised tables and informs me that he does not need either lights or a microphone. He starts his demonstration in a cordial, playful tone, always making jokes about the translation from the host of the meeting, Ștefan Pop- Curșeu, quickly dispelling the official, academic air. He humorously declares himself a “minimalist” collector with reference to the 3,000 instruments he owns, a number that does not seem so impressive when he also informs us that there are 46,000 different instruments worldwide.

He then tells that he invents new instruments for each new show and even for each role. He describes the processes of performance and music construction as occurring in parallel and symbiosis. So far, he has created 800 instruments that produce sounds that “do not exist anywhere else or that

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<sup>6</sup> Louis Thomas Hardin, known professionally as Moondog, an American composer, musician, performer, music theorist, poet, and inventor of musical instruments. He was blind dressed in a Viking costume and stood as a sentinel in midtown Manhattan. There he sold his poems and played percussion instruments for money. Most people thought he was mentally ill, unaware that they were dealing with an acclaimed American composer, recording for major labels, praised by Leonard Bernstein and Duke Ellington, and who had recorded a disc of children’s music with Julie Andrews (source: <https://macleans.ca/culture/the-weird-and-true-story-of-moondog/>).

have not existed for a long time". I realize that what Lemêtre presents to us (students, teachers and people from outside the Faculty) is not actually a concert, but an acoustic journey through time, making us feel how the oldest or the newer instruments sound like. The musician, who impetuously proclaims himself a "Neanderthalian," continues his demonstration with the prehistoric rhombus hanging from the end of a string, used by shamans, which, when turned strongly, vibrates making a sound that evokes the voices of the ancestors. Guided by the shaman Lemêtre, we visit a real cabinet of musical curiosities, bizarre instruments – made of animal horns or bones, stone, metal, wood, shells, etc. – which are important not so much for the sounds emitted, but mostly for the sensations that their sounds evoke in the listeners. At one point, caught up in his tumultuous display, Jean-Jacques cuts his finger on one of the blades of his instruments, but although he is bleeding, he continues his demonstration undisturbed and humorously presents a truly strange instrument made in India from the settlers' typewriters. So he covers, in less than an hour, a fabulous history of sound tools, made from natural elements, never accepted into the restricted family of orchestral instruments. During the presentation, another unexpected thing happens: he finds, with bitter irony, that one of the instruments, made of an ornate seashell, was broken, probably by the porters at the airport. He also overcomes this moment with humor, trying to make the remaining fragment of the magnificent instrument sound. At the end of the mini-concert, he surprises us all by generously inviting us to test his treasured instruments. He stands aside and enjoys seeing the frenzy with which the students rush and improvise on the ancient instruments creating a joyful uproar. It's an unfettered encounter between today's youth and instruments from all time.

## **The Teacher**

The workshop, coordinated by J.-J. Lemêtre, is held in the same studio where the mini-concert took place. We work four, five hours a day, in two shifts, in the morning and in the afternoon. As with any workshop, the dynamics of participation is variable. On the first day, we enjoy a large audience, about

50 students-actors, Romanian and Hungarian. The floor and the walls of the studio vibrate to the sound of the drum with which Lemêtre imposes the rhythm and energy of the collective walking exercises. Although he announces at the beginning that he expects participants to be warmed up before the sessions, he always inserts warm up games in the work, that are meant to prompt the playful spirit and to strengthen the body-voice-imagination cohesion.

In the following days, the number of participants decreases, but the group stabilizes, only those interested and available for the French artist's proposals remain. His assignments are not easy, the comments are sometimes acid, the frequent digressions of the master are not always comfortable or accessible. He sanctions mistakes and interpretation inaccuracies with an explosive, playful, but firm "niet!". At one point a few students even fight the opinions and position of J.-J. Lemêtre, disturbing us, the teachers that are present. Our concern melts away, however, watching how Lemêtre manages to control the slightly irreverent attitude of the youngsters and how he channels their energies towards the work.

During the six days of the workshop, Lemêtre proposes various exercises that can be classified into several categories. Although he does not seem to have prepared a very rigorous structure in advance, his choice of topics seems to be guided by accurately identifying the needs and aspirations of the students. The order of the exercises is never the same.

### *Walking exercises*

Working energy and Presence seem to be the target of collective walk exercises, supported by the percussion. At the teacher's signals, the actors stop and must execute, without delay, different indications that stimulate their kinesthetic response, imagination, visual culture, and the ability to incorporate different archetypal characters and situations (examples of themes: dancers of tango, flamenco, tribal, minuet, tourists in New York, aggressive felines, Charlie Caplin, Party at 5 in the morning, etc.). It is interesting that this type of warm-up exercises are used not only at the beginning, but also whenever the group's energy is low.

Through walking exercises when the gait is rigorously regulated from the outside, or the rhythm exercises done in a circle, seated, the development of the rhythmic qualities, the depart from the specific Western binary rhythm paradigm, is pursued insistently. I mention only one apparently simple exercise, meant to counteract the habit of symmetry, an exercise that the students caught on to quickly, but with which I still have difficulty, probably being more trapped in binary thinking than the younger ones.

*Rhythm and percussion exercise 3 + 3 + 2<sup>7</sup>*

A few basic rules are established: a) the first beat is always played with the left hand; b) the same hand does not beat twice consecutively in the same place.

The exercise begins: the left hand taps once on the left leg/ the right hand taps the right one/ the left hand taps the right leg/ then the right hand taps the left leg/ the left hand on the right one/ the right hand on the right leg; then left hand to the left and right hand to the right and so on.

Variation: repeat the formula "3 + 3 + 2" in the loop, making 2 slow cycles and the third twice as fast. In general, the exercises include many variations that seek to avoid routine installation and mechanical solutions.

*Geometric figures. Dissociation of limbs*

Another important cycle of exercises is aimed at improving coordination, independence of limbs. These exercises will also appear in the later demonstration, to make the audience understand first-hand the technical challenges the actors face. Here, the task of the actor is to draw in the air, simultaneously, with different limbs, different geometric figures. For example, holding an imaginary chalk in their left hand, they draw, on an imaginary

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<sup>7</sup> For further understanding of these exercises, I recommend Pierre Longueness's *Jouer avec la musique. Jean-Jacques Lemètre et le Théâtre du Soleil* (Arles : Le Temps du Théâtre, Actes Sud-Papiers, 2018) : 191-248 ; Jean-Marc Quillet, *Musique et théâtre. La musique de Jean-Jacques Lemètre au Théâtre du Soleil, entretien délectable et inachevé avec Jean-Jacques Lemètre, musicien au Théâtre du Soleil* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2013).



painting in front of the body, a vertical line, from top to bottom (the first time); on the 2nd time the hand travels the same line from bottom to top. Simultaneously, holding an imaginary chalk in their right hand, they begin to draw a right triangle, lowering a line on the first beat, then drawing the horizontal line outwards on the 2nd beat, and then going up to the upper angle of the triangle on the 3rd beat time; the triangle is drawn with the right hand simultaneously with the repeated drawing of the vertical line with the left hand.

Variation: do the same thing but say out loud “kling” when the left hand comes back up to the original starting point, and “klong!” when the right hand returns to the starting point of the triangle.

The exercise can be repeated by switching hands and/or drawing a rectangle in the air with one hand and a triangle with the other. A development of the exercise involves making the geometric figures simultaneously, but with the legs, by jumping in place. Exercises of this kind put the patience and skill of the students to the test, but they are ambitious and even have fun. Lemêtre, always indulgent with this kind of exercise, encourages them to quickly pick up when they make a mistake.

Special attention is paid to finding the actor’s true voice and adjusting it. When a student complains that he or she has no ear for music, Lemêtre, after listening to them carefully, tells them that they are not at all like that, only that they still do not know where, in their body, the various musical sounds are formed.

### *Choral exercises*

From this category of exercises, we retained the exercise called “Cluster”: in the first moment, the group arranges itself in a circle facing the inside of the circle, then everyone turns to the outside of the circle. In the first phase, everyone is turned inward, inhale quietly – make *a cluster* – then stop – then everyone turns outward quietly – inspiration, and begins to speak, at the same vocal volume as the cry from the *cluster*, an improvised story, or a monologue to an imaginary listener or to the audience. By “cluster,” Lemêtre means a loud vocal release, on a vowel of their choice, made by all participants at once. At the signal of the coordinator, all participants play their note:

attention is directed to the synchronization of everyone. The exercise has several variants: interrupting the story – inspiration cluster – resuming the text; the same but continuing after the cluster in English or another foreign language; the same thing but whispering.

Also in this category, there are the exercises with a conductor that the students have fun with.

Here the group is divided into 2 subgroups, the girls, and the boys. The conductor indicates by signs who sings and who is silent. Also, the conductor can indicate a crescendo or des-crescendo. All participants take turns to be conductors.

In addition to the training of the actor's "pre-expressive" skills (in Eugenio Barba's terms) – daily practice includes performance technique and audience work. Of these exercises, one seemed to me to have an archetypal quality. It is an exercise that establishes a stage entrance protocol, by crossing a few thresholds. The actor learns to make a clear difference between his/ her every day and extra-daily, condition of existence and behavior.

### *The Entrance*

Each of the students, in turn, makes an entrance on stage coming from the hall, an entrance that is divided into several moments, called by Lemêtre "musical phrases":

1. *Decision/choice* and initiation (the student waits still, in an everyday condition, as a private person or "civilian" and thinks about what he/she is going to do).
2. *The way from the hall to the stage through the left side of the hall* – the preparation – (the student passes from the condition of a civilian person to that of an "actor").

*Note:* Considering this stage as crucial, Lemêtre points out the frequent mistake of starting gradually and demands a firm decision translated into a similar movement. As for walking to the stage, Lemêtre insists that the actors take enough time but without wasting time, i.e. not to be too slow and that walking should be an affirmation of the desire to reach the stage.

3. *Walking behind the curtain*: once on stage, the actor turns to the right and moves forward behind the imaginary curtain – thus hidden from the audience – to the center, near the opening of the curtain (he/ she is an “actor”).

*Note*: Lemêtre requires a certain quality of movement by imagining that you are pulled forward by an invisible thread, that you are present, that you are concrete.

4. *The entrance*, composed of the following sequences: the opening of the curtain, the first step and the closing of the curtain behind you, coming to the front stage in front of the audience (it corresponds to the transition from the condition of actor to that of “character”).

*Note*: The actors are required to really see and believe in the real existence of the imaginary curtain, this condition being a precondition for belief in stage fiction.

5. *Taking the audience into consideration*: a pause followed by an actual scanning of the audience from left to right (as a “character”) then returning to the centre.

*Note*: Lemêtre insists that this gaze be sustained, that the actors control their blinks, their breathing and every part of their bodies because any detail left unattended can diminish the actor’s presence in the eyes of the audience.

6. *Strongly speaking the line*: “Hello. My name is (name)!” (as “character”), returning to the exit and exiting the stage (as “character”).
7. *Backstage* (again as a “civilian”).

The students try, seriously, to go through the above stages within the parameters set by Lemêtre, but he often stops them, makes observations, makes them redo. Their frustration is natural, but it diminishes due to the fairness of the corrections. Lemêtre notes that most actors still do not know how to prepare for the entrance, to center themselves enough to acquire the strength necessary for the *decision* to begin; he notices a tendency to speed up actions, aspects that are also related to the fact that he is working with first-year students who still lack the experience of performing in front of an audience.

## The conceptual practitioner

J.-J. Lemêtre often makes long digressions, some ideas are repeated, on purpose, to fix them in the minds and especially in the bodies of the students. His words give rise to questions and controversies, in a word they awaken dormant energies, trigger mental processes that continue today, long after the departure of the French master. I reproduce, below, some of his aphorisms that stayed with us.

“The four demons that threaten the actors, the four dangers that must be fought, are: Realism, Psychologism, The Everyday Life, Naturalism. The four don’t mean anything, i.e. they don’t have the power of meaning, they don’t have theatricality.”

“Realism is not theatrical. Realism belongs to cinema (...) Theater is different from everyday life. Theater means Poetry – Magic – Dream – Fantasy. (...) Replace realism with *theatrical realism*. The rhythm, the contrasts, the changes keep you in the realm of theatricality. To think theatrically is to think musically.”

About the body shape: “no matter how you stand on stage, imagine it’s a posture! (...) finish the body before you start talking!” (i.e., fix the body posture/ attitude most suitable to support what you have to communicate, a text, a song, etc.).

The difference between *diction* and *articulation*, according to Lemêtre: *diction* means practicing words in a neutral state, according to the rules, a facial gymnastics, as in the case of tongue twisters; *articulation* would be the exaggerated utterance of words, with interest in their musicality and the expression of intent.

### *Mantras for the actor*

“If you don’t believe in what you’re doing, don’t do it!”

“Train your imagination muscle to *see* what you are doing (to feed your action with inner images) and to *see yourself* doing (only then can you control the action to the end).”

“Learn to start something. Breathing is the most important thing (...) The sequence of the beginning includes the following stages: *exhalation – inspiration – action* (a line or movement performed directly, without delay).”

“The scene is about escalation: if you start badly, things get worse later.”

“Always be in the present, not in the future, thinking ‘what’s next?’, and not in memory, worrying about ‘what did I do?!’”

To the actors when improvising: “Don’t make up/invent anything! (...) I don’t want to see *ideas*, but *proposals*. An idea is exhausted in the time it took you to communicate it.”

“Eliminate the word ‘exercise’ from the vocabulary. Never think that what you are doing is an exercise, but something that belongs to life and is theatre.”

#### *About silence, rhythm*

“Silence is rhythmic. (...) Silence must be musical. (...) See with your ears! (...) Listen to the silences between the words. Complete silence does not exist at any time. Hear how many layers depth silence has. (...) Silence is a matter of attention. (...) Don’t be afraid of silences, interruptions, stops. Feel the energy of the pause/ interruption. Your strength comes from stops.”

“Feel the rhythm of the scene; the action must be in the right rhythm; you must be connected to the right rhythm. (...) Breathing is a good guide for integrating into the rhythm of the scene.”

“Movement and rhythm exercises mark the beginning of working on independence between body and voice because it is very useful to differentiate between *independence* (when each part of the body does something else, independently – opposite vector), *interdependence* (when each part does what it does separately – but everything integrates into a common rhythmic phrase, the parts complementing each other in a composition) and *dependence* (when each part of the body does the same thing, mirroring each other).”

“A golden rule for actors: don’t talk while moving! If you talk while moving, two actions overlap, and the audience doesn’t know what to watch. (...) Walking, stopping, answering means a series of three expressive actions

that must be organized individually. (...) You must always remain *in action*, but that does not mean moving all the time or making noises, but being in the right rhythm of the scene.”

“There is rehearsal tempo and performance tempo.”

### *Theme and variations*

“The theme is just the starting point. The director/teacher sets *the theme*, you, actors, propose the variations. The idea is to have as many variations on the same theme as possible. Don’t get attached to just one option.” (observation valid for all those involved in stage work: students, actors, directors, teachers).

### *Public course*

“Never forget the audience. Before you see, you hear. To see, you must hear first. Sound is the first stimulus that reaches the public.”

“The actor’s only allies are the spectators, the gods in the sky and the gods under the earth. These three courts must be addressed simultaneously by the actor on the stage.”

[About audience activation] “The act of *listening* on stage is the most powerful; if the audience sees you, the actor, listening to the action, it becomes even more attentive, you increase their interest in what is happening.”

### *Feedback. C’est parfait!*

One of the most valuable lessons I received from J.-J. Lemêtre can be summed up in the expression: “parfait!”

Lemêtre said from day one, then kept repeating: “If you make a mistake, it’s perfect but never make the same mistakes again, change the mistake.” This idea marked our students the most and encouraged them to gain an ease in improvisational proposals which, today, they still take full advantage of. “Perfect!” is not a value judgment, it does not mean that the result is perfect, it means “ok, it was as good as it could be, let’s do it again.”

This means giving confidence to that student that you validate his/ her involvement in the topic or task he/ she just performed, but that, together, development solutions can be found.

Watching Lemêtre's corrections I understand that, for him, evaluation is not a diagnosis, but research. You need to identify the Root Causes that led to certain errors. As a teacher, there is no need to dwell on the things you cannot change. Feedback to Lemêtre is a way of non-attachment and energy saving. He does not rush to fine a person when she/he has done something wrongly. He rather lets things cool down first and then he carefully formulates the feedback, equipping the person with simple mantras like, "to be bigger on stage, align and straighten your posture" or "be as generous with the spectators as with your acting partners".

## **The Director**

For the Sibiu International Theater Festival, J.-J. Lemêtre built, in just four days, a free spectacular structure, called *Ludic Scales: a Journey through Theatre, Dance and Music*, composed of five scenes: *The Babel Tower; Warm Up; The Childhood; The Theater; Concert with invented instruments*.

The event was designed by Lemêtre as a work in progress, a "présentation de travail", a "projet curieux", "something that has never been done before". In fact, Lemêtre the director was preparing, with the students' input, a theatrical farce, an ingenious cultural diversion. He announced, from the beginning, that we were going to work on a "cours de public" (a course for the audience); we would have to contradict the audience's expectations, surprise it, trick it step by step so that it would eventually become the protagonist. The goal was to change the way the public sees, feels and listens to the artistic act. Lemêtre was proposing that the audience and the performers on stage become a community, through joint improvisation.

The event was directed in the form of an open lecture in which J. J. Lemêtre gave assignments to the students and intervened from time to time offering explanations, making tasty comments, and challenging the audience to get actively involved.

For *The Babel Tower* scene, Lemêtre thought of a re-actualization of his *Babel Orkestra* project<sup>8</sup>. The students addressed the audience by simultaneously speaking the same text – in fact, a play on words – translated into French, English, Ukrainian, German, Romanian, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Mexican, Serbian, Armenian, Portuguese, Mandarin, Norwegian, Finnish, Flemish, Javanese, Dutch, Arabic, Korean, Iranian, etc. The musician thus sought to highlight the musical diversity of languages. I was impressed, during the script development phase, by the email correspondence based on which Lemêtre obtained the translation of his text. For two weeks, I saw how, from all corners of the world, came the most exotic sound transpositions of the text, an illustrative proof of the fact that the musician is connected by invisible threads with friends from all over the world, ready to contribute to his projects<sup>9</sup>. In Sibiu’s performance, Lemêtre introduced a part especially designed to draw attention to Russia’s unjust war against Ukraine. The students whispered “Ukraine!” for a few moments.

The second scene, *Warm Up*, apparently had a demonstration character. The students presented various rhythmic, coordination and kinesthetic response exercises. Lemêtre then challenged the audience to try to join the actors and solve the exercises together. What seemed simple at first turned out to be difficult. The audience was amused and once again appreciated the qualities and preparation of the students.

The third scene, *The Childhood*, was a sequence of small individual presentations by students performing poems and songs from their childhood.

*The Theatre*, the fourth scene, prepared in advance, was a development of the group Entrance exercises. The scene also featured what, in Théâtre du Soleil jargon, is called a “concoctage”, that is a collective improvisation with a situation, a simple plot, and a few lines of action. The students were divided into two theater groups humorously named “Pilaf” and “Côte de boeuf”.

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<sup>8</sup> *Babel Orkestra* was an installation, an orchestral work of spoken voices by Jean-Jacques Lemêtre intended to inaugurate the immersive spaces of the SAT (Technological Arts Society) in 2011 in Montreal, Canada. (<https://vimeo.com/53113146>).

<sup>9</sup> Here is a fragment of the original playful text created by J. J. Lemêtre: “ça!/ c’est quoi?/ c’est quoi ça?/ c’est quoi ça là?/ ça! c’est quoi ça là?/ c’est quoi ça? c’est quoi ça?/ c’est quoi ça? c’est quoi ça là? ça c’est quoi ça, c’est quoi ça là?....”



The two groups performed for each other and for the audience, a short artistic number.

The evening ended with a “concert” conducted by J.-J. Lemêtre himself. He introduced the “cosmic premiere” of the students’ “symphonic-harmonic-sympathetic orchestra” and announced that fragments of a score discovered in the archaeological site in the courtyard of the Faculty of Theatre and Film in Cluj will be played. The students crawled in under the curtain and then played instruments they had built themselves from humble materials, but ingenious in sonority. The audience had a lot of fun. The concert, as well as the atmosphere created by J.-J. Lemêtre, are reminiscent of the avant-garde artistic events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when artists pushed the limits of art to the extreme to challenge the spectators to break out of their numbness and become co-participants.

This community spirit of theater is, for me, the most important legacy that J.-J. Lemêtre leaves us. The musician pushes the boundaries that separate us from each other and succeeds, with hard efforts, to bring us closer, so that we are no longer separate entities, artists and spectators, teachers and students, but rediscover ourselves as a single community united by the power of improvisation. In Jean-Jacques I met a person who lives in the zone of optimal experience, someone who really believes that all people have an inherent value and by believing that he makes the others become a complete source of happiness.

### **Feedback from students**

After J.-J. Lemêtre’s departure, I challenged the students to answer in writing to the question “What did you gain in the creative work coordinated by J.-J. Lemêtre?” Here is a selection of responses:

“Making an action does not necessarily mean moving all the time. Worth mentioning the fact that in order to see, you must first listen.” (Anda U.)

“In the two teams [of actors] the level of group communication and organization of ideas was bad, probably due to a lack of an attitude of availability. Here, J.-J.’s intervention was very beneficial.” (Andrada C.)

"I think it is very important to focus on certain concepts of the lessons learned thanks to the workshops with J.-J. Lemêtre:

1. "Realism" vs "Truth": although Lemêtre teaches us a specific ideology of theater (...) this ideology does not betray the truth, because the truth is not synonymous with the real. "Believing" is synonymous with truth.

2. The term "theatricality": Lemêtre teaches us how theatricality is necessary in working on stage (...) to fructify its poetic nature and to highlight the subtext and metaphor.

3. The technique does not betray the truth: the technique can be imagined as an outline that the actor must respect, filling the interior and being colored by the truth.

4. Thinking like a child: it is a necessary and irreplaceable tool for the actor. It is his/her ability to adapt to the director's proposals and to respond promptly, openly, playfully, without fear.

5. Searching for one's own rhythm: It is an obligation for the actor to perform an action in an organic rhythm, *necessary* for the stage situation, a necessity that the actor feels inside him/ her." (Christian U.)

"Through the meetings with Mr. Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, I understood even more how important punctuality and preparation for work are. We were asked to come already warmed up, so we were treated like professionals. Not only that, but he wanted to present us to the public as professionals." (Flavius B.)

"After the meeting with Lemêtre I can say that I look at the scene as a liberation and a return to childhood." (Gabriel E.)

"I feel that after the meeting with Lemêtre I realized that I have a lot of work to do on some things that at first glance are very simple, such as the tempo, the imaginal muscle and the respiratory muscle. (...) Lemêtre is a very valuable man who you always want around you." (Julia B.)

"Mr. Lemêtre told us very clearly: "Take your choice until the end, until the director tells you it's too much, don't tell yourself it's too much, that's how you create blockages." He told me, personally, that I was creating false problems for myself and that I should make a choice between them. (...) So, "Everything is simple, serious, complicated do not exist – it is possible.", Lemêtre told me." (Cristina K.)

“I think the most important lesson I was left with was that the process can be more important than the result. For a few days, we worked and felt exactly like the actors at the Théâtre du Soleil.” (Lavinia F.)

“This workshop gave me the chance to understand and live the famous saying "Freedom in Rigor" and for that I am deeply grateful.” (Stefan R.)

“My experience with Mr. Lemêtre made me want more (...). Now I think it really was like a breath of fresh air, I really don't know what I would have done without the Lemêtre experience. It doesn't end here, this is just the Beginning, he just planted a seed that now must grow. I hope I can take care of it...” (Sânziana O.)

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