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Kokyu Studio in Wrocław: A Place of Practice

This article attempts to outline the most important assumptions of the work of Kokyu Studio led by Przemysław Błaszczak and Joanna Kurzyńska and based at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław in Poland. The Studio's educational and artistic programme is founded on the idea of a 'place of practice', which captures the philosophical, practical, aesthetic, and ethical horizon of the activities common to all members of the Studio. The regularity of practice, exposure to long working processes, and the improvement of the quality of movement, which are rooted in several traditions and methods of work, allow practitioners to study their own development and integrate various sources of knowledge. Reflections here also ask questions about the place and application of such a model of work in the context of contemporary challenges for actor-performer training.

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> To practise the Art of Peace, you don't need buildings, money, power, or status. Heaven is right where you stand and that is the place to practise.
> Morihei Ueshiba[1]

IT IS DIFFICULT to write about someone's work in a way that captures the essence of the worldview that creates it, its mode of doing, and how this work affects people. It is probably also impossible for such a description to be adequate if the work 'happens' and leads the workers through a process of constant change. And this is not at all specific to theatre work but a simple conclusion, observable in the reality around us. There are always people who do not want to stand still. If we look at theatre as the art of life – or in a special form, as the 'Art of Peace', as seen by the creator of Aikido – it is clear that spaces give context for how we define our place in the world. Whether it is the image of the sky above our head, the carefully prepared *Kamiza* in the *Dojo*, or the blackness of a room for theatre work, the word 'place' in relation to 'work' will always be significant.

Kokyu Studio, founded in 2016, conducts its laboratory and artistic activities by combining three main elements: Japanese martial arts (primarily Aikido), actor training, and vocal training. The Studio's founder, Przemysław Błaszczak (formerly of Teatr ZAR),[2] set the foundation for the first two elements by drawing into one direction many years of exploration as an actor and director – not least his work on the performance *Welcome to my Home: Meditation on a Woman from the Dunes* (2016, when he developed his very first Kokyu training) – and experiences gathered on the mat since 2005 in the area of live Aikido practice, independently but under the supervision of sensei Piotr Masztalerz (6 dan Shidoin).

Joanna Kurzyńska joined the Studio as a second leader. Apart from working in the Studio, she pursues her own artistic projects (for example, as a member of the vocal-instrumental trio Sutari), educational projects (regular workshops for actors and vocalists from children and youth groups such as the Youth Musical Academy, established in 2009), and, above all, research projects (Voice in Progress), in which she specializes in exploring the techniques of freeing the natural voice, with particular attention to the method

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of Kristin Linklater. The Studio's artistic team also includes actresses Marie Walker (a graduate of Rose Bruford College in London) and Marta Horyza (a graduate of the Fontainebleau School of Acting in France).

When describing its own work, Kokyu Studio uses the term 'place of practice' to emphasize the research-laboratory nature of its collaborative work. The Studio is a place where the individual paths of all members meet and where they have a chance to merge, but it is also open to working with other people for whom the Studio is a place of encounter to which they bring the work tools that they have already fashioned for themselves. For someone trying to describe or analyze the Studio's activities, it is important to understand the primacy of the words 'place of practice' over other terms that exist in theatre studies such as 'theatre laboratory', 'studio work', or 'theatre company or 'theatre group'. Eliminating the element of 'theatre' in its name has both a symbolic meaning (insofar as 'theatre' is thought to be a consequence of Studio work and not the aim of Studio work itself, which always remains practice) and a practical meaning (that is, members of the Studio maintain the regularity of work, seeing in it a source of professional ethos and the basic element that constitutes an actor on or off the stage).

It is practice as such, then, that is the primary focus of the Studio's research on a micro-scale, which manifests itself in particular attention to movement details and work on the awareness of the small elements that make up the complexity of the body as a working mechanism. Simultaneously, now on a macro-scale, it includes a broader socio-cultural context. Both ends of the scale seem to be naturally distanced from the idea of acting itself. This, however, is only on a surface level. The micro-scale vector shows the journey to the self as a human being who is becoming an actor. The macro-scale vector shows how this work resonates in thinking about making interpersonal connections, shaping a world-view as well as a personal path in which work, in whatever form, is placed exactly where we locate the best conditions for it to thrive. The word 'actor' becomes a point of orientation, a challenge thrown to the practitioner to define himself/herself. Despite efforts to neutralize this category, it is still a model of work that is particularly useful for performers of different types, but is understood from a perspective where people are understood to be looking for stimulation in order to understand their own practice better and at its different levels.

The Studio itself can also be seen as a theatre company in the narrow sense that it carries out its own artistic projects, pursues its training practice on the stage, and is committed to providing conditions for its own creative development. The fact of giving priority to 'place' shows a consistent need – and, with passing years, a more crystallized need – to create a self-regulating mechanism and mode of working. Confronted with the capitalist model of contemporary performance production, this approach seems to be somewhat anachronistic and raises questions about the needs of today's adepts of the profession. However, Kokyu Studio's approach, by contrast with 'theatre built in a rush', allows us to highlight the meaning of tradition itself. We do not define tradition simply by pointing to a source and a given guideline, but by our process of 'positioning' in which deep knowledge and a concept of confrontation with tradition play a central role.

Kokyu Studio was formed as a result of strong needs to work towards the Aikido tradition (Figure 1). The latter is treated as being a central practice, while the categories belonging to this particular training are foundational to the whole Studio's work. They illuminate other areas of work with the actor's body, and suggest a way of interpreting them. Yet before turning attention to Kokyu training, it is worth addressing a broader topic: the transcultural key for interpreting the Studio's work.

Given the cultural distance between the Polish and Japanese contexts of practice, choosing a source and consciously setting it as a point of reference cannot be done lightly. This immediately raises the question of what 'the choice of a tradition' really means. When it comes to discussion about the space in which the meeting between East and West takes place in Kokyu Studio's training, the foremost relevant factor is the leader's personal experience. Błaszczak's choice is grounded in the realization that the

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Figure 1. Aikido practice at the Na Grobli Dojo in Wrocław. Photo: Rut Figueras.

worldview present in Aikido practice has many similarities with his own view of reality. In his need for deep practice that links bodily work with a spiritual path is his realization that Aikido's view is closer to him than the one proposed by his native Polish Catholic culture. Furthermore, the practice of Aikido forces a deep study of oneself and is connected more broadly with Zen and Shintoist practices. The central issue, however, concerns a spiritual path that supports constructing a certain quality of life and how such a perspective, in the simplest and most pragmatic sense, can be creative as well as connected up with one's own world of values.

As such, cultural distance might not necessarily be difficult. Rather, it is a line that marks one's contact with practice, and it is a line that needs to be explored persistently. For this reason, the process of development is long-term, requiring uninterrupted and consistent work, and assiduous cultivation of the contact felt and made, which does not separate life practice from artistic practice. Eugenio Barba perceived interest of tradition in the same way. Being outside a given cultural circle, which intuitively attracts us, seems to be the beginning of the creative process and the beginning of the artist's path.[3] So, through the very process of translation and the necessity of translation, an awareness of purpose and need is revealed along the way of working as it unfolds.

We do not ask about cultural belonging by birth when we speak of place and practice, but about the spiritual tradition, with which we feel an emotional-psychological bond and a physical fit. Barba stressed the purpose and idea of cultural anthropology in this way:

> Theatre Anthropology is the study of the behaviour of the human being when it uses its physical and mental presence in an organized performance situation and according to principles that are different from those used in daily life. This extra-daily use of the body is what is called technique. . . . In general,

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the transmission of experience begins with the assimilation of technical knowledge: the performer learns and personalizes. Knowledge of the principles that govern the scenic *bios* can make it possible for one to learn to learn rather than to learn a technique.[4]

The empirical attitude that underlies the 'place of practice' determines not only ethical postulates and principles but also builds the basic framework for understanding what the process of work really is. A similar approach can be found in the martial arts and in its 'purest' variant (native Japanese).[5] It is based on forcing the student to learn the practice without instructions, without guidance, entirely on the basis of direct, observational transmission. This is the space in which the cultural difference between East and West is most clearly visible: in the degree of readiness, dedication, and trust towards tradition. While Japanese Aikido masters do not question the principle of absolute obedience to the master, and even treat it as transparently right, western reminiscences of such practices socially tend to have a long way to go before assimilating a radical course of this kind. At the same time, being so strongly 'here and now' in action, Aikido's work on atavistic patterns of reaction in situations of real danger (or provocation), and on transforming the system of movement habits, neutralizes issues to do with cultural authenticity.[6] Simply put, this process at the level of praxis is too short to be dependent on intellectual declarations. In the readiness to act 'in tradition' (not 'towards tradition') appears a vital test: whether tradition is present (even in a redefined way) or is only a static reference point. Being aware of one's own path of learning plays a significant role in this process.

An interesting convergence of thinking about theatre practice, voice practice, and the practice of the martial arts occurs here. In each of these practices, an important part of the path of growth is to integrate the knowledge coming from the teachers on this path and, finally, to discover and strengthen oneself in the role of a teacher. The figure of 'the inner teacher' often appears in the terrain of theatre practice.[7] In the context under discussion it is a horizon of work that shifts along with growth, never promising a finished result. In Aikido practice the process of learning never ends: it is an ethical obligation and the main tool of self-discovery.[8]

At this point there also appears some space to discuss the context provided by Jerzy Grotowski's explorations. The Grotowski Institute, where the Studio began its work, is a kind of place-context. Echoes of Grotowski's legacy are noticeable in the Studio's work, although they are not precisely interpreted within theatrical discourse. They are apparent, instead, in the particular kind of curiosity and affection for process work that Grotowski and his students explored, leaving free space for their own accents in what concerns the forms and tools of training.[9] The Studio follows perhaps only one of Grotowski's principles religiously: the student who is hungry for her/his truth should take what is most valuable from the teacher by 'stealing for a good cause' and continue walking on the path of her/his own development.[10]

In attempting to construct a coherent scientific commentary, detailed analyses of possible correspondences and juxtapositions within Grotowski become, in a sense, secondary (for example, the Studio's training of running for contact, work on deepening common presence, or the idea of rejecting unnecessary habitual movements).[11] Conducting such analyses evokes historical commentary rather than the specificity of this particular work. References to the idea of 'studio work' or 'laboratory' could, of course, be searched further back in history, reaching back to Konstantin Stanislavsky, including the method of physical action.[12] Or, in the Polish context, we can return to Juliusz Osterwa's model of work and the idea of Reduta Theatre.[13] In the Polish context of research on the laboratory tradition, this would lead to the conclusion that similarities are connected to focus on creating creative space, combining practice with the sphere of scholarly research, and establishing a work ethos.[14]

The differences, on the other hand, lie in the fact that Kokyu Studio understands the development of its work not as a phase, but as a continuous process. Experiment is represented here not by – metaphorically

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speaking – new and shiny equipment but by the simplest stick of *jo*, the mastery of which allows one to rediscover exactly what has already been discovered before. The difference is that for the Studio practitioner, this simplest play is a tool for an ongoing process of discovery. It is hard to describe the work of people whose core is located in the intention, rather than in its detailed components. The basis of the work ethos, which also has its philosophical dimension of course, is pure praxis, and a commitment to the raw materiality of the work, to the removal of unnecessary narrative that camouflages the directness of knowing and experiencing one's own body-mind.

The Japanese word *kokyu* in the Studio's name is formed from two kanji characters. The first one means 'calling', 'inviting', and 'invoking'. The second means 'inhaling', or 'calling in an inhalation'.[15] In Aikido, 'kokyu' is the name of a group of techniques that translates as 'practising breath' and also a type of traditional Japanese stringed instrument.[16] Originally, in descriptions of the Studio's work, 'kokyu' referred to a precise structure with which to begin each day's work together (Figure 2). It allows focus on movement and breath in their unity, and was intended to build concentration as well as to strengthen the body and prepare for voice work. Gradually, the term 'kokyu structure' began to be replaced by 'kokyu training', firstly because the structure itself was evolving, and, secondly, because this evolutionary process revealed the fundamental nature of this form of training: it is designed to look at the structuring of the body in movement, its constitution, and not to impose this structure. This precise difference is crucial to understanding that just as 'place' is a conventional and fluid category that requires an act of definition, 'structure' is also a concept related to process: a kind of a litmus paper, thanks to which it is possible to observe one's body constantly and one's readiness to commit to the process.

Figure 2. Kokyu training. Photo: Magdalena Mądra.

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Figure 3. Joanna Kurzyńska. Photo: Dominik Kurzyński for AQQ Media.

On a smaller scale, the process of *kokyu training* evolution shows the same process of evolving evident in the whole educational programme of the Studio, towards an even stronger merging of the work's elements. Przemysław Błaszczak often emphasizes the similarity between Aikido training and theatre training in the way they process objective forms of body work taken out of a neutral context, and how their regular, detailed, and long-lasting repetition increases their functionality and practical application in work on the stage, making that work natural again. The tools and methods that constitute the Studio's methodology interact more and more with each other, based on this logic, first through alignment (training elements next to each other), then through grouping (work modules) towards 'tuning'. The latter term is meant to emphasize the main criterion that makes these elements interact and build the emergent process of the whole training – the rhythm of work and the necessity to maintain it. The intention is not to create a metaphysical atmosphere, surrounded by the esoteric and exotic context of Far Eastern culture.

In the most pragmatic sense, the responsibility for our own discipline is always within the context of others with whom we share the work space. Joanna Kurzyńska (Figure 3) constantly emphasizes that the Studio 'works with physics and anatomy, not metaphysics', and the offered training is not for people who use it to induce intimate experiences. 'We can't plan experiences [in the Studio],' Kurzyńska says:

> Rather, you have to train yourself not to have expectations. That is a position of freedom. With what I have, I go into the work and I'm as open as I can be and as cooperative as I can be. That's usually enough. But it is a question of how far, in a simple way, we can tell, meet, act. And that's now a question about the integrity and honesty of the work.

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What is revealed here is the essential tension in the Studio's work between the subcutaneously pulsating sources of centuries-old tradition (which might sometimes give rise to a temptation to create a spiritual atmosphere) and a Studio methodology reduced to the simplest, strictest possible contact with tools for working with the body, avoiding any need for planning or imagining experience. In this reduction and tuning (with oneself and partners) can be seen the actor's *bios*[17] – a point, a place, 'an ember of the flame' (in the Studio's vocabulary) that each actor must discover individually through training.

The 'practice space' understood in this way is a space of radical honesty and integrity at work, where simplicity of communication, clarity of intention, and full engagement and trust in the 'structure' create this harmony at all levels of the practice experience (Figure 4). From this comes a restrictive approach to rules related to order in space, time discipline, and not disrupting the order of the session: not focusing on egocentric and narcissistic needs, but showing attention and respect for all members of the work, and not wasting the time given to the practice. This is how practice ethics create space for the body, cleansing the context of the work so that even the smallest manifestations of progression, change, and intention can be seen. 'Tuning' in this sense means combining a wide proprioception with the search for theatrical micro-detail, while the bond, which only increased with the subsequent years of the Studio's research, is the breath, in its various functions (activating, integrating, recognizing, relaxing, and so on).

When explaining in the Studio the meaning of the word *kokyu* in the Japanese context, Błaszczak added:

> The Japanese word *kokyu* means 'breath', or 'proper breath', or 'healing breath'. In Aikido very often it is also connected to the sense of timing, to be right

Figure 4. Kokyu training. Photo: Rut Figueras.

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Figure 5. Aikido practice with Przemysław Błaszczak and Marie Walker. Photo: Alicja Dacyszyn.

there at the very moment, to execute the highest efficiency of the movement [Figure 5]. It can be used in relation to the concept of *ki*, and, simplifying we could say breath equals power. There is a group of techniques in Aikido called *Kokyu Ho* (Kokyu practice) or *Kokyu Nage* (kokyu throwing, throwing by breathing). Behind all these meanings lies the initial idea of the strong, primal connection between the breath and the movement.[18]

The relationship between movement and breath seems obvious, but the crossroads of the leaders' chosen methods and source traditions do not provide an obvious network of connections between the different ways of working with breath. The horizon for the Studio's work includes further exploration of the function of breath and going deeper into tuning with text – as they had already done by of using a Shakespeare text in the original English in the 2021 performance *I Come to You River: Ophelia Fractured* (Figure 6).

Descriptions of craft may give the impression that the Studio pays less attention to stage work. This is a coherent picture, which is reflected in the metaphor Błaszczak draws: 'If we think about Kokyu Studio using the image of a tree, the research on Aikido, and actors training with its regularity, would be the roots; education would be the trunk; and then the performances would be branches, the crown of the tree.' The performance is not, as was indicated at the beginning, a disconnected activity. Testing the researched tools and their operability in stage conditions; the desire for individual artistic fulfilment; dialogue with the audience (here there is clear distancing from the idea of martial arts); and verification of authenticity – these are some of the reasons for which the Studio cares about the regularity of stage work. This is difficult financially, due to the conditions of Polish theatrical production, but clearly

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Figure 6. *I Come to You River: Ophelia Fractured.* Photo: Dominik Kurzyński for AQQ Media.

unique and precious in professional terms. Creating art in Kokyu Studio is an equally patient and long-lasting process during which significant changes take place, pushing the author's training into new areas. For Kurzyńska, this balance between stage and training is the only way to see that everything has an impact on practice (individual and group), and that no movement qualities are given once and for all. This only confirms, mobilizes, and validates the assumptions regarding work ethics and the characteristic focus on long-term work, or, as Kurzyńska proposes, 'patient addressing'.

Similarly, there is a tension between the Studio's core team (leaders and actresses) and the groups that are included in the research process in various formats (short- and long-term workshops, research programmes lasting several months, or the Winter or Summer School). First is the internal perspective of the Studio, which Błaszczak describes this way: 'It is about being in a regular process, being honest, and seeing how much you can let go of what is conventional. It's observing myself in change, such as how *harai* changes my voice or approach to life's problems, how my body changes under pain.'

What Kurzyńska also notes is that the members' conformity to this understanding of the work also strengthens the group in terms of management. It minimizes organizational effort, facilitates shared persistence in the context of obstacles or difficulties that arise, and provides a trusted space for everyone to grow professionally and find support in the human aspect that is, after all, inseparable from practicing theatre.

The second perspective is the external one, visible to the participant. Here it is important for the members of the Studio 'to sow the question – uncertainty or certainty – that it is possible to do otherwise' (Błaszczak). Essential in this aspect is the process of 'creating a group around a group'

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each time, a group of participants around the permanent members of the Studio creating its core. This configuration offers another meaning of 'ember of flames', which Błaszczak defines as follows: 'It is a space that is meant to give strength and motivation to those around it, so that it is possible to sum up the efforts, to go together on a journey, towards one goal.' It is, then, more of an experience that can give the promise of continuity, although a great deal depends on what people give to each other in such a process. After all, what is most important is the participants' own beliefs, which brings us back to the the question of what benefits and what barriers are created by the model of work proposed by the Studio.

'Producing performances', 'theatre industry', 'designing spectators' – these are the linguistic and mental categories that (in relation to the Studio's proposals) lie at the other end of the spectrum, which we can operatively call 'styles of theatre work'. Project activities – episodic and based on short and intensive meetings – seem to dominate, at least within the Polish sector of workshops and forms of theatre and movement education. There are not many groups that consciously decide on such a wide horizon of work and deep ethics. It is evident that a long-term practice which requires, for example, living in Wrocław for a few months or more, is economically and organizationally demanding, and, as a result, a significant minority of practitioners choose this solution. There is, however, a dedicated niche (unfortunately consisting of a smaller proportion of Polish participants) that represents a fairly faithful group having contact with the Studio. Among this group (information based on the interviews conducted), it is clear how principles that are precisely and consistently held translate into strong impulses that often break through years of professional impasse. The 'ember of flames', despite its poetic name, becomes a tool for real change at work. The only requirement is that the practice needs to be taken 'seriously'.

This word, which is slowly going out of fashion, highlights an issue: is a 'place of practice' really 'our place'? There has to be a willingness to settle, despite difficulties and imperfections. Perhaps, strictness and honesty in assessing one's own place in the work become the least expected by participants, yet they are, ultimately, the most appreciated values that come from contact with the Studio's training, as are regularity, polishing our craft, and regular, daily learning from what we do at work. This is where theatre unexpectedly and powerfully meets Aikido – in the focus on technique and work, and through it, in the possibility of encounter, which is pure, direct, intense, and without projection. The idea of deep practice is just that: 'standing in the truth', as the Studio leaders like to say, rather than trying to design experiences. They also say: 'To practise the Art of Peace, you don't need buildings, money, power, or status. Heaven is right where you stand, and that's the place to practise.'[19]

Notes and References

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