

# Interview with Adrian Lester: taekwondo and actor training

Paul Allain and Grzegorz Ziółkowski

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# Interview with Adrian Lester: taekwondo and actor training

Paul Allain  and Grzegorz Ziółkowski 

Q2



In the memory of Peter Brook (1925–2022)  
who remains so important for so many of us



**Adrian Lester** (b. 1968 in Birmingham, England) CBE is a British multi-award-winning theatre and film actor, director and writer who starred, among others, in Cheek by Jowl's all-male production of *As You Like It* (1993), Peter Brook's performance of *Hamlet* (2000) and its film version (2002) as well as in *Othello* at the National Theatre in London (2013). His television and film appearances include roles in the BBC series *Hustle* (2004–2012) and the drama *Bonekickers* (2008) as well as Mike Nichols' film *Primary Colors* (1998) and Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labours Lost* (2000). Most recently (2022) he has read *The Empty Space* for Nick Hern's audio book of Peter Brook's seminal work. He is married to actress and writer Lolita Chakrabarti. He holds a 3rd degree black belt in Moo Duk Kwan taekwondo.



**Grzegorz Ziółkowski:** How did you start training in martial arts? And why did taekwondo particularly attract your attention?

**Adrian Lester:** I was 27. A friend and I were talking about taking up some form of exercise. We laughed about the fact that doing jobs on TV means you're picked up at five or six in the morning, you start work, you are driven or escorted everywhere and, unless you are involved in some sort of action movie or series – which is rare – you simply stand, walk, talk and sit. Then you are driven home in the evening tired and ready for bed. We talked about going to the gym and working out but thought that would be boring. We wanted to get fit while learning a skill. Dancers have to do class every day in order to keep their instrument ready for various levels of expression. Singers warm up and have lessons whether they are working or not. What do actors do? In the end, my colleague mentioned a friend of his who studied martial arts. Now here was something we had always had an interest in but had never taken the step of going to classes. We contacted the friend and went along to a taekwondo class led by Master Trevor Codner in Hackney, London. We were both hooked. After the class we spoke to Master Codner and turned up for the next lesson.

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1 A Korean martial art based on karate and northern Chinese martial art styles. All footnotes come from the editors.

2 A training hall in Korean martial arts.

I liked taekwondo specifically because, like many other self defence techniques, it is an art form, an expression. It utilises all the muscles that I would need for dance or any form of movement capability which I might require for live or recorded performance. It didn't shorten any of my muscle groups. It wasn't purely about binding and controlling. It's a target-based system where the short sharp delivery of strikes and kicks is mixed with long reaching techniques and aerial kicks. My particular art is not the strict Olympic form of taekwondo. It's the Moo Duk Kwan school which is closely related to *Tang Soo Do*<sup>1</sup> and through that, karate. You use your hands a lot, more like kickboxing. Nevertheless, it's very expansive and works with the body in similar ways to a dancer: lots of stretching, the legs have to be quite wide. Core strength and balance is very important.

I took to it straight away.

**Paul Allain:** It sounds like you immediately found a connection to it, that you were really looking for something like that. Some actors think their training is over by the time they leave drama school.

**AL:** When I was a student, the principle of RADA at the time, Dr. Oliver Neville, always told us that it takes ten years to make an actor. Until that point you're still training, it's just that your training is outside and if you're lucky enough, you'll get paid to do it. I took that to heart. I didn't feel that by the time I finished I was done with training. The school simply gave me the tools that I needed to develop.

At drama school we learned combat and stage fighting, which was a skill that we utilised in various forms on screen and on stage. And we were taught fencing. Although fencing is a very good skill, I think nowadays martial arts are better placed. The work for screen has changed a lot and when it comes to close quarter combat, more and more actors are expected to learn martial arts techniques. A drama school that has given its actors a foundation in martial arts will not only give those young people the confidence that a clear understanding of self defence can provide, it will also keep the students fit, shape their mindset and prepare them for modern stage and screen combat.

**GZ:** What place has taekwondo occupied in your daily schedule? How much are you involved in it now?

**AL:** I train three times a week, if I'm free. As you get older and rise through your grades, you can start to teach. We encourage people in class to watch and pass on information to their fellow students even when they are blue or green belts. It helps foster the right ethos in the *dojang*.<sup>2</sup> Myself and the other black belts, we participate, but we also teach.

**PA:** Do you think every drama student should have some kind of martial arts training? A single martial art or broader?

**AL:** Broader. There are three benefits of martial arts for actors. Firstly, general fitness. If you use taekwondo in drama training, you're actually asking the muscles to stretch, be open and expand while they are strengthened. You're not shortening them as you make them stronger and more capable as you would for something that relies, within its

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197 3 A traditional Southern  
198 Chinese kung fu style.

199 4 A system of Japanese  
200 close combat.

201 application, on shorter techniques, like *wing chun*<sup>3</sup> or some of the grap-  
202 pling forms like *jujitsu*.<sup>4</sup> There's a binding to their practice: the partici-  
203 pants literally bind each other as they perform some of the expertly  
204 crafted movements needed to lock and keep their opponents bound to  
205 submission. But those arts do not concentrate on the muscles needed to  
206 balance, jump and spin through the air as taekwondo does.

207 The second thing is that you are learning techniques that increase your  
208 confidence in daily life. You're not learning simply to pretend to punch or  
209 kick. You're learning actual skills and systems that will enable the student  
210 to disable a potential threat – the self defence aspect is very strong.

211 Third is that when you come on to a film set and someone says 'We  
212 want you to throw a punch and step to the side and then he blocks it  
213 and you do this', the actor will be ready. Just as you'd be well-prepared if  
214 you were learning fencing and sword fighting at drama school and then  
215 you were on a set where you had to pull out a sword and use it for a  
216 fight. I have never been involved in a sword fight in any job since leaving  
217 drama school, but I have used my taekwondo training.

218 **GZ:** In what way? What is the bridge between this practice and acting  
219 for you?

220 **AL:** The easiest relatable bridge would be if you're called on set to fight  
221 in any martial arts style. You know how to do it. There are many films in  
222 the West that have reinvented our idea of onscreen combat and now  
223 you will regularly see close quarter techniques used in fights. With a pre-  
224 vious drama school training that incorporated martial arts, you would  
225 know how to execute the punches, blocks, kicks used in these fight  
226 sequences. You would know to manipulate your opponents' limbs, strike  
227 points on the body, torso, face and neck. These techniques would be  
228 part of skill set you brought to work with you.

229 The other part of using taekwondo in acting comes with balance,  
230 strength and stamina. My stamina has increased tenfold since I've been  
231 practising martial arts. I'm more prepared physically and better equipped  
232 to do eight shows a week or any other kind of strenuous work. This  
233 benefit isn't exclusive to a martial arts training. Increased fitness would  
234 also occur if somebody ran every day, or if they went to the gym three  
235 times a week. I'm not claiming taekwondo has a specific place in training  
236 your cardiovascular system for a long and arduous run but with taek-  
237 wondo, unlike running or repetitively lifting weights, the muscles are  
238 stretched and opened. Relaxation is a key component with many techni-  
239 ques, therefore we take tiny moments to remember our breathing and  
240 physical form as it occupies space in front of your opponent. This aids  
241 focus, and focus is power.

242 If a student is repeatedly moving their body in space, rather like a dan-  
243 cer, then the poise and balance necessary will bring an extra level of spa-  
244 tial awareness to their stage work.

245 **PA:** I'm also interested in the inner aspect. Does taekwondo help with  
246 concentration, a sense of calmness, stillness perhaps? I'm thinking of your  
247 work with Peter Brook on *Hamlet* and how you might apply it in a spe-  
248 cific context. You've been talking about the choreographic and physical  
249 aspects, but can you say more about the mental side?

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**AL:** If you were to watch my performance in *Hamlet*, you would be able to see martial arts all over it.

Focus, time and pressure. Let me elaborate ...

Often times during the run, people would watch the show, look at me and say 'Oh, you move like a dancer, I can see your training'. My response would always be 'I'm not training in dance, I'm training in martial arts. Any aspect of my physical presence on stage that looks or feels dance-like is because of my martial arts training'. That's a reference to the physical side ...

There's also an understanding that with emotions and conveying a desire for a certain outcome, this requires a knowledge of how the energy of your thoughts can be focused and used. Desire for a certain outcome is an objective; how you focus and achieve the outcome is through actions. The deep and relaxed way in which you react when those actions are changed or trapped by others, moment by moment on stage, adds up to your entire performance.

If an elephant is standing on wet sand, it leaves a wide mark but the depth of the imprint is shallow. If you now take a person wearing stillettos and they were to stand on the same spot, the mark is narrower but the depth is much deeper. A lighter weight with a more focused point creates greater damage. This principle is applied in taekwondo. When you take that laser-like focus and apply it to some aspects of speaking Shakespeare and dissecting thought processes, strangely you find that the physical life in the *dojang* and the experimentation with movement there transforms into an emotional understanding and the practice of speaking lines and dissecting thoughts for a particular purpose on stage. The two have a link.

When you're in the *dojang* and you're practising your *katas*, your forms, you get very, very tired. You can hardly stand up and you're called upon to repeat the same patterns of movements again and again. When you are recalling something, the short-term and long-term memory centres of the brain are called upon to react again and again. Then you step on stage and you're asked to do the same movements and speeches in a matinee and then evening performances, you're recalling them from the same part of the brain. Repetition leads to strength. When I'm repeating things in class and then I'm asked to repeat things on stage, the former helps.

**PA:** Has taekwondo helped your vocal projection, your vocal delivery or vocal qualities too?

**AL:** You use *kiais*<sup>5</sup> when you're practising and that does focus your strength and concentration. But the vocal thing for me moves in my daily life away from taekwondo into singing and rapping. I'm not a rapper but if you were to rap along with songs, given the speed with which some of them take place, understanding their rhythm helps with delivering a classical text. – Strange that the oldest form of speaking in front of people should be strengthened by the newest form of speaking words in front of people. Or maybe the verses of a rap track and the verses contained in classical texts have so much in common? – Add this to the vocal power needed for singing and the two skills can really help your speaking on

5 The short shouts employed to strengthen attacking moves.

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stage. I'd love to say that taekwondo helps my vocal stage presence, but really it's the understanding of rhythm, rhyme and song.

**GZ:** Is there any difference in the influence of martial arts training on your stage and screen presences?

**AL:** Remember the elephant on the sand? Well, I think that what you do on stage with a cannon you can do on screen with a laser. You have to allow the camera to do its work when you're on screen and trust that if you are thinking correctly and feeling correctly, it will be enough. On stage, you have to be more aware of the physical, technical demands necessary to deliver what you have to say to four, six or eight hundred people, eight times a week. In theatre, more microphones are being used on stage, but that doesn't take away the fact that physically you have to move, react and be entirely present in real time for the duration of the story. Your presence has to contain a clarity that the audience can observe and follow, because they're only ever going to see everything you do in 'long shot', they're going to see your entire body. A film camera behaves like an eye, and when someone is speaking to us, if they're moving and gesturing with their hands, our brain perceives it in mid-close-up. If the person stops moving their hands, we automatically zoom in. We don't know we're doing it, but our perception blurs everything else out and we focus purely on their face. In that sense, every actor on stage can create their own mid or long, close-up or tracking shot. On screen, the camera controls these elements for you.

Director Nick Hytner, while talking to drama students at RADA and also in conversation with me, said: 'You can't ask me to cast someone as Hamlet and put them on the Olivier stage<sup>6</sup> unless they are a stage animal'. This means two things: that they have an animal instinct on stage, a sort of unspoken awareness of where they are and who they're talking to that can quickly become physical and passionate and, in a way, ferocious. There's power in stillness. The ability to deliver lines at almost a whisper and still have people at the back of the theatre hear you. In order to carry the centre of any kind of classical play on stage, you have to be a stage animal. It's a good description.

**PA:** Might that ferocity perhaps be seen differently now with #metoo and the abuses that have happened in the theatre and training? As we have been putting together this special issue, we've been very mindful that people might see martial arts as aggressive and violent. Are there risks or dangers in this kind of practice in actor training? Does it need to be framed differently these days?

**AL:** Without direct experience as a guide, we are all only as good as the people that teach us. If you have bad teachers at drama school, the students listening to those teachers will learn bad practice. The safeguard is, as with everything, that you must have good people passing on the techniques and information. When I've been working in various countries around the world, out of curiosity I have always walked into the local martial arts schools. I'd find out where they are and just pop along in my tracksuit bottoms. In this way I have attended Aikido and kung fu classes in Japan and America and capoeira in Brazil. I'd go along, just to see what's being done, see if I can pick up the root movements, the basics. In

6 The largest of the three theatres at the National Theatre in London.

some of those schools, I've seen some very bad teaching. Even though I don't know the art, I've seen teachers deal badly with people who are vulnerable and asking for instruction. Their ego goes first. This negative aspect of teaching can appear anywhere and places very bad habits in those that learn.

People can think that those who study martial arts are aggressive, but you spend more time being hit than hitting. In that sense, martial artists – the people I have had the good fortune to train with – are some of the sweetest, calmest, most balanced people I've ever met in my life. Because we disconnect our egos from any reactive need to assert ourselves in any situation and therefore lessen the need for a physical response. I have been asked whether or not I have used my martial arts training in the street. To be honest, I've never had such a fight precisely *because* I have a black belt in taekwondo. I feel no need to protect myself when faced with animosity or someone else's ego or fear which transfers itself into anger and therefore violence. I say to my students: 'The one overriding thought that must take place before you decide to hurt any other human being is that one of you is going to hospital and the other to the police station. Whatever happens, you have to know that what you're engaged in has been worth this outcome'. The only reason you should put your life at risk to protect yourself is when you are certain that your life is at risk. Then, at that point, don't advertise to your opponent that they are in a fight. Don't clench fists, raise your voice or start pushing and shoving. Do nothing. Then by the time your adversary realises that they are in a fight with you, the fight is over. Because you will have ended it and are prepared to explain yourself if someone questions your actions. Life's normal potentially violent interactions can be solved with a sincere apology, a joke or an offer to buy the person a drink to replace the one that got spilt. Putting them in hospital is not an answer. It's just the beginning of a long and unpleasant journey.

**PA:** In martial arts there's a very clear relationship to the partner, as there is to the teacher. Does it help you with partner relations on stage or film?

**AL:** Yes, it does feed into it. If you're working with a partner in a martial arts situation, you are quite literally giving them an arm and a leg to manipulate purely for their own growth in the art form. And then, equally, they will give you an arm or a leg in return. They will allow you to take them to a point of extreme vulnerability so that you understand and learn how your skills work. It's quite easy to see how that transfers into a scene. You are open and vulnerable to your partner, reacting in the purest sense to everything they make you feel.

A lot of people have said that acting isn't acting, it's just REacting. A martial arts class is a perfect testing ground for the speed and accuracy of a person's reactions.

**PA:** Is there a significant gender difference in martial arts? Or do you find this practice as open to female as to male actors?

**AL:** Absolutely. Some of the black belts I've learned from in my class have been the kindest, smartest women I've met. We have a balanced class of men and women, young and old, which shows you something about the martial arts that you're teaching. If you have women and girls,

men and boys, you train a 60-year old and a 14-year old and they're both standing in front of you doing the same things, that points to the quality of the class and the training. In order to come, all students have to feel safe. If you can see that the 9-year old girl is feeling as safe as the 40-year old woman and the 11-year old boy is feeling as safe as the 20-year old man, then the teacher has created an atmosphere of trust and respect. The best place in which to learn.

**GZ:** When acting, you're constantly being judged. Actors face a lot of pressure. Could you comment on the character formation, the patience and the discipline that might be useful coming from martial arts for this stressful environment?


**AL:** The one thing that traps an actor, that forces them to close down every aspect of their talent, is self-consciousness. If you become conscious of yourself physically, or aware of yourself in front of other people, you start to create tension to protect yourself and therefore you can't be open, released, relaxed. Consequently, the work traps itself and stops. Many actors then get into a cycle of insecurity where they will seek surgery or the best creams in the world, or they'll do something else that increases their self-confidence. Certain actors will dye their hair because they're going a bit grey, or if they're getting on a bit, they'll have things replaced. The best actors, however, realise that they are there to play human beings and human beings are old, short, tall, young, little, wear glasses and so on. You are there to play a human being, so you have to divorce that fact from your own ego and your own self-consciousness. Human beings look, sound, walk, talk and engage with others just like you do.

One thing that taekwondo has given me and gives those who come, not only to my class, but to many classes I've been to, is self-confidence. You start to concentrate not on what your body looks like, but on what your body can and cannot do. It is in our ability that we place our confidence.

Standing up in front of people, no matter your age, weight or movement capabilities, you should feel quite happy with what your body allows you to do and feel very confident with the ways in which your body can protect you. That's all you need, and it quietens the other voices, the other insecurities. I've seen people who are quite big in terms of their weight, but they're extremely fit. If they have to jump and spin and do forward rolls and so on, you would not believe the amount of musculature there. On the other hand, some people can be very slim and yet incredibly strong. Self-confidence is increased by martial arts.

**PA and GZ:** Thank you for sharing your reflections with us.

**AL:** It's been a pleasure.

 The conversation was carried out online on 23 May 2022. We kindly thank Adrian's agent Tina Price for helping to arrange the meeting.

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698	leading to his first book <i>Gardzienice: Polish Theatre in Transition (1997)</i> . His research	748
699	since has focused on actor training including Tadashi Suzuki and the legacy of Jerzy	749
700	Grotowski. He has been a research consultant internationally and recently advised WAAPA	750
701	Perth, Western Australia on their research strategy. His latest project for Methuen Drama	751
702	Bloomsbury's <i>Drama Online</i> platform is 'Physical Actor Training – an online course', containing	752
703	over 60 films of training, supported by the website <i>The Digital Performer</i> . He wrote about	753
704	the A-Z in an article in the TDPT special issue 'Digital Training' 10.2, 2019.	754
705		755
706	<b>Grzegorz Ziółkowski</b> is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Adam Mickiewicz	756
707	University in Poznań, Poland. Alongside his latest book, <i>A Cruel Theatre of Self-</i>	757
708	<i>Immolations: Contemporary Suicide Protests by Fire and Their Resonances in Culture</i>	758
709	(Routledge, 2020), he has published monographs in Polish on the work of Peter Brook and	759
710	Jerzy Grotowski. He has also co-edited special issues of <i>Polish Theatre Perspectives</i>	760
711	(Voices from Within), <i>Performance Research (On Performativity)</i> , and <i>Contemporary</i>	761
712	<i>Theatre Review (Polish Theatre After 1989)</i> . From 2004 to 2009 he worked as	762
713	Programme Director of the Grotowski Centre, later Grotowski Institute, in Wrocław. From	763
714	2012 to 2017 he directed theatre exploration in the framework of the Study ROS and	764
715	the Acting Techniques Intensive Seminar ATIS. He has practised Yang style Taijiquan for	765
716	more than 25 years. <a href="http://www.grzeg.home.amu.edu.pl">www.grzeg.home.amu.edu.pl</a> .	766
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