

Martin Gruber:

Form and Change

The Path of Drama

— illustrated by Aikido and other forms of Bodywork

Form has never evolved out of a sense of security, but always in face of the end

—Ilse Aichinger

Introduction

I remember the elders in Japan to this day. The old masters, whom I met on my first visits to the “Dojos” (Do: path, Chinese “Tao”; Jo: place), showed me more “Do” than I was able to admit to myself at the time. And there was an astonishing number of masters. In Aikido they threw men twice their size and less than half their age to the mat. They did it with ease and precision over and over again. Kazuo Ohno danced in his Dojo with inexhaustible depth longer and more intensely than we, his students. The dancer was about 80 years old at the time. He pointed us to the very long path ahead of us. It was we, the young ones, who looked clumsy and old next to these old masters.

Back then I was prejudiced against the collective Self, and the conformist discipline of the Japanese people, which only mirrored the limited point of view of this inexperienced Bavarian. These “old guys” moved with a spontaneity and individualism I would have never dared in my youth: they moved as if they had at last found the way to themselves through the daily practice of their art’s strict form. Their path was first and foremost learning to surrender to a concrete task. To truly surrender means learning to take leave from something; taking leave from self—importance, from vanities, from adornment, from the seduction of

quick outer effect, from impressing others, and from falling into merely showing off the learned skill. To enter a Do is a form of becoming. It means a lifelong pursuit of the conflict between “I show” and “I am”. It means that I lose the conditioned ego to a task to such an extent that I arrive at my utmost potential, which is my true Self. Then I can splurge myself on others without getting lost.

When I was a member of the international theater group “Suzuki Company of Toga” I learned that in Japan along with the martial arts, along with dance, music and many other art forms, drama is still considered Do. We too admire our great old actors, whose names we all know. But they have always been exceptions, who were strong enough to walk the walk alone. Teaching form as an aide to design a developmental arc across a whole life span is a tradition which is deeply rooted in Asian thought. Our culture lacks such tradition. I experience the helpfulness and depth of this approach to this day with my teachers. They have always shown me my limitations, while opening new doors for me at exactly the right time. One of those doors was my attempt to pass on my experience with this Asian tradition, and to transpose it to Western needs. To this end I reduced “Aikido” and “Hojo” down to their essential techniques. I organized these combined with Suzuki training and structural—functional bodywork into a system that makes them applicable as regards content and didactic needs of our theater. In the system these techniques may then be expression and form of Do, a path for the actor.

I introduced the methods mentioned as classes at the Otto—Falckenberg School in 1986; I have developed a modified and extended format since then, which has been an integral part of the training at the “Bayerische Theaterakademie” since its founding. I will try to illustrate how these classes build one upon the other. The classes promote and make didactically communicable the necessary skills and unused potentials for the acting vocation. At the end of this essay I will add

a diagram which illustrates some of the most important characteristics and their interdependence. These characteristics are essential for the instant when absolute stage presence is required. For those readers who are bored with teaching methods, please skip the following pages and read on from “Conception”.

1. Didactic

1.1 Aikido

Aikido is a modern martial art, founded in the early 20th Century by Morihei Ueshiba. The basic learning situation of this — like all martial arts — is the physical attack by one or multiple opponents. *Ai* means the unification of opposites, *Ki* is the life force, and *Do* the path. *Awareness, blending, and redirecting* of the attack neutralizes the aggressive intention of the opponent. The goal is to resolve the conflict on a higher level rather than to learn how to endure or pass on pain and beatings. It is a self— opening in order to utilize the incoming energy of the opponent, and to let it run out to one’s own advantage in a controlled throw or wrist lock. Attack and defense dissolve into organic impulse—reaction chains, just as in a lively theater dialog. This happens in flowing, natural, functional movements which depend upon great flexibility from out the body’s center. These movements must be free of any physical or mental rigidity. For example, I usually react to an attack with a stiff, conditioned protective posture: I duck, covering my head with hands and arms. This is exactly the body posture that will practically provoke a beating. With this posture I not only express to the world that I consider myself a victim, but I also stay stuck mentally in a victim status. To stand open and erect in the face of an attack is counterintuitive to old reaction patterns. In teaching Aikido I emphasize those techniques which depend upon this erect open posture, because they

convey among other things a sensitivity for the optimal basic stance on the stage, as well as its great number of possible variations.

Fighting scenes teach students to take a stand for their own intentions and means in a concrete challenge, and to organize body and mind in the best possible way. The fight situation is in my opinion extremely important. “The man whom one wants to make a mime, must be grabbed at exactly this starting point of the everlasting fight for life and death” (Barrault 1982, p.371).

In Aikido, unlike other martial arts, we teach extensively the art of falling in order to be able to perform simulated attacks with highly physical dynamic. All students learn injury—free falling in all directions as part of their training. Fear of the ground and fear of falling drops away. This offers a much greater scope for the physical imagination in improvising and the work on the role. Numerous practices to train concentration, breath and the power of imagination support this further. An example for training concentration and imagination is the well—known exercise of the “unbendable arm”: a student lays her outstretched arm on her partner’s shoulder in a relaxed way and focuses her attention on a point beyond her extended fingertips. It is now virtually impossible for her partner to bend this arm. As soon as the student tries to be either strong, contracting her muscles, or simply relaxed without extending her attention mentally, her partner will be able to bend her arm easily. With this practice students discover that their imagination is a force which has an immediate effect. They also try out body postures, which make it virtually impossible to push over their partners or to lift them off the ground. Similar to the popular children’s game of playing “dead weight” this works by concentrating and relaxing simultaneously.

The movement sequences in fighting scenes can make rhythmic phenomena like *Jo—Ha—Kyu* directly comprehensible. *Jo—Ha—Kyu*, which is an integral part of

the Asian artistic sense, can be translated with “opening — development — climax”. It refers to a dynamic developmental arc, which is inherent in all natural movement sequences. Their rhythmic course changes organically with the context (compare Oida 1998, p. 59ff). Once the rhythmic nature is internalized it can be transferred literally to individual scenes in a theater production, as well as to the entire dramatic structure of a play. It can be transferred to the walk of a gentleman or a servant across a room, the opening of a blossom, or to a buzzard taking flight from a fence post. Technical by—product of this entire training is that students are able to recognize and dramatically translate all fighting scenes of all kinds which the theater world demands — from a bar brawl to a battle of words — in their structure, and in their specific sequence.

The practice of Aikido implies a multitude of possibilities to change a situation. This requires very complex and highly intuitive behaviors. As in working on a dramatic role, in Aikido one or more partners will play through interactions, trying out alternative ways, and will then examine them with regard to their effect. Students recognize the dynamic of the rule—of—three “awareness — acceptance — continuation” as the vital basis of cooperation vs. opposition. They learn a particular quality of action which builds on mutual respect. In my mind it is best expressed with the Japanese word *kokoro*, which means “the heart”, “opening the heart”, and at the same time “spirit and reason”. The student gains a deeper understanding about the relationship between cause and effect, impulse and reaction, question and answer, as well as their interdependency. In accordance with a principle of dialog he can no longer react with prepared behavior patterns. Over and over again he must surrender to his partner’s unpredictable impulses. This requires sharper self-awareness and stronger awareness of the environment. At the same time it builds confidence in the own instincts and reduces the gap between perception and action. Students develop stronger trust in their spontaneous actions, and learn to control and continue

them in better and more goal—oriented ways. After all this ability is one of the basic conditions of good improvisation and scene work. “Then here I will simply stand and be prepared” (Morihei Ueshiba).

We teach Aikido throughout the training twice a week as a requirement. Within these four years some students will gain their black belts, which will be recognized in Japan.

1.2 Hojo

Hojo is a ceremonial form of sword fighting, a monastic ritual which attempts to grasp the essence of organization in the natural law with the changing of the seasons, and to make them visible through gesture and voice. This is a sternly formal meditation in movement. Each season is associated with a strictly established movement sequence, which is performed by two partners who stand facing each other.

Asian thought regards the world as a well—ordered system, in which macro and micro cosmos repeat each other in the bigger picture as well as in the small, in physical as well as in spiritual phenomena. This system connects for example the four seasons with four of the five elements (metal, wood, fire, water, earth), with four of the five directions (our four, plus the center), and four of the five inner organs (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, kidneys). Those in turn stand for the five mind states. For example, summer is associated with the direction south, the element of fire, the color red, the organ of the heart, and with joy. Winter, on the other hand is connected with the direction north, the element of water, the color black, the organ of the kidneys, and with fear. The movement sequences of spring and fall, summer and winter are very similar, but they differ substantially depending on their association in terms of speed, gesture, and dynamics. The partners can

translate different ideas about the elements, the characteristics, etc. playfully into movement and expression by way of experimentation. This creates the particular vitality of a sequence. Again students can experience directly, how strongly the imagination influences and changes even the smallest of movements.

For one seasonal cycle at a time the more advanced of the two partners takes on the role of the elder, the “shadow” toward the younger, inexperienced but more heated partner who represents the “light”. The elder subtly controls the movement of the younger partner with his greater skill, over and over again reestablishing exact timing and distance with the less competent beginner. Faced with the sword of the opponent every mistake and every weakness in concentration stands out ruthlessly. Supported by the form both partners will push themselves to the limit of their attention. During the entire formal course of the ceremony — approximately 20 minutes — the partners never break eye contact. A special breathing technique, the “fire breath”, heats up the in—breath in the abdomen, so that radiating out from the pelvis the energy level in the body increases tremendously. During the course of the ceremony this built up energy leads to more and more penetrating *ki—ai* (*ki*: life force, *ai*: unification of opposites). *Ki—ai* is released through the voice. It is considered a sign of absolute unity of thought, gesture, voice and eyes. The space inhabited by body and imagination expands both acoustically and visually. From a certain point onward it is purely the quality of this force—voice and the intensity of the eye contact, which hold the fight in balance.

We teach Hojo in conjunction with Iaido, the art of sword—drawing once a week before morning classes. Because of their unique quality these courses are electives, and are taught to students at all levels. I suspect the reason why classes are so popular, is especially because Hojo demands an unusually high measure

of self-discipline due to its strictly ritualistic character and its separateness from daily life.

1.3 Suzuki Training

Suzuki Training, also called “the grammar of the feet”, was developed by the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki specifically for the training of his actors in the early nineteen—eighties. It is a high energy, very formal physical training, which enhances grounding and the efficiency of body and mind posture. Suzuki derived many of his exercises among others from the Noh Theater and old shamanic practices while simplifying the movement sequences. He took for example the strong feet stomping to invoke the stage spirits from the Noh tradition, and connected it with elements of shamanic dance like its monotonous rhythms, which evoke ecstasy. Suzuki’s forms are remarkable in that they are impossible to transfer in any way to the usual vocabulary of gestures in the theater. Therefore they cannot be performed with any familiar movement pattern. This exactly is Suzuki’s point: “the main purpose of my method is to uncover and bring to the surface the physically perceptive sensibilities which actors originally had before the theater acquired its various codified styles” (Suzuki, no year, no page). The necessarily high level of coordination requires clear decision for form and the complete renunciation of all ornamentation, since anyone regressing into private movement patterns will immediately fall out of the group rhythm. The training enables students to experience directly and immediately all contradictions between personal design and real action. Even in a few hours time students develop high, dynamic group energy. The individual learns to trust the group, to surrender unconditionally to its dynamics, and to draw power and motivation from it.

I will try here to describe some of the practices and their effects. The pelvis must swing as freely as possible in spite of the big or fast movements throughout the exercises. The abdominal wall must be relaxed, and all limbs not involved in the movement, must remain motionless. In the beginning the group will perform unusual walking patterns to rhythmic music. For example they will only walk on the inner foot or the outer foot. Students repeat the patterns along an imaginary line across the room without interrupting the rhythm. The next exercise is the so-called inventing of body statues. The basic stance is a calmly held squat. Students respond to a sharp clap immediately with a body posture of their own choice. They hold this posture motionlessly like a statue until the next clap, which allows them to fall back into the basic stance. The claps occur at very irregular intervals. In the gesture of the statue the heels may never touch the ground, which makes holding the balance more challenging. None of the statues may be repeated. Beginners tend to come up with especially creative, unusual statues, so that they end up losing their balance, or else they have to contract very strongly in order to hold the form. They need the return to the basic stance for relaxation, even though in this and in the highly tonic phase of the statues, body tone and concentration should always be equal. Beginners often miss the clap introducing the next change because their concentration and thinking is already geared toward the next, highly original statue. After a while students learn to shift their main focus away from the big gesture toward the minimal, clear, unpretentious movement. They find that they are able to hold those effortlessly in balance, with transparency and aliveness even over longer periods of time. They also learn that showing off is not essentially the emphasis of this exercise.

Highly dynamic practice sets take turns with calmer ones, all of which are partner exercises. Two partners perform fixed movement sequences mirroring each other while maintaining uninterrupted eye contact. They work with the

image of a stick held between their breastbones, which will hurt with too much pressure (distance too close). It will fall to the ground with too little pressure (distance too far). So it is not the individual partner who is important, but the attention is directed completely to the space between them. This in between appears to become denser, and the partners suddenly perceive it as three—dimensional. At the same time — in step with the mirrored movement — both partners must speak particular sentences in one voice. When voice and body find each other in grounding and center of gravity, a feeling of vibrating density spreads throughout the entire body. Another choral exercise requires students to scan certain sentence sequences in a relaxed and clear manner while holding an uncomfortable body posture. Both practices point out that the speaking is not separate from the body, that it is an extension of the gesture instead. The quality of the voice indicates clearly whether the student takes each posture seriously, all the way to his fingertips.