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Citation: Lennox, Solomon (2016) Essai: Liminal spaces and experimental practices in the Warrior Muay Thai training camp. Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 7 (3). pp. 494-497. ISSN 1944-3927

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2016.1219115>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2016.1219115>>

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Liminal spaces and experimental practices in the Warrior Muay Thai training camp

I stare at the tattered piece of paper bearing the training schedule as I gulp desperately at my bottle of ice cold water, trying to replace the fluids which are pouring like a flood from my open pores. I feverishly scoff down watermelon slices and lychees as I sit in front of the electric fan, trying to regulate my body temperature and combat Thailand's sweltering mid-July heat. Harry¹, a Captain in the British Armed Forces joins me, his half-naked torso glistening with perspiration.

Harry: Crosstraining was a killer today. You missed a good one mate.

Solomon: Yeah? Looks like it. Muay Thai was tough too.

Helena, a Ukrainian-born martial arts instructor from Ireland approaches our table. We are also joined by Carlos, an ex-Marine from the USA, Silvia, a student nurse from Australia, Caroline, an engineering student from New Zealand, Kate, a farmer from the UK, Kenny, a recovering alcoholic from the USA, and Terry, a retired police officer from the USA. We exchange stories about the different training sessions we have participated in that morning. It's 11am and everybody at the table has completed at least one, hour-long training session. Some, Like Harry, Silvia, and Carlos have engaged with two separate fitness classes. Helena has focused on developing her Brazilian jui-jitsu skills, I have spent two and a half hours in an intermediate Muay Thai class, whilst Kenny has received one-to-one personal training as he works towards gaining his personal training certificate to become a Muay Thai instructor.

As our food arrives we discuss the afternoon plans, determining who is taking which classes. Half of us opt to participate in the combat conditioning class; a session

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

designed primarily for the professional mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters who reside at the ‘Warrior Muay Thai’ (WMT) training camp. We all agree that after combat conditioning we will attend the high intensity interval training session (H.I.I.T) as a group. Footage of professional MMA fights play on loop on the big screens hanging in the dining area. A table of Chechen, Russian, and American professional fighters and trainers sit next to the boxing ring, watching one of the Thai trainers put a novice athlete through his paces on the pads.

Scooters screech in to the parking lot alongside the open-air dining and training spaces. A team of international trainers hope off their bikes and make their way towards the main training space. The table of professional fighters dutifully head over to the space. Those of us who have opted for combat conditioning follow suit. The rest of our group desert the dining space. Some are heading across the road to try out a class at another gym, some are heading back to lounge by the pools at their hotels, and others are heading over to the smoothie bar to treat themselves to a protein shake. Before the day is out, each of us will have completed an average of three to four hours worth of physical and sports-specific training. It is a schedule we will repeat six days a week for as long as we are residents at WMT.

If the fraternity of boxing is akin to a surrogate family, and the familiarity of the boxing gym like that of a second home, offering the boxers a protective and nurturing environment within which to ply their trade, the trainees at the WMT camp, in Phuket, Thailand, become like a foster family, and the camp itself, like a care home. People pass through. Some stay longer than others. But these are people in transit, acutely aware of the temporal nature of their presence here. Harry, a WMT

trainee observes, “It’s like limbo for the lost here”; like the fictional island in the ABC television series *Lost*, WMT has a way of drawing people back to its training spaces, repeating or extending their visits in order to continue their projects of ontological transcendence. According to Skylar, a WMT trainer, the training camp offers individuals the chance to engage with a variety of different training styles, encountering pain, difficulty and a feeling of displacement, in order that they might attend to their own ‘trauma’, in their bid to affect ‘change’. Harry’s ‘lost souls’ choose WMT and the accompanying training practices as a vehicle to embark upon what Skylar determines to be a process of physical, spiritual, and soul cleansing.

Situated in the heart of the fighting district in Phuket, WMT is a destination gym that receives hundreds of enthusiastic fitness and combat tourists everyday. The average training residency lasts between 1-3 months, with some participants staying as little as one session for one day, and others turning to paid Muay Thai fights as a means of financing extended periods of stay. As a WMT trainee, individuals are free to select from over twenty types of fitness and combat classes, crafting an idiosyncratic training regime that fits their motivations, goals and objectives. The classes range from circuit, weight and cardiovascular training, and yoga, to sport-specific practices such as Muay Thai, Western boxing, K-1 kickboxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), Brazilian jui-jitsu, Greco-Roman wrestling, and traditional Thai martial arts. Guest trainers are routinely hired to provide workshops in alternate fighting styles and practices, such as Israeli Krav Maga and Capoeira to name but two. In short, WMT thrives on cultural eclecticism. It is a liminal space encouraging its international cohort of trainees to embrace hybridity. The focus for most is on the ‘in-

the-moment' process of training, the sensorial components of extended engagement in embodied intercultural training practices.²

My experiences as a WMT resident offer pertinent reflections on intercultural training regimes. These reflections suggest some important considerations for the development of intercultural actor-training programmes in the UK. I propose that through their offer of a culturally diverse array of training styles, destination gyms like WMT, operate as liminal spaces embracing experimental practices. They produce an atmosphere where participants are encouraged to engage in a fluid approach to training, 'dipping in' to sessions as they see fit, exercising individual agency as they select the embodied sensorial practices that best suit their goals, drives and objectives on any given day. Rather than presenting an homogenised training regime, destination gyms like WMT provide space for culturally different practices to operate alongside one another, allowing the participants to make connections between practices, wrestle with the paradoxes inherent within the different approaches, and find the ways to carve an idiosyncratic set of bodily practices that are suitable to their individual needs and objectives.

Considering some key academic analyses of intercultural approaches to actor training (Schechner, 2006; Ramírez Ladrón De Guevara, 2007; Zarrilli, Daboo, and Loukes, 2013; and Lim, 2016) it is possible to argue that intercultural actor training programmes ought to strive for dialogical approaches to the sharing of embodied physical practices; that intercultural actor training programmes benefit from working with notions of harmonisation rather than homogenisation; that actors benefit from systems that are fluid and encourage flexibility; and that actors benefit from adopting

² A small number of trainees are professional contracted fighters preparing for their next competitive bout, but the majority of attendees are amateur athletes and sports tourists.

a sensorial and discursive approach to investigating the difficulties and paradoxes of different cultural styles of actor training. To what extent are these aims achievable within the current UK Higher Education (HE) structure?

If WMT serves as the basis for a useful critical reflection on intercultural approaches to training, it does so because it provides its participants with liminal spaces where individuals are encouraged to engage in experimental practices in order to find the cracks in the ‘complicated structural systems of knowledge’ allowing intercultural communication and transcultural reciprocal practices (Ramírez Ladrón De Guevara, 2007, p. 117). Within a UK HE model, where students engage in 12 or 24-week long modules and are expected to demonstrate the acquisition of specific, pre-determined learning outcomes, what room is there to engage with a hybrid, fluid and experimental approach to study? To what extent are students permitted to exercise agency over their approach to practice? How are transcultural reciprocal atmospheres facilitated wherein students are encouraged to pick at the cracks of complicated knowledge systems, rejecting uniformed or homogenised practices in favour of a ‘shared landscape’ from which to approach their work (Lim, 2016, p. 78)?

WMT, with its focus on process over product, provides a broad and diverse structure within which individuals are free to develop an idiosyncratic approach to training. Whilst attention is paid to goal-driven objectives, as evidenced by the teaching of specific techniques for specific types of competitive fighting, few of the trainees (save for the small cohort of professional fighters) are focused on developing specific skills for a specific end result. Rather, the majority of participants are engaged in larger, more loosely defined and understood, projects of ‘ontological transcendence’, whereby the eclectic intercultural training practices of the destination gym are the vehicle through which one may ‘fashion themselves into a new being’

(Wacquant, 1995, p. 501). As I seek to develop intercultural approaches to actor training for students engaged with HE Drama degrees in the UK, I continue to search for an approach that undermines product and goal orientated learning and instead places value on process, on experimentation, discovery, and critical self-reflection.

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