The Actor in You

by John A. Baron

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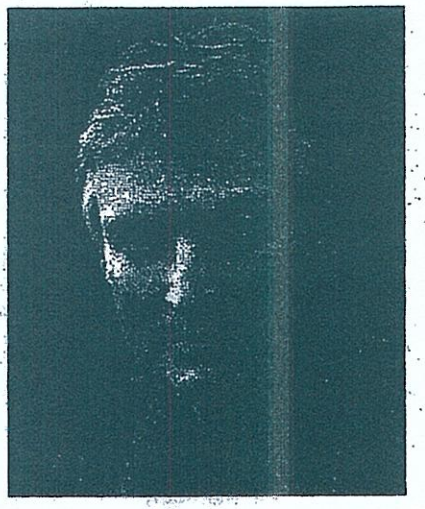
What do an actor's efforts to develop and embody a character have in common with our own efforts to develop and embody ourselves?

I became interested in the Alexander Technique 30 years ago while working as an actor in London and in regional repertory theaters. Like many theater colleagues, I had studied a range of voice and movement techniques in depth, so I was familiar with the idea of "the body as instrument" and how essential it was for a performer to have control of this instrument. However, I had always struggled with various personal tensions that manifested in tightness in my legs, pelvis, solar plexus, etc., which were always made worse by my belief that actors were not supposed to have these tensions! So for the most part I pretended not to be tense—which made for more tension.



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My own brand of tensions and the way in which they were embodied in my movement and expression limited my ability to play characters that weren't as tense as I was. Furthermore, these tensions limited my ability to study characters, as my process of study was limited to the subjective experience of a somewhat tense and rigid self.

Much later I came to the realization that it is the same for any individual as it is for an actor. Our patterns of misuse, downward collapses, excess tensions, rigid thinking, contraction, forced expansion, caricatured emotion and predictable responses limit our ability to play our own roles i.e., to be ourselves, as in, our true nature. Over the years, F.M. Alexander's work was to play a leading role in my exploration of the analogy between the actor's development of character and the individual's development of self.

The Actor and the Self

The actor's process often involves experiencing unfamiliar parts of himself, because any character the actor is attempting to play can be very different from the actor's own character. The actor may spend many hours experimenting and studying a character he is preparing to play. He may sit in an imagined room as the character: reading a newspaper, creating imagined smells, hearing imagined noises, looking at and touching the character's personal objects in the room. He may explore character through articles of clothing or by improvising with the character's movement. It is not unknown for actors to repeat a small scene hundreds of times, letting ideas come to them about the character during this process. One famous actress would start to explore a character by wearing a pair of shoes the character might choose. Even trips to the zoo in pursuit of character are not uncommon. In these examples, the actor is creating a sensory/kinesthetic connection to the character, rather than a laundry list of personality traits.

Opening to the experience of another self through the playing of a role can challenge the fixed psycho-physical identity of the individual performer. Working on the choreography and embodiment of a character, the actor is sometimes transformed by experiencing aspects of him/herself beyond the scope of the familiar, and by the heightened awareness that can accompany this experience. In this instance, is the actor marginally "possessed" by the character he or she is playing? In Greek theatre, the mask worn by the actor was thought to have a power of its own, as if the character of the mask would play itself through the actor wearing it.

The confusion around the separation of the character being played, from the actor himself or herself, is exemplified in the following comments by the actress Dame Edith Evans:

> *I seem to have an awful lot of people inside me. Do you know what I mean? If I understand them I feel terribly like them when I'm doing them...by thinking you turn into the person, if you think strongly enough. It's quite odd sometimes, you are it for quite a bit, and then you're not.*[1]

If we were to approach the work on our own "self" in the same way the actor approaches work on a character, what might be the result? Would we experience dissociation or confusion as to "who is who" as Edith Evans alludes to in the previous passage? Would our own everyday mask or self-image or personality "fix" the self and therefore limit our possibilities?

If we were to imagine ourselves as actors preparing to play our own roles consciously, we could endeavor to study the myriad ways we embody our own self, i.e., our own personal choreography in various activities. Just as the actor may imagine and then experiment with the way the character walks around the room, sits, stands still, stands on tiptoes, reaches for an object, so we may take one of these activities and explore it from various angles as a means to experiencing unfamiliar aspects of ourselves. As an example, let us take the activity of standing still, incidentally one of the most difficult challenges for an actor. How do we stand? Where does our excess tension or lack of tension manifest? How balanced are we? Is the weight on one foot more than the other? Is the pelvis locked forward or backward or twisted to the side? Is the neck locked backwards? How does all this affect our breathing, or even influence our digestion?

How do we embody our own character and how does this limit our experience of daily life? When we experience the unfamiliar, do we, like the actor, discount or ignore it as being outside our

self? And the heightened states of awareness an actor often recounts when performing or rehearsing a role—would we accept these energies as being a part of our own identified self? In short, what is the glue that fixes us to the limited identified self?

What we normally break down into separate segments of movement, emotion, posture, thought, individual spirit, expression, energy, psyche, sensation, voice, gesture, and how these aspects are consciously embodied, connected, and choreographed in the moment, could be characterized in the Alexander Technique as "the use of the self" (the *self* taken to be "the whole living organism"). F.M. Alexander, himself an actor in his earlier days, said, "Talk about a man's individuality and character: it's the way he uses himself!"[2]

The process of connecting to the self via the Alexander Technique is one of letting go or "undoing," rather than directly imposing an idea of self onto ourselves or anyone else. Perhaps the nature of self can be less complicated if it is thought of as a way of being.

> "What do an actor's efforts to develop and embody a character have in common with our own efforts to develop and embody ourselves?"

Unlike the actor who is studying a character, our own identity is often quite fixed, not only in the image we have of ourselves but also in the limited kinesthetic sense that accompanies this image and that "feels right." The kinesthetic sense is sometimes informally or colloquially referred to as the "lost sixth sense." Let's explore this lost sixth sense a little, not just as a concept or definition that we could then agree or disagree with but, rather, let's explore it kinesthetically.

Experiment 1

Remember you are the actor here playing the role of yourself. Take an ordinary simple moment—just one second—from your character's day. You are in a room waving good-bye to someone.

We might study the action in this first experiment in several ways. What is the stimulus or motivation for you to wave good-bye? First let us look at the sequence: there is a thought to wave and then the arm is raised—first the thought, then the action happens.

From a physiological perspective, which muscles are primarily involved in the action? What are the downward collapses or the upward tensions? How is this movement being supported by the whole structure?

We could focus on the emotional state of the character within the action. How is this emotional state expressed in the choreography of this movement? We might look at the changing posture during the motion and consider the energy that is expressed, the physical tension, balance and freedom. What is the individual spirit, spark, humanity that is alive or lacking within this activity? How you, the actor, intentionally express the "being" of your character will depend largely upon your kinesthetic awareness.

Experiment 2

Try folding your arms quickly. Now try folding them the other way round. After completing this experiment people often say: "The other way round doesn't feel like me."

At some point in the Alexander work, the student will understand that his/her kinesthetic awareness is in fact faulty and that this faulty awareness is based on habits of "misuse." This understanding is of importance when we attempt to connect to experiences that are unfamiliar. The new feels "wrong" and the habits of misuse feel "right" so we will want to return to the familiar habits.

Fixed psycho-physical patterns create inflexible identities. Wilhelm Reich wrote:

> *The unarmored being perceives the self and the surrounding world in an essentially different way than does the armored organism. Since awareness actually colors all other sensations and since sensation is the filter through which the world becomes manifest to us, the kind of sensations determines the kind of perception and judgement.*[3]

Without a developed awareness of our kinesthetic sense, it is difficult to be fully present to our lives. We have millions of kinesthetic memories and these memories have a wisdom that we can access, but, for the most part, we are blocked from these experiences due to misuse and armoring. For example, over-contracted muscles lessen awareness of what our muscles and limbs are actually doing. And awareness dominated primarily by intellect also will limit perception. Accessing kinesthetic memories triggers a psycho-physical intelligence that exposes the narrowness of the rational conceptual mind. In brief, kinesthetic awareness penetrates the moment, while the intellect is often reduced to labeling it.

Multi-dimensional awareness within a single moment is experienced by all of us from time to time. Artists, poets, and mystics have alluded to this state or phenomenon over the centuries. The truly startling thing about a multi-dimensional experience is that when it happens there is a quality of emotional simplicity.

> *To see a world in a grain of sand*
> *And a heaven in a wild flower.*
> *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand*
> *And eternity in an hour.*[4]

In order to experiment with enlivening the experience of a single moment let us turn to "you as the actor" once again and try Experiment #3.

Experiment 3

Close your eyes. Imagine yourself as an actor on stage in one particular place at one particular moment. You are aware of the whole of your body, how you are moving, or how you are barely moving. You are aware of yourself as your self, and also of the character you are playing. You are aware of what you are saying and exactly how you are saying it. You are aware of your surroundings and the other actors around you, of the characters the other actors are playing, and how you are relating to them all, of the moment in the Drama, of the smell of the theater, the heat of the lights, the range of vision, perhaps aware of using your peripheral vision. You have a sense of the audience—it's a physical bodily sense that is able to detect their connection to this moment. If you are speaking, you are aware of the acoustics and exactly how much energy and resonance you need vocally, so all in this theater can hear. You might even be aware of simple objects

like your wristwatch or shoes or other things. And this happens in one moment!

How do we connect to this level of awareness? Well the short answer is "We don't!" We are already connected. If we considered UNDOING the blocks, misuse, and armoring that interfere with our innate connectedness, rather than having to DO something (on top of the existing blocks, misuse, and armoring) in order to make this connection happen, we may find our whole being influenced for the better. And when we find ourselves connected in this way, our movement, coordination, and ease of expression seem to flow without us having to "do" anything.

Kinesthetic awareness is vital for developing and maintaining a sense of individual unity. This sense of unity is often referred to in various traditions as "being centered." Being centered physically requires that our muscles gently lengthen the skeletal system while joint surfaces are opening away from each other. Concurrently, there is appropriate tension, freedom of movement, freedom of the breathing function, coordination, and balance. Being centered physically and knowing we are affecting this through conscious intent invites us to be centered in ourselves. Other cultures have long recognized this. For example, in Japan there is the tradition of "Hara." This refers to being centered in the lower belly—speaking and acting from the lower belly which they refer to as being the "vital center of man." Karl Graf Durcheim author of the book *Hara* writes:

> *The first duty in exhalation is to let go, first in the shoulders, that is, to let go as a person and not as a muscle. We work on ourselves and not on our bodies.*[5]

"Multi-dimensional awareness within a single moment is experienced by all of us from time to time."

In the Alexander work, the change from subconscious to conscious control is fundamental. Usually when we speak of control we think of a part of us that directly takes charge—often the super ego—to control an action or an event. The conscious control that is explored in the Alexander work takes the form of actively inhibiting stimuli and their related responses. As Alexander said, you are here "to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn how to deal with it."[6]

Over the years I have worked with many actors helping them to develop their characters. At the beginning of our work together they will often perform their piece for me while I observe their "use." These actors have varying degrees of talent and training, and their pieces can range from being largely unprepared to well developed and moving. Regardless of an actor's progress, I find it to be a creative exercise to apply Alexander's principles not only to his psycho-physical use but also to his interpretation. To do this, I might have the actor lie on a teaching table in a semi-supine position, knees in the air, the head oftentimes supported by books, in order to encourage a certain connection to the head, neck, and back. Through the use of my hands I will gently lengthen his spine and then work to release the tensions he is unconsciously holding or to address areas that lack energy.

After a while, I will ask the actor to do his piece again, only by now he is in a different kinesthetic condition, one of openness and release. At first, he once again may approach the piece in the familiar way, in which case the original tension downward collapses, and the inevitable accompanyin interpretation are expressed as before—though perhaps not to th same degree. I will stop the actor and point out, either with m hands, or verbally or both, how he is responding. I ask him t repeat the line while consciously NOT responding in the previou way—that is, if he had tightened his neck and shoulders or flinche in the solar plexus when he said a certain line, I ask him NOT to d this. By inhibiting the immediate and mainly predictable response we invite responses and perceptions that access less superfici layers.

I may spend a fair amount of time going through this proces stopping over and over again to help the actor develop kinesthetic intelligence that knows what responses to inhibit, wh and how. All this time, my hands are giving kinesthetic directior to the actor, informing him of any block encouraging release, directing connection an inviting centeredness.

After a while new perceptions emerge abou his character, particularly on the emotional leve and the habit of declamation and interpretiv imposition take a back seat so that the characte can start to emerge. With these new perception new ways of expressing these perceptions i movement, gesture, tone of voice, etc. come into being. Thi process, an indirect way of building a character, is based on:

1. Recognizing a fixed interpretation
2. Undoing the fix
3. Letting the character emerge
4. Directing the experience into form

An artist's interpretive clichés come from fixed postural set When the actor is more consciously connected and not blocke into old habits of expression, the kinesthetic channels are free t take in and assimilate new information and experiences from th role that can feed the imagination.

Freeing the Self
Experiment 4

Think of a time from your recent past when you wer experiencing conflict. For instance, you might be in your livin room saying, or not saying, something to another person. Re create/perform this moment. Let this moment be no more than on minute for now.

Play this scene a couple of times, noticing the choreography i your movement, expression, and in your embodiment of th conflict. Then stop. What happened to your head, neck, and bac within the drama? What happened to your hands, pelvis, voice breath?

Lie down on the floor, legs and arms touching the floor, hea NOT on a book, and play the scene as before continuing to observ the specific choreography: tension, holding, gripping, o collapsing.

Stop. Now adopt the Alexander Constructive Rest Position Replay the scene once again saying the lines out loud (or if you ar not saying anything, stay with your thoughts) only this time allov yourself to NOT respond as before. If you observe yoursel tightening—pulling in the shoulders, gripping the jaw, holding i the stomach for example—then simply stop, allow the tightening t undo and reconnect to the scene. Allow the thoughts and emotion to play out at the same level of intensity as before, but without th

previous choreography. Repeat the scene while staying released, open, and neutral in your use.

After working with this scene you might try choosing other moments of conflict to work with in the same way.

If we were to take the experiment even further, I might suggest that the next time you find yourself in a real moment in your life that results in conflict, try working on the way you specifically respond to this conflict using the process outlined above and see what happens.

Using the analogy of the actor's development of character and the individual's development of self, we can see that when we are kinesthetically fixed, we also fix our own character, and, like the actor, this limits our opportunity for change. If we choose to reawaken the kinesthetic sense, through the means of the Alexander Technique, we open the door to fundamental changes in the self. In this way the self can become more than just a static identity; it could even be experienced as a continuous state of becoming. Nisargadatta Maharaj puts this more clearly:

The 'I am this' is not certain: the 'I am' is![7]

The accomplished actor is capable of playing many different roles, whereas the limited actor is typecast as his/her own person. In some ways we are all typecast by how and who we are supposed to be, by peers, family, friends, career, culture, background, and, of course, by ourselves. Should we find ourselves stuck in an inauthentic role, we, like the actor, might wish to explore creative ways to "undo the fix." And undoing the fix is at the heart of the Alexander work.

The Alexander Technique can be an art form, and it can be a study in the art of living. Whether we are actors looking to develop our craft or individuals looking to develop beyond the limitations of a fixed identity, or both, the Alexander work provides a means for guiding us in this direction.

Endnotes:

1. Keith Johnstone, *Impro* (London: Methuen, 1981), 151.
2. Edward Maisel, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1967), 12.
3. Wilhelm Reich, *God, Ether and Devil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1949), 56.
4. William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *Oxford Book of English Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 327, lines 1–4.
5. Karlfried Graf Durcheim and Alphonse Goettmann, *Dialogue on The Path of Initiation* (New York: Globe Press Books, 1991), 95.
6. Maisel, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 9.
7. Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That* (Durham, North Carolina: Acorn Press, 1982), 1.

As a professional actor in the United Kingdom for ten years, John Baron played leading roles in television and film and performed with many theaters including: Glasgow Citizens, 7:84 Theatre Company, and The National Theatre. He became an Alexander teacher in 1985 and has taught in England, Italy, Germany, and the United States. Recently, John presented his workshop "The Actor In You" at the Esalen Institute, and worked with the San Francisco Ballet and the Sundance Institute. He teaches in Sausalito, California and co-directs the Alexander Educational Center in Berkeley.

Photograph by Max O'Neil.