

The Alexander Technique and the Actor

By Meade Andrews & Saura Bartner

The following article, describes their work with the Alexander Technique in relation to acting training. Saura teaches Alexander Technique for actors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and the Trinity Rep Conservatory in Providence, Rhode Island. Meade is on the faculty of the Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory in Washington, D.C., and is a recent recipient of the prestigious Helen Hayes Theatre Award. The article is designed as an introduction to the Alexander Technique for the acting teacher and student.

If a series of case studies were published in relation to the Alexander Technique, mine would be defined as "classic." After being a dancer for 10 years, I sustained a knee injury. While waiting to heal, I transferred my love for artistic expression to the theater. The year was 1962, and I was appearing in my first play, Chekhov's "The Seagull."

I wanted so badly to be seen as a truthful and sincere actor. I can still recall my desperate feelings of frustration in the scene where Masha confesses her love for Constantin. I was unable to make any emotional connection to my lines. Thirty-five years later, I can still visualize and sense that moment so clearly. But, there is a difference. After studying the Alexander Technique for 25 years, I can now describe this experience as a classic example of "downward pull." My neck muscles were overly constricted, causing my head to roll back and press down on, and shorten my spine. I was literally choking myself while trying to contact some shred of emotional responsiveness. I understand totally why I was unable to respond to internal or external stimuli. My instrument was so restricted that the flow of rhythmic impulse, known as performance, was significantly distorted and disrupted.

Today, when I work with actors, I relate this experience as a cautionary tale, and as an example of why a well balanced, finely-tuned instrument is so crucial for an artistically successful performance. Fortunately, I can also show them immediate and excellent examples of contemporary actors speaking about their process, coupled with film clips from their movies.

Over the past three years, the Bravo Television Network has presented a series of interviews with prominent actors connected with the Actors Studio in New York. Watching fine actors such as Dennis Hopper, Sally Field, Shelley Winters, Angelica Huston, Paul Newman, and Tommy Lee Jones speak of their careers and approaches to acting is a rare privilege. Each of these actors reveals a finely calibrated instrument with a hair-trigger readiness to respond to a stimulus. Each creates a palpable sense of dangerous excitement, certainly sexual, that is simultaneously under their complete control. We watch them talk in these interviews and perform in their films, experiencing a sense of keen anticipation as we wait for their next move or response. The pleasure of watching them arises in not knowing what they will do next. We know that whatever they do will be spontaneous, yet totally in keeping with the character they have developed. Their commitment is so complete and their instrument so sensitive and well-trained, that you cannot take your eyes from them. You become fascinated by trying to figure them

Daniel had a dance background, yet lacked spontaneity. He would hold himself up, rarely allowing the natural support from his reflexes. When asked where his center of gravity was, Daniel would point to his chest, which is called the "center of levity" in dance training. Finding support from one's center of levity is not conducive to stability nor strength, so when Daniel brought his thinking to his chest he was easily taken off balance. As he brought his thinking to his pelvis he was able to remain centered and stable on his feet when challenged.

Daniel's ability to change his thinking through the Alexander Technique shifted his position-oriented use to a more flexible and centrally available one, allowing more of his whole expressive self to be present for his acting.

Rachel was attempting to stop upstaging herself with her hands, which she used when the words were slow in coming and when she lost trust in herself, and thus the primary control. Employing the Alexander Technique, Rachel improved her coordination. This process of gaining awareness, using inhibition and direction allowed her the time needed to reduce unnecessary hand gestures.

Rachel's access to her inner life was a valuable resource for the building of character. Without interfering with her inner connection, she was able to stay in the moment, enlivened and connected, and more compelling on stage.

Greater Ease Through Redirection

These students learned that by finding greater ease through redirection, they can grow in stature, poise and the ability to be spontaneous in their performances. Their voices fill the theater with increased strength and enhanced resonance. The overall effect on the repertory company is that of more evenly balanced performances by the students, a more effective ensemble between student actors and professionals, and heightened enjoyment for the audience.

At the core of an actor's training is the process of learning to respond truthfully in the moment to imaginary circumstances. Constriction of the body in the form of fear and performance anxiety causes a hyper-responsive nervous system over-contracted muscles and an unbalanced skeletal system. As a result, timing becomes erratic, lines and actions are anticipated, and emotional responses become forced or faked. The Alexander Technique can serve as a powerful catalyst for opening the actor's instrument to the deepest resources of available responses in the moment of performance. The results are a blend of vulnerability and absolute commitment that can create riveting moments in the theater.

The Alexander Technique offers the actor a very specific psychophysical process, a means of guiding a performance toward a deep sense of attunement with each moment as it unfolds. The study of the Alexander Technique is a gradual, in-depth process of re-education, requiring time and repetition. As the actor rebuilds a more reliable kinesthetic feedback system, he or she grows to be a more consistent, mature and dynamic performer, vividly contributing to the magic of the overall theatrical event.