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Editorial

Paul Allain , Thomas Wilson  and Grzegorz Ziółkowski 

To the Ukrainian fighters bravely opposing
Russian aggression

Martial arts hold a distinctive place amongst the many sources of techniques which can be drawn on to nourish contemporary performer training. For many practitioners, some of whom contribute across a range of modes to this special issue, it is a core aspect of their work. This is not only because theatre – just like any martial art – is a complex psychophysical practice in which its bodily aspect is inextricably linked to its mental and emotional dimensions, but also because theatre often builds on conflict (of *dramatis personae*, ideas, perspectives) or entails confrontation with an audience. Our focus here is mainly theatre but aspects of this might also relate to other performance forms, even if then this specific notion of a contest or *agon* is less directly evident in, for example, dance.

Since the 1960s, various non-Western forms of martial arts and their adjunct activities related to healing and meditation have been increasingly adopted in Western performer training. Their diverse influences on actor preparation and manifestations in this context have already been widely discussed (for a summary, see ‘A Bibliography’ and ‘Voices Advocating Martial Arts in Actor Training’ on the blog), including in the pages of this journal (see *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* articles devoted wholly or in part to aikido 2.1, 2011; boxing and capoeira 3.2, 2012; and tai chi 4.1, 2013).

Nevertheless, it seems highly pertinent now to reinvigorate discussions about martial arts’ applicability and usefulness in training contexts as well as related ethical issues.

We live in an age when hierarchies are being acutely questioned and overturned, in life as much as in the training studio or classroom, when inclusivity and equality determine our every move. How then do the highly structured forms of martial arts and their related pedagogical or dissemination models speak to or enact such concerns? Can they only reinforce authority, or might they overcome such binary models? How might martial arts help shape the performance revolution that is yet to come? And how do martial arts impact on wider notions and practices of gender and sexuality? Are they purely conformist, homogenizing, gendered or can they offer possibilities for transgression and transformation?

In our call for papers for this special issue we highlighted the above questions and asked several more, curious about specific forms and their suitability for different performance contexts, the situations from which they have arisen and in which they exist and any implications of this in a highly interconnected world. Moreover, we threw wide open the door to proposals which confront not only those practices most commonly associated with martial arts and most frequently employed in performer training contexts, such as Japanese aikido and Chinese *taijiquan* (widely known as tai chi), but also lesser-known styles and schools as well as other less obvious martial

arts approaches, attitudes, ideas and techniques.

Some of these issues are tackled by the contributors here as well as additional ones which, fortunately, we had not envisaged. The second aspect – i.e. a focus on martial arts styles less popular in actor training – is addressed to a limited extent, as both aikido and *taijiquan* are strongly present (see contributions on the former from Théo Aiolfi, Przemysław Błaszczak, and Marie Walker, and on the latter from Daniel Mroz, Gabriel Guarino de Almeida, Stefanie Sachsenmaier, and Grzegorz Ziółkowski). Nevertheless, aikido and *taijiquan* are supplemented here by Korean taekwondo (featured in the interview conducted by Paul Allain and Ziółkowski with the remarkable British actor Adrian Lester), Brazilian *ju-jitsu*, or BBJ (highlighted in the video conversation led by Janet O'Shea with the outstanding English dancer and choreographer Akram Khan; available [on the blog](#)) traditional fencing styles such as Japanese *ken-jutsu* and Polish *sztuka krzyżowa* (in Wojciech J. Cynarski's article), Indonesian *siauw lim pek ho pay*, or *Bangau Putih* (White Crane) *silat* (in Marco Adda's postcard and text), Japanese judo (in Ellie Nixon's article), the ROSS (Rossiyskaya Otechestvennaya Systema Samozashchitya) system of Russian Martial Arts (in Slade Billew's contribution) and Chinese Eagle Claw kung fu (in Guarino de Almeida's study). We are particularly pleased that some authors mention lesser-known martial arts such as the Ukrainian *boyovyy hopak* and Mapuche (Chile) *kollellaullin*. (We have opted for the spelling without capital letters or italics of names of widely popularised and practised forms, which – like yoga for example – have entered common parlance. Exceptionally, we italicise *taijiquan* but not its better known, although imprecise, transliteration of 'tai chi', just as aikido, judo, kung fu and taekwondo are not italicised or capitalised.)

Although the eight articles featured in this collection offer a wide range of approaches, methodologies and subjects, all of them are grounded in their authors' direct (and usually long-term) experience of martial arts practice.

The contributions also create dynamic pairings which are interspersed with Training Ground materials.

The first two articles – by Polish scholars Ziółkowski and Cynarski – are placed together because their authors advocate for two radically different understandings of the concept of martial arts. The former's approach is inclusive and embraces traditional martial arts, competitive combat sports, military and civilian self-defence systems, as well as many activities that straddle the boundaries between these. The latter sees martial arts as principally those fighting practices which relate to 'metaphysics' (Cynarski's term) and are aimed at self-realization. Both point to different styles and aspects which may prove useful in actor preparation. Ziółkowski's contribution provides a very useful overview of the problematics of martial arts in actor training. More specifically, he claims that Chinese *taijiquan*'s pair forms are especially valid in a theatre context since they may contribute to the reinvigoration of playfulness and enhance creativity within predetermined movement scores. For him, long-term *taijiquan* training may help navigate a process of personal self-discovery and a confrontation with one's own weaknesses and mental, emotional and physical clichés – clearly potentially very helpful for performers. Cynarski believes actors may profit especially from practising traditional fencing arts, above all because these techniques may provide them with the skills needed in dueling scenes on stage and screen. He provides fascinating insights into specific historical martial arts practices in Poland.

The next two articles – by Adda and Nixon – form another couple, both carefully culturally and historically contextualised. Although they speak about two distant parts of the world (Indonesia in the former and Chile in the latter), it is worth noting that both countries experienced right-wing military coups, followed by long-term cruel and murderous dictatorships. Some historians even claim that the 1965 Suharto takeover in Indonesia was mimicked by Pinochet and his henchmen in Chile eight years later. In Adda's piece, history is emphasized more as the author focuses on

the artistic strategies of W. S. Rendra, a remarkable director-pedagogue in the Indonesian theatre of the autocratic era. As a gesture of resistance against Suharto's policies, which included the harsh treatment of the Chinese minority, Rendra resorted to the Sino-Indonesian martial art White Crane *silat*, which later shaped many dimensions of his theatre practice. Adda looks closely at the use of *silat* in two seminal theatre works by Rendra staged in the mid-1970s. Nixon centres on the role of judo in the devising process of *Aerial Architecture* (2005–2007), a performance she co-created with La Mancha Theatre Company in Chile, which was inspired by the work of French artist and innovator Yves Klein, himself a proficient judo practitioner. Readers get a glimpse of the central role of martial arts not only in actor training but also in the processes of theatre creation in two very different temporal and cultural contexts.

The third pairing brings together articles by Mroz and Billew who provide insights into how distinct martial arts (Chen style *taijiquan* for the former and the ROSS system for the latter) are applied in and adapted to university teaching/learning contexts. Mroz underlines the benefits of *taijiquan* for developing spatial awareness ('spatial projection' as he calls it) in student actors performing in devised and choreographed theatre works in his native Canada. Billew selects elements from the ROSS system to aid his students in the US in their attempts to embrace their 'psychophysical identities' related to age, class, (dis)ability, gender and race, and to embody these for theatrical purposes.

We see it as one of this special issue's strengths that the article authors come from diverse academic and artistic backgrounds (not all of them are academics), as well as the fact that the collection is open to both theatre and non-theatre practitioners and scholars. The last two pieces are by martial artists and martial arts scholars who are not primarily engaged in the theatre. Their articles are not strictly related to actor training *per se*, but the

issues raised in them readily filter through to and benefit theatre and performance more widely. Guarino de Almeida, who tackles the subject of animal imitation in Chinese martial arts, is well aware of this when he writes that the 'Chinese martial arts training process has a lot in common with many other performance practices, since the enactment of animal qualities is very close to an impersonation or even role playing'. Martin Meyer analyses the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic and assesses the impact of the necessity of social distancing on martial arts teaching/learning processes. Martial arts' augmented presence in digital formats, such as Meyer describes, may be relatively easily transplanted into actor training environments. Both domains (martial arts and actor training) are embodied and, as such, face analogous challenges when mediated via screens.

As with each issue, we have a range of Training Grounds contributions – writing and images that sit outside of the long-form academic essay. For this special issue, we are pleased to have contributions from a number of practitioners of different martial arts, offering perspectives from inside martial arts training itself or from inside companies that draw on such training. We have three Training Grounds *essais* (prose pieces that set out in less formal ways to explore their chosen area), five much shorter postcards (some accompanied by images), and an interview with actor Adrian Lester.

The first of our *essais* is from Grzegorz Ziółkowski, in which he reflects on the ways in which *taijiquan* has been an 'absent presence' in the practice of his two studios, ROSA and ATIS (Poland). In doing this, Ziółkowski provides a rich sense of the delicate ways in which the incorporation of martial arts in theatre training needs to be undertaken. The second and third *essais* are a paired offering, bringing two complimentary perspectives on the influence of aikido in the work of Kokyu Studio (Poland). The first perspective is that of founder and leader of the work

Przemysław Błaszczak, whilst the second comes from Studio member Marie Walker. Where Błaszczak offers an account of how and why aikido is important for the Studio, Walker gives a flavour of the performer's experience of the training and its impact on their work.

The first of our five postcards is Marco Adda's, which, through its poetic and rhythmic form, offers a sense of what it is to perform *Bangau Putih's Ular* (snake) movement. In contrast, Gabriella MacLean reflects on the benefits of training in Historical European Martial Arts, focusing particularly on the three components of sword fighting: Tempo, Measure, and Intention. Théo Aiolfi's postcard draws attention to the role of repetition in aikido and the way this encapsulates the lesson of 'leaving the script behind'. Stefanie Sachsenmaier reinforces the notion that skills are not an end in themselves through her postcard musing on *taijiquan's* Pushing Hands. Finally, Jonathan Grieve offers some blunt advice to a friend – reminding us that the original context of martial arts is a robust pragmatism, something that we would do well to remember about the function of training.

This sense of pragmatism is also much in evidence in Allain and Ziółkowski's interview with Adrian Lester, where he reflects on the external and internal benefits that taekwondo has afforded him, attesting to the range of these benefits in a direct and transparent manner.

We have no desire to provide here an unequivocal answer to the question of whether or not performers should train in martial arts, and if so, which one and how. We prefer to leave this question open so that readers are confronted with a wealth of reflections from different contexts and times, able to make up their own minds. We hope, though, that this special issue is a useful steppingstone towards a more profound understanding of the many implications which this question prompts for all those interested in the ever-evolving processes of performer training.

The editors

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Thomas Wilson is Co-Programme Director for BA (Hons) European Theatre Arts at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, and an Associate Editor for Theatre, Dance and Performance Training journal. He has a diverse performance background, initially competing internationally in voltige (equestrian gymnastics), before training in a range of physically-rooted practices (contact improvisation, *butō*, theatrical biomechanics) and making work at the intersection of theatre and dance. He served on Accademia Teatro Dimitri's Educational Advisory Commission from 2016–2020. His book *Juggling Trajectories: Gandini Juggling, 1991–2015* was short-listed for the Society of Theatre Research Book Prize in 2016.

Grzegorz Ziółkowski is professor of theatre and performance at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. Alongside his latest book, *A Cruel Theatre of Self-Immolations: Contemporary Suicide Protests by Fire and Their Resonances in Culture* (Routledge, 2020), he has published monographs in Polish on the work of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. He has also co-edited special issues of *Polish Theatre Perspectives* (Voices from Within), *Performance Research* (On Performativity), and *Contemporary Theatre Review* (Polish Theatre After 1989). From 2004–2009 he worked as Programme Director of the Grotowski Centre, later Grotowski Institute, in Wrocław. From 2012–2017 he directed theatre explorations in the framework of the Study *ROSA* and the Acting Techniques Intensive Seminar *ATIS*. He has practised Yang style taijiquan for more than 25 years. www.grzegorz.home.amu.edu.pl.

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