

F. Matthias Alexander and Edwardian Actresses/Actors

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Abstract

This case study investigates anecdotes and claims about Alexander Technique founding father Frederick Matthias Alexander who allegedly ‘treated’ numerous eminent Edwardian London actresses and actors. Research shows it is advisable to question those stories and claims.

Key Words: Dora Barton, Kate Bishop, Lily Brayton, Sarah Brooke, Constance Collier, Alice Crawford, Daisy Cordell, Violet Elliott, Evelyn Glover, Norah Kerin, Marie Löhr, Edith Tasca-Page, Maud Beerbohm Tree, Viola Tree. Frederick Matthias Alexander, George Alexander, Oscar Asche, Alexander Leeper, Mary Leeper. Harry Brodribb Irving, Henry Irving, Matheson Lang, Robert Loraine, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Lewis Waller, James Welch, Robert Young. Alexander Technique, Westminster County Court, Westminster Police Court.

Introduction



Figure 1: Violet Elliott. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

While doing research for his biography of Alexander Technique founding father Frederick Matthias Alexander, freelance historian and writer Michael Bloch unearthed a previously unknown story about Alexander in the local London newspaper *Daily Express* (1904). The edition of October 19, 1904 sketches how Australian contralto Violet Elliott met Australian voice production and breathing instructor F. M. Alexander at the house of a London throat specialist. Alexander “was there to greet her, and incidentally to discover ‘how she breathed.’” It was four months after he had arrived in London from Australia. The *Daily Express* reporter continued, “At Miss Elliott’s suggestion Mr. Alexander then propounded the system [of breathing] which he firmly believes would *regenerate the race* were it universally adopted” (italics added). Clearly, he was not a person of small thoughts and words.

Alexander never spoke about his meeting with Violet Elliott later in his life. On the other hand, in newspaper ads and in pamphlets and in anecdotes told to his pupils and teacher training course students he stated that he had taught his voice production and breathing methods to famous Edwardian stage actresses and actors like Lily Brayton and her husband Oscar Asche, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, his wife Maud and their daughter Viola, Harry Brodribb Irving and his father Henry Irving, Lewis Waller and others — and that he had treated them.

Alexander's advertising began after the *Morning Post* on March 7, 1907 extensively reviewed his booklet *The Theory and Practice of A New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* — issued the first week of March in Australia and England (Alexander, 1907f-g). Before that time, he used to quote physicians, singers, actors and others favourably judging his methods. However, perhaps respecting unwritten conventions, he never mentioned their full names and only used initials in his newspaper ads.

On March 8, 1907, a day after the book review had been published, Alexander (1907a) began to refer to his booklet in newspaper ads (Alexander, 1907a). On April 8, he referred for the first time to the book review in the *Morning Post* (Alexander, 1907b). On April 17, he then started to use the review's title ('Regeneration by Breathing') for a while as heading for his newspaper ads (e.g., Alexander, 1907c; see *Note 1*). And lastly, as of June 12, a majority of his 1907 and 1908 advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post* cited the book review's lines "The efficacy of this new method (whatever it may be) is witnessed by Messrs. Beerbohm Tree, H. B. Irving, and Oscar Asche, and by Mesdames Lily Brayton, Constance Collier, and Viola Tree. Sir Henry Irving spoke well of it shortly before his death" (*Morning Post*, 1907a). Note, however: Alexander — between the quotation marks — discretely replaced 'efficacy of this new method (whatever it may be)' by 'efficiency of Mr. F. Matthias Alexander's new method' (e.g., Alexander, 1907d-e, 1908a). It was a small adaptation of text, but a big difference in meaning. The *Morning Post* review of his 1907 booklet was by no means favourable. The fact that Alexander rather swiftly adjusted the book review's text to his own intentions can only mean that he was certain almost nobody who read his newspaper ads would check the *Morning Post*'s opinion.



Figure 2: Lily Brayton, Mrs. Asche. Figure 3: Oscar Asche. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

Leeper's conflict of interests

Many Alexander Technique (AT) teachers and Alexander adepts never showed a critical attitude regarding Alexander's advertising, and never checked facts. They, in turn, propagated that Alexander had taught and treated distinguished Edwardian actresses and actors like *père* and *fils* Irving, Lily Brayton, Lily Langtry, Robert Loraine, and others. In their eyes a high number of eminent clients seems to prove the 'efficacy' or 'efficiency' of Alexander's methods and confirms that they work (e.g., Carrington, 1979; Evans, 2001; Fischer in Alexander, 1995; Gelb, 1981; Irwin, 1935; Leeper, 1909b; Morgan, 1954; Westfeldt, 1964).

We must, however, place clear questions about Alexander's and his followers' claims. For example, one of Alexander's adepts mentioned above is Dr. Alexander Leeper, First Warden of Trinity College, University of Melbourne. In 1908, Leeper attended an Anglican Conference in London. The Australian Victorian Teachers and Schools Registration Board commissioned him to also investigate English and mainland systems of physical training. Regarding breathing and voice production methods, his *Report on Physical Culture in the United Kingdom and the Continent of Europe* proudly announces, "I should, without hesitation, give the first place to the system associated with the name of Mr. F. Matthias

Alexander.” The report stated that Alexander had taught several distinguished London actresses and actors (Leeper, 1909b, p. 186; see also *Advertiser*, 1909; *Age*, 1909; *Geelong Advertiser*, 1909). The report, however, does not mention that Leeper had long since been a champion of Alexander’s methods or that he knew him since the mid-1890s when Alexander lived and worked in Melbourne. Leeper’s biographer Poynter (1997) reports that already in 1896 “Leeper engaged [Alexander] for a quarter’s tuition in voice production and breathing. Impressed, he became one of the first and most ardent champions of this new method” (p. 253). Although Leeper’s report states that Alexander’s brother Albert Redden taught Alexander’s methods in Melbourne, it does not mention that Leeper in late 1907 and early 1908 had taken a kind of refresher course of lessons with A.R. Alexander in Melbourne, before leaving for London (A. Leeper, 1907, 1908; Poynter 1997). Furthermore, diaries of Leeper and of his wife Mary Leeper show that they between July and September of 1908 regularly visited Alexander, both at his studio and teaching room in London and during Alexander’s North Sea coast vacation in Cromer, Norfolk (A. Leeper 1908; M. Leeper, 1908; Staring, 2005). Leeper’s report does not mention either that Leeper “had resumed frequent sessions” with A. R. Alexander after returning to Melbourne in 1908 (Poynter, 1997, p. 346). Lastly, Leeper (1909a) indicated in a letter to Alexander that he had advised his brother-in-law to visit Alexander to arrange lessons with him. All of this may indicate a substantial conflict of interests elegantly concealed by Leeper in his report that has never been properly analyzed. Therefore, any reference to Leeper’s report must be cautious; its likely bias should be stated.

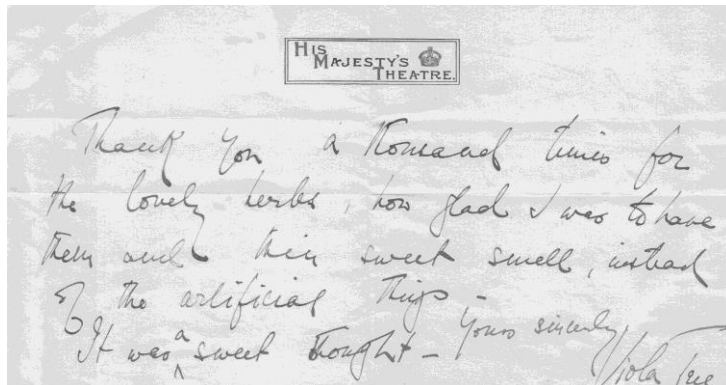


Figure 4: Viola Tree. Figure 5: Viola Tree (n.d.), undated note to unknown correspondent, written on *His Majesty's Theatre* stationery. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

“Alexander v. Loraine...an action of a consulting voice surgeon” (*Standard*, 1909)

While opening the “case of Alexander v. Loraine” (*Era*, 1909a) on July 30, 1909 at the London Westminster County Court where Alexander sued actor Robert Loraine for 50 guineas — “fees for lessons and treatment given to him” (*Leader*, 1909) — Alexander’s counsel Mr. Fletcher tried simultaneously to impress as well as mislead the Court by declaring Alexander’s profession was “giving lessons in voice production to people and showing them how to use their voice properly. *He was also a consulting surgeon* in cases where people had lost their voice” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1909; italics added). Next,

Alexander gave *evidence bearing out* [his] *counsel’s opening*. His counsel was asking him as to the *people he had cured*, when Mr. Frank Dodd [Robert Loraine’s counsel] objected, and his honour upheld the objection. (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 1909; italics added).

Cross-examined by Mr. Dodd, Alexander had to admit “that he held no medical degrees” (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 1909) and that he did not “profess to cure anything” (*Weekly Irish Times*, 1909). Yet, for all we know, Alexander more often behaved like a physician, and he did not object when the press insinuated he was a “Dr.” At least, he never corrected the media. This factually started early in 1908 when the *Yorkshire Evening Post* (1908a) of March 16, and three days later also the *Wells Journal* (1908), discussed Alexander’s (1908b) Letter to the Editor in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of March 14 (see also *Note 1*). These newspapers called him “a medical correspondent.” Subsequently, on March 17, the *Daily Telegraph* (1908), *Midland Daily Telegraph* (1908), *Morning Post* (1908) and *Standard* (1908b) reported on a Westminster Police Court case involving Alexander.

Dr. F. Mathias [*sic*] Alexander...summoned by James Henry Smith, a taximeter cab-driver, for the non-payment of a shilling fare, urged that he was driven so abominably from Bruton Street that he wrote a letter of complaint to the Commissioner of Police...The Magistrate said he thought [Alexander] had taken a reasonable view of the matter, and the summons was dismissed. (*Midland Daily Telegraph*, 1908).

On both occasions there were no reports from Alexander that he did not hold medical degrees. Diverse books, journals, magazines and newspapers would later call Alexander “Dr.” or even “Professor” (e.g., *Continent*, 1918; *Current Opinion*, 1918; Sokoloff, 1935). No journal, however, or magazine, or newspaper ever printed a correction by Alexander.



Figure 6: Constance Collier. Figure 7: Dora Barton. Figure 8: Norah Kerin. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

Dora Barton, Kate Bishop, Sarah Brooke, Marie Löhr, Maud Beerbohm Tree, Robert Loraine, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Lewis Waller

On July 30, 1909, at the London Westminster County Court, it further turned out that actor Robert Loraine declared he “did *not* consider he derived any benefit from” Alexander’s course of lessons. He had had no more than 15 lessons of 35 advised by Alexander (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1909; italics added). Still, his cold departed and his voice recovered “in the natural way in about a fortnight” (*Nottingham Daily Express*, 1909; *Daily News*, 1909).

Note that at least ten Australian, English and Irish newspapers and magazines reported on this “case of considerable interest to the theatrical profession” (*Nottingham Daily Express*, 1909). “Quite a number of well-known actors were in court” (*Standard*, 1909). “Well-known actors give evidence in county court” (*Derby Daily Telegraph*, 1909).

Intriguingly, according to a quote from the *Onlooker* of 24 March 1906 in a 4-page advertising pamphlet jointly published circa 1906 by F. M. Alexander and his brother A. R. Alexander, Alexander’s “eminent pupils” Lily Brayton, Viola Tree, and Dora Barton, Henry

Irving, H. B. Irving, and Lewis Waller had “derived *incalculable benefit* from [Alexander’s] instruction” (Alexander & Alexander, n.d., p. 3; *Onlooker*, 1906, p. 634; italics added).

Lily Brayton, Viola Tree, and *père* and *fils* Irving will be discussed below.

Research did not turn up any data regarding Alexander’s instruction of Dora Barton. But, surprisingly enough, during cross examination at the Westminster County Court case ‘Alexander v. Loraine,’ mentioned above, Alexander declared actor Lewis Waller had taken a mere four lessons and “then refused to go on.” Waller, on the other hand, “deposed that he suffered from hoarseness, and went to [Alexander], who did not do him any good. He did not go on with the treatment” (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 1909). The *Nottingham Evening Post* (1909) reported, “Mr. Lewis Waller said his voice recovered in the natural way.”

At the Westminster County Court, Alexander further stated Herbert Beerbohm Tree had had four lessons and his daughter Viola Tree “150 to 200 lessons.” He probably wished to indicate both of them benefited from his lessons. Alexander also declared that, among others, he had “treated” actresses Kate Bishop, Sarah Brooke, Norah Kerin, Marie Löhr, and actor James Welch (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 1909; *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 1909).

Research did not turn up data showing how many lessons Sarah Brooke, Constance Collier and Norah Kerin had had from Alexander. From the fact that Sarah Brooke in a letter to Alexander, dated 1 October 1910, written on the stationery of Hotel Astor New York (see *Figure 12*), announced that she wanted to take lessons again, we may deduce that she in the past benefited in some way from Alexander’s lessons. Regarding Constance Collier, Alexander (1909) in a 1-page leaflet cited an undated letter written by her on His Majesty’s Theatre stationery, thanking him “for the great benefit derived from [his] method...Despite heavy rehearsals my health has gradually improved and my voice has gained in strength and fulness.” She signed, “I remain, Your grateful pupil.” Yet Constance Collier (1929) did not mention Alexander in her autobiography.

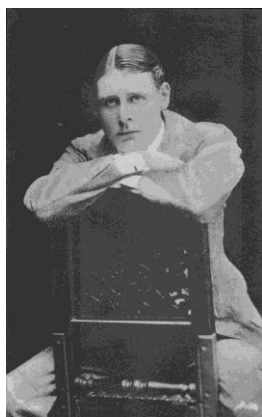


Figure 9: Robert Loraine. Figure 10: Alice Crawford. Figure 11: Lewis Waller. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

At the Westminster County Court, Alexander declared that Marie Löhr and Kate Bishop “had been to him for treatment;” Marie Löhr had had four lessons and her mother Kate Bishop only one — “a special one” according to Alexander (*Nottingham Daily Express*, 1909; see *Note 2*). You wonder, how could Alexander sincerely speak of ‘treatment’ when he had given someone four lessons, or for that matter, only one?

Beerbohm Tree wrote on His Majesty’s Theatre stationery on January 23, 1906,

I have great pleasure in saying that I have received assurance from several members of the profession to the effect that they have benefited most surprisingly by your treatment. Among others, my daughter Viola has greatly strengthened her voice by your method. (Alexander, 1909).

This letter does not give the impression Beerbohm Tree has had any lesson. He had obtained the advice of several people and merely expressed their opinion about Alexander’s “treatment.” Note further that Alexander is not mentioned in Beerbohm Tree’s biography written by his half-brother Max Beerbohm (1920). However, during cross examination at the Westminster County Court on July 30, 1909, Alexander admitted Beerbohm Tree took (only) four lessons “to look into the system on his daughter’s behalf” (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 1909). In fact, this means Alexander did not ‘treat’ Beerbohm Tree after all; the latter merely tried to form his opinion about lessons of which his daughter Viola had already taken a number.

At the 1909 lawsuit, Alexander also indicated Maud Beerbohm Tree, married to Herbert Beerbohm Tree, was his “pupil” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1909). Yet, in a letter to Alexander, dated 21 November 1905, written on the stationery of His Majesty’s Theatre, she merely spoke of Alexander’s “treatment” of her daughter Viola Tree (Alexander & Alexander, n.d., p. 2). Research did not turn up data showing Alexander ever taught her.

All this makes it unlikely that Alexander had ever ‘treated’ both Maud Beerbohm Tree and Herbert Beerbohm Tree.

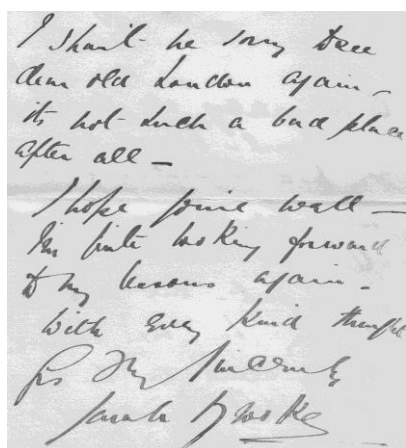


Figure 12: Sarah Brooke (1910), extract from letter to Alexander, dated 1 October 1910, on stationery of Hotel Astor New York. Figure 13: Sarah Brooke. Figure 14: Lily Langtry. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

Lily Brayton, Viola Tree, Oscar Asche, H. B. Irving, Matheson Lang,

Obviously, this does *not* mean that *none* of the actors listed by Alexander as his actor clients profited from his voice production and respiratory teaching — or treatment in his words. The *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star* (1909) reported Alexander “intimated that he treated Miss Lily Brayton with complete success,” and the *Nottingham Evening Post* (1909) wrote that Matheson Lang and Harry B. Irving “said that [Alexander’s] treatment had benefited them.”

H.B. Irving had paid Alexander £60 in all and must have had between 25 and 50 lessons — since he paid “a guinea a lesson if he went to [Alexander], and two guineas if [Alexander] came to him. He derived benefit” (*Standard*, 1909).

On February 2, 1906, H. B. Irving wrote to Alexander,

It gives me great pleasure to have an opportunity of saying how much I appreciate the good you have done me both in my work and my health. You have made a new man of me. I don’t think I can say more than that. (Alexander & Alexander, n.d., p. 2; Alexander, 1909).

A few months after the lawsuit on July 30, 1909, Irving (1909) again acknowledged he had “derived great benefit from Mr. Alexander’s work” — this time in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (see also Staring, 2003 for the context of his Letter to the Editor in the *Pall Mall Gazette*).

Oscar Asche's (1929) autobiography explains: Alexander "had a system of breathing which *cured* and *prevented* throat-trouble. To [H. B. Irving] came Alexander, and in a little over a week had him fit again" (p.113; italics added). Of course, whether this can be attributed to Alexander remains an open question. However, Asche did *not* write that Alexander had taught him, or 'treated' him in Alexander's words; he only memorized Alexander taught his wife Lily Brayton as well as H. B. Irving (p. 113). In a letter to Alexander, dated 23 January 1906, written on Adelphi Theatre stationery, Asche also merely referred to his wife having lessons from Alexander; he did not indicate he himself had had any lesson (Alexander, 1909).

Note that Asche, as Manager of the Adelphi Theatre, wrote this on *exactly* the same day as Manager of His Majesty's Theatre Beerbohm Tree wrote his letter to Alexander (see above). One may ask, a mere coincidence? Three days later, on January 26, Lily Brayton thanked Alexander in a letter written on Adelphi Theatre stationery for the "great benefit" she had derived from his method (Alexander, 1909; Alexander & Alexander, n.d.; see *Note 3*).

Matheson Lang (1940), who at the July 30, 1909, court case 'Alexander v. Loraine' "spoke to undergoing [Alexander's] course of treatment," and who had taken over 100 lessons by mid-1909, declared "the treatment was very beneficial to him" (*Standard*, 1909). He would later write in his autobiography that Alexander had helped him "enormously" (p. 85). And, a few months after the 1909 lawsuit, in a letter to Alexander dated 26 November 1909, on stationery of the Lyceum Theatre, Lang declared he had "derived great benefit" from Alexander's "work" (Alexander, 1909).

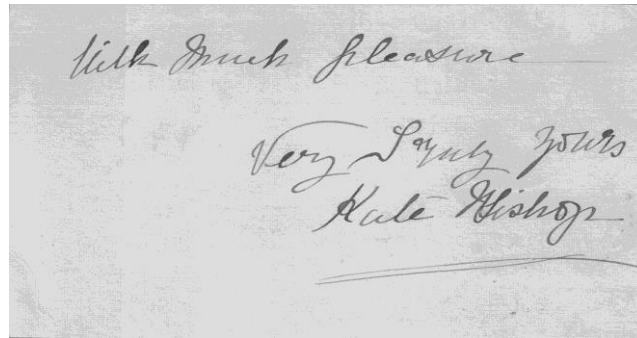


Figure 15: Marie Löhr. Figure 16: Kate Bishop (n.d.), note on postcard, dated 7 October 19??; Bishop is Marie Löhr's mother. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

According to the *Daily Telegraph* (1909), Alexander declared at the 1909 judicial proceedings, "Miss Viola Tree has been coming to me for lessons for a long time." In a letter to him, dated 23 January 1907, written on of His Majesty's Theatre's stationery, Viola Tree already hoped his method would "be put into general use — in the theatrical world and in all worlds" (Alexander, 1909). On the other hand, Viola Tree's (1926) published correspondence since the start of her singing career in the spring of 1909 does not mention Alexander.

Concluding this section, for what it can mean in this respect, Alexander is known to have received photos autographed by Lily Brayton, Sarah Brooke, Norah Kerin, Viola Tree, and H. B. Irving (enacademic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/3956218). These actresses and actor thanked him or sent him good wishes, but did not mention 'lessons,' 'treatment,' or 'benefit.'

James Welch and A Question of Time

Another actor who reportedly profited from Alexander's lessons was James Welch. AT teacher Lulie Westfeldt (1964) vouched how Alexander liked to tell her and other AT teacher training course students an anecdote regarding Edwardian actor 'Jimmy' James Welch.

What [Alexander] most enjoyed telling us about when he recalled those early days was the play *When Knights Were Bold* and his work with Jimmy Welch, the leading

comedian...Welch had collapsed *after* the first night of the play, and [Alexander's] job was to get him in such shape that he could carry on. Alexander succeeded in doing this and the play had a long run with Jimmy at the helm. (p. 51; italics added).

It is conceivable that Alexander referred to the inaugural performance of *When Knights Were Bold* at the Theatre Royal in Nottingham on September 17, 1906. Or, perhaps more likely, Alexander referred to the very first performance in London, at Wyndham's Theatre, on January 29, 1907. According to Bloch (2004) Alexander "saved the career of the comedian James Welch, a patient of Dr Jakins, after he had collapsed *on* the opening night of *When Knights Were Bold* at Wyndham's Theatre in 1906 [*sic*]" (p. 70; italics added). And American journalist Michael March (1945) wrote, "The *première* of the famous comedy, *When Knights Were Bold*...was darkened by the collapse of the tubercular James Welch" (p. 6).

After a number of performances of *When Knights Were Bold* in Nottingham in September 1906, Welch and his theatre company toured Wales, Scotland and England before they had a "long run" of the comedy at Wyndham's Theatre in London between January 29, 1907 and August 22, 1908 (Wearing, 2014). Yet, neither 1906 reviews of the inaugural night in Nottingham in the *Nottingham Daily Express* (1906) and *Nottingham Evening Post* (1906), nor 1907 reviews of the opening night in London in the *Guardian* (1907), *Illustrated London News* (1907), *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (1907), *Observer* (1907), *Sketch* (1907; E. F. S., 1907), the *Stage* (1907a) and the *Times* (1907) reported an incident as allegedly told by Alexander to Westfeldt and others — a story that Bloch and March gave even more drama.



Figure 17: Mrs. Maud Beerbohm Tree. Figure 18: Henry Beerbohm Tree. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

Interestingly, Welch sent a letter to Alexander, dated 22 September 1908, written on Wyndham's Theatre stationery. The letter's text was printed in a leaflet (Alexander, 1909):

I have nothing much to say to you about your treatment of me [but] the result has been magical. When Dr. — first sent me to you I was *nearly* "outed" with this part of Sir Guy in "When Knights were Bold." That was nearly two years ago. (Italics added).

It seems Welch in his letter referred to an occurrence where he, by the end of 1906, had been "nearly outed" — whatever that may have been. Anyway, Welch's memory slightly differed from Alexander's. During the winter of 1907, after having consulted a physician — who referred him to Alexander — Welch frequented Alexander's teaching room in London.

In October 1908, Welch gracefully — perhaps even gratefully — tributed Alexander by staging *A Question of Time*, a melodramatic drawing-room comedy written by Alexander and playwright Evelyn Glover (Alexander & Glover, 1908). The one-act farce depicts a hilarious early nineteenth-century evening at the house of farmer Jacob Rimmer and his wife Mary — both speaking with a 'North Country' accent. Their daughter Esther and her lover James Halsall speak 'proper' English. The two lovers are nearly caught by Jacob. James hides in the clock. The clock falls on the lamp, and the lights are out. Jacob thinks there's a ghost in the house, *etc.* The Eighth Volume of the Lord Chamberlain's Day Books in the British

Library states that only two theatres procured the Lord Chamberlain's license to stage the comedy. The Comedy Theatre (now Harold Pinter Theatre) applied for 5 May 1908, the Coronet Theatre for 26 October 1908. The Comedy Theatre never performed the farce; the *only* performance of the play was on Monday October 26, 1908 in the Coronet.

Just a handful of newspapers announced the upcoming performance of *A Question of Time* (*Brighton Gazette*, 1908; *Daily Telegraph*, 1908b-c; *Era*, 1908; *Morning Post*, 1908; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 1908b). The farce also received few reviews. The *Bystander* (1908) stated it “was by no means unwelcome at the Coronet Theatre...though it is a mere episode...The dialect was wonderfully well spoken and the acting praiseworthy.” The *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (1908) talked about “simple-minded fun;” the *Stage* (1908) observed, “The four members of the cast made the best of rather poor material;” the *Standard* (1908a) stated a “good deal of laughter is aroused by the boisterous humour of the piece;” and the *Daily Telegraph* (1908a) judged, “the best that can be said of it is that it lasted little more than a quarter of an hour.”

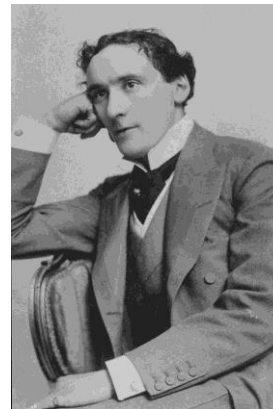


Figure 19: George Alexander. Figure 20: Matheson Lang. Figure 21: Harry Brodrigg Irving. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

Gawain (1908) reported in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* that *A Question of Time* was immediately withdrawn and was no longer performed after October 26, 1908.

The first of the three new West End front pieces was *A Question of Time*, by Matthias Alexander and Evelyn Glover, and produced at the Coronet last Monday by Comedian James Welch in front of his great London (and now ditto touring) success, *When Knights Were Bold*. *A Question of Time*, which only occupied about fifteen minutes of that precious commodity, was withdrawn after the first night. Welch has expressed to me his regret at this front play's fate, for he assured me that it “read” admirably and that it was indeed originally accepted by that sound judge, Dion (or Dot) Boucicault, for production at the Comedy. (*Italics added; J.S.*)

Helen Palgrave and Harold Carson, two fairly unknown actors, and Daisy Cordell and George Tully who later became silent movie actors, played the four characters (*Era*, 1909b). Note that Palgrave, Cordell and Tully as members of Welch's theatre company later that evening in the Coronet Theatre performed in the three-act farce *When Knights Were Bold* (Wearing, 2014).

It is striking, perhaps ostentatious, that since that time Alexander never mentioned his and Glover's *A Question of Time* in his stories about Welch, or while telling other anecdotes, and only once referred to Evelyn Glover in his writings (Alexander, 1932, p. x). In turn, Evelyn Glover also never mentioned *A Question of Time* and only once referred to Alexander in her writings (Glover, 1938, p. 38; see also *Note 4*).

Sir Henry Irving

Westfeldt's story about James Welch (above) has some important similarities to an anecdote in Matheson Lang's (1940) autobiography. As of March 1909, Alexander aided Lang when playing Hamlet at the Lyceum. Alexander came "night after night to the theatre to see me safely through the performance...and from that help has grown a friendship which has lasted ever since" (p. 86). In a very similar anecdote with respect to Sir Henry Irving, Michael March (1945) wrote that Alexander had kept "nightly vigil in the prompt box" while Irving performed. American AT teacher Frank Pierce Jones (1976, p. 19) added Alexander's bluff to March's anecdote. Alexander checked whether Irving did what he had taught him to do.

Sir Henry used to keep [Alexander] in the wings while he was on stage in order to have his professional help between acts. Alexander told me that he used to sit with a book in his hands threatening to throw it at Irving if he pulled his head back while he was speaking. "He knew that I would do it, too," he added.

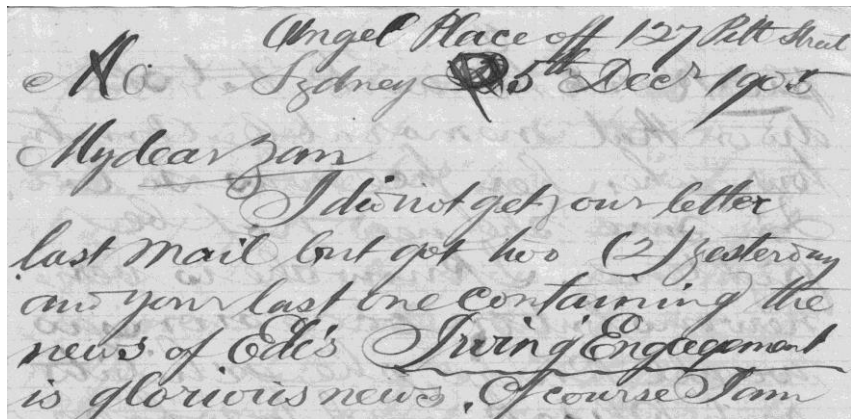


Figure 22: Daisy Cordell and James Welch (in *When Knights Were Bold*). Figure 23: Robert Young (1905i), extract from his letter to Alexander, dated 25 December 1905; "Ede" is Young's wife Edith Tasca Page; "Irving" is H. B. Irving. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

If it were true, the "nightly vigil" could have lasted only a short period. Alexander had arrived in London in June 1904, had to settle down, establish a name as voice production and respiratory teacher, build a clientele, *etc.* His first newspaper ads in England appeared around seven months after his arrival in London — in the *Morning Post* of January 4, 1905 and in the *Daily Telegraph* of January 12, 1905.

On January 19, 1905, Irving wrote to Alexander, "I am very sorry that for a time I am obliged to suspend my interesting experience...I look forward to an opportunity of meeting you again" (Alexander, 1909; Alexander & Alexander, n.d., p. 1). The message seems to show all the characteristics of a polite way to thank someone for a very brief contact, in this case perhaps also for a small demonstration of Alexander's methods, and to say goodbye — forever. Bloch (2004, p. 68) thinks the meeting took place after Christmas 1904:

From September 1904 to February 1905, Irving toured the provinces...but after Christmas, suffering from exhaustion, he took an extended break in London and Bournemouth. It seems to have been during this period that he first saw [Alexander].

Bloch then estimates, more precisely: speculates, the nightly vigil mentioned above occurred from April to June 1905, "when Irving gave his last London performances, playing Becket at the Drury Lane Theatre" (p. 68), a few months before his death in October of that year.

Even though many books about Alexander mention that he treated Irving, he is not mentioned or referenced in any biography of Irving. Irving's Manager and Secretary Bram Stoker should certainly have recollected such a dramatic period in Henry Irving's life as described by Bloch, Jones and March — if it had happened. As Irving's Manager, Stoker should have been responsible for an arrangement between Irving and Alexander as described by Jones. However, Stoker's (1906a-b) biography of Irving, already published exactly a year after Irving's death, does not mention or refer to

Alexander at all. As well, it was Stoker as Irving's Secretary who was the author of the overwhelming majority of Irving's letters — not Irving himself. Baker (2004) states Stoker wrote "around half a million letters on Irving's behalf." Bloch's (2004, pp. 68-69) biography of Alexander has more about Irving:

From what [Alexander] told [London AT teacher trainer Walter Carrington], Irving took a considerable liking to [Alexander] and asked him to stay on in his dressing room after lessons, sometimes talking to him for hours on end...While there is little to corroborate the existence of the friendly relationship [Alexander] claimed briefly to have had with Sir Henry...we must assume the relationship did exist, for [Henry Irving's son H. B. Irving] would have known the truth of the matter, and he never ceased to be a supporter of [Alexander].

Robert Young wrote to his friend Alexander in London on March 3, 1905, "I see Sir Henry Irving is ill" (Young, 1905a). A few months later that year, in a section of a letter from mid-June where he discussed Lily Brayton's lessons, Young (1905d) supposed Alexander might "*eventually meet Sir Henry*" (italics added; see *Figure 25*). If, however, Alexander had done what Bloch, Jones and March recounted, he most certainly would have enthusiastically told his mother and brother in Melbourne and Robert Young in Sydney about it in his letters to them between April and June, 1905. They, in turn, would have been equally or even more lyrical in their responding letters to him. There are however no indications in their 1905 letters in the author's collection and in a separate Private Collection (see *Note 5*) that Alexander did what Bloch, Jones and March wrote in their biographies of Alexander.

All the same, Alexander began teaching Henry Irving's son Harry Brodribb Irving at some time in the spring of 1905. Between April 4 and June 6, H. B. Irving performed as Hamlet at the Adelphi Theatre — Lily Brayton as Ophelia, Maud Beerbohm Tree as Gertrude, and Oscar Asche as Claudius. Early in May, however, Irving got the flu. Another actor played Hamlet between May 9 and May 15 when Irving, suffering from the after-effects of influenza, recovered during a short stay in Herne Bay (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1905; *Western Daily Press*, 1905). This is likely the period in which Irving had his first lessons. On July 30, 1909, at the Westminster County Court case 'Alexander v. Loraine,' Irving gave evidence that he "was performing in 'Hamlet,' when he lost his voice, and went to" Alexander (*Standard*, 1909). Irving heard of Alexander "from Mr. Oscar Asche, and went through a course of lessons with complete success" (*Leader*, 1909). Asche declared that Alexander was "clever at *curing loss of voice*" (*Nottingham Daily Express*, 1909; italics added). Asche (1929, p. 113) would later write about Irving's lessons, "To [H. B. Irving] came Alexander, and in a little over a week had him fit again" (see also above).

A. R. Alexander (n.d.) wrote in an undated letter to his brother in London,

Your ever welcome letter to hand this morning and we are more than delighted to hear of your great luck in *getting* H. B. Irving, that is really splendid and means a great deal as far as your success is concerned, and by all accounts, your place is established beyond doubt. (Italics added).

As well, Alexander received a letter, dated 19 June 1905, in which Robert Young (1905d) confessed he had speculated Alexander "would *get* [Sir Henry Irving] but of course it was only a flash of thought" (Italics added). Still, Young expected Alexander would "have plenty of pleasant hours in [H. B. Irving's] company." Alexander's mother Betsy Alexander (1905c) wrote to him on June 27, "I am so pleased you have made such a success of H. B. Irving what does it all mean to you in the future. My boy's name will resound all over big London I feel sure of that." And a day later A. R. Alexander (1905a) wrote,

It is really splendid news about Irving & Miss Tree you are absolutely made in the Big City and you are sure to *get* a number of the big people through the good results. (Italics added).

H. B. Irving's course of lessons probably lasted until around mid-September 1905, because in a letter dated 6 October 1905, Young (1905h) wrote to Alexander, "Hope you keep in touch with H. B. Irving [&] that you *get* Beerbohm Tree" (italics added).

Bloch (2004, pp. 67-68) states that Alexander regarded Sir Henry Irving “little short of God, and later told [his student] Walter Carrington that his greatest ambition in life had been to meet him.” As indicated above, Alexander had briefly met Irving, probably not long after Christmas 1904, and possibly he even gave Irving a demonstration of his methods.

On May 22, 1905, the second greatest wish of Alexander was fulfilled: he saw Henry Irving, his stage God, perform as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* — a role he had himself played more than once before he left Australia. On March 18, 1905, probably knowing about Irving’s upcoming London farewell season between April 29 and June 10, Robert Young (1905b) had already asked Alexander, “I suppose you will hear Sir Henry Irving soon now.” On June 12, he then ‘checked’ his friend, “I suppose you have seen Irving in some other Character than ‘Beckett’ [*sic*]” (Young, 1905c). Young must have known that Irving at the time performed at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in four plays: *A Story of Waterloo*, *Louis XI*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Becket*. And a day later, perhaps after having received another letter from Alexander, he wrote, “Yes you will like Irving in doubt in ‘Shylock’ — that part ought to be right in his line now as he has reached advanced age” (Young, 1905c).

On June 6, 1905, assumedly only knowing her son had planned to attend one of Irving’s performances during his London farewell season between 29 April and 10 June, Alexander’s mother wrote to him, “What a treat to hear Irving I quite envy you in a way because I know he is a man of great genius & that says much” (B. Alexander, 1905a). On June 13, Alexander’s mother wrote, “My heart knows no bound [*sic*] the joy your news has given me. Words cannot express all I feel. To think my little boy with the great Irving[’s] son & all the big people” (B. Alexander, 1905b). And on June 21, she wrote,

I wish I could have seen you in your grand box at the theatre & also to see the great Sir Henery [*sic*] as Shylock. I do love that play...I am pleased you have the great pleasure of hearing him. I am sure you always wished to hear that great man. (B. Alexander, 1905c).

Yet, no matter how immensely proud Alexander’s mother was, it would have been multiplied a dozen times in case the anecdotes of Alexander teaching Sir Henry Irving, told by Bloch and March and by many AT teachers like Walter Carrington and Frank Pierce Jones would have been true. However, we can only conclude that until May 22, 1905 nothing of the kind had occurred. The letter of Alexander’s mother, dated 21 June 1905, cited above, shows that Alexander on that day — most probably in the company of H. B. Irving — witnessed how Henry Irving acted as the villain Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Next, on June 26, Robert Young (1905e) wrote to Alexander he was “overjoyed to hear of the great good news re H. B. I. [= H. B. Irving]. I am sure you must feel very gratified and we are all so delighted.” And again he assured his friend, “I hope you meet Sir Henry.”

Now, did a meeting take place between Irving and Alexander, or not?

On June 10, Henry Irving had ended his short farewell season in London. Then, almost four weeks later, the tone of Young’s letters to Alexander suddenly turned extremely exuberant. On July 4, Young (1905f) wrote, “Your success with Sir Henry...and the whole business is simply enough to make me say “Am I awake! Is it all true” or “Do I dream?” He added he would inform acquaintances about the good news regarding H. B. Irving and Henry Irving. He thought one of them would “use some strong language when I tell him about Sir Henry.” And finally, on July 15, Young (1905g) wrote,

Your last letter received and I am glad to hear that you have continued with Sir Henry. You note what I say in my last re the *communion with this great man*. It is certainly a splendid privilege for one and I know you will appreciate it. (Italics added).

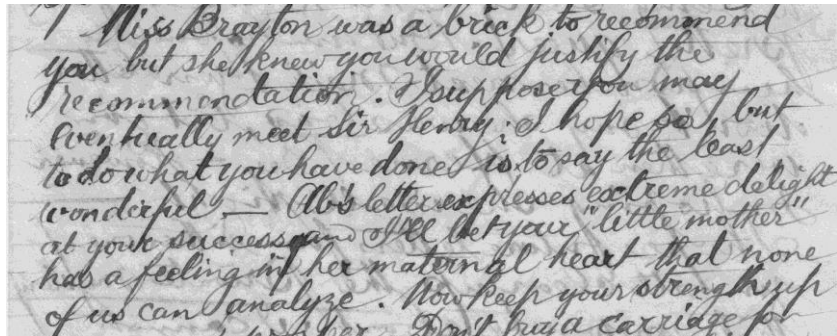


Figure 24: Sir Henry Irving. Figure 25: Robert Young (1905d), extract from letter to Alexander, dated 19 June 1905, re. Lily Brayton and Sir Henry Irving; “Ab” is F. M. Alexander’s brother A. R. Alexander in Melbourne, Australia. (Jeroen Staring Collection.)

The phrases “you have continued with Sir Henry” and “communion with this great man” may perhaps trigger speculation and fantasy about whether Henry Irving has had a few lessons after all and whether those lessons brought relief to his failing health (compare Stoker 1906b; Terry, 1908). Research, however, did not turn up any data showing that Irving had indeed had *any* lesson from Alexander in April, May and June, 1905. Instead, in the most positive scenario, Young’s remarks may well indicate that Alexander tried, and probably succeeded to attend a kind of ‘meet & greet’ with Sir Henry Irving — possibly arranged by Irving’s son H. B. Irving. Furthermore, the religious connotation of Young’s (1905g) phrase “communion with this great man” indicates a temporary, short lasting, purifying, inspiring, energetic, powerful, togetherness with a divine person. The phrase certainly does not indicate a longer lasting friendly relationship as described by Bloch and others.

Next, as of mid-July 1905 the subject ‘Henry Irving’ almost completely disappeared from letters to Alexander. This would definitely not have happened if Alexander had indeed taught Irving, stayed in Irving’s dressing room after lessons, talking to Irving, *etc.*

The subject ‘Henry Irving’ re-appeared briefly after Irving died on October 13, 1905. A. R. Alexander (1905b) wrote to his brother in London, “I suppose Sir H. Irving’s death came as a great shock to you, it was very sudden indeed; poor old chap.”

Finally, it is striking that Alexander during the legal action ‘Alexander v. Loraine’ in July 1909 (see above) did not mention that he had taught Henry Irving in 1905, or that he had ‘treated’ him that year. Alexander would certainly have mentioned Irving if the stories about him told by Barlow (1973), Bloch (2004), Carrington (1969, 1996), Evans (2001), Jones (1976), Maisel (1969), March (1945), Rickover (1988) and many other AT teachers and Alexander adepts would have been true. Yet, Alexander did not even quote the *Onlooker* of 24 March 1906 about Henry Irving and other “eminent pupils” who allegedly had “derived *incalculable benefit* from [Alexander’s] instruction” (*Onlooker*, 1906, p. 634; italics added). This is all the more striking because Alexander had quoted the *Onlooker*’s assessment before — in the undated advertising pamphlet *Eulogistic Letters from Leading London Artistes Concerning Messrs. Alexander’s new method of Vocal Respiratory Re-Education* (Alexander & Alexander, n.d.). Finally, letters sent to Alexander written in 1905 by his mother, his best friend, a brother and a brother-in-law in the author’s collection and the Private Collection mentioned (see *Note 5*) do not indicate that Irving has *ever* had lessons from him.

Conclusion

Two Edwardian actresses and one Edwardian actor who allegedly had lessons from Alexander have not yet been mentioned. Bloch (2004) states George Alexander had one lesson. Writings by Carrington (1979), March (1945) and Westfeldt (1964) pose that Alice Crawford has had lessons, while Barlow (1973) wrote that Lily Langtry was among Alexander’s pupils.

A. R. Alexander (1904a) wrote in a August 17, 1904, letter, “Hope you convince Alexander” and he asked two weeks later, “How did you get on with George Alexander?” (1904b). He probably did not get a reply. Why? Bloch (2004, p. 67; italics added) explains:

‘Hope you *get* [George] Alexander,’ wrote [A. R. Alexander] to [F. M. Alexander] on 24 October 1904, ‘it would be great if you could fix his throat for him after all the specialists had failed.’ Apparently George Alexander did have a lesson with [F. M. Alexander]; but he chose not to repeat the experience, and when presented with his

bill, accused him of ‘practising extortion’. Clearly, there would be no support from that quarter.

The table below (*Figure 26*) shows 17 names of actresses and actors who have been mentioned by Alexander as having been taught and/or treated by him. Alice Crawford and Lily Langtry have not been added to the list because unfortunately no source is known that gives (further) details. And, George Alexander has not been added to Alexander’s list because Bloch does not refer to a source open to investigation (he referred to Walter Carrington†).

A question mark in the table indicates when the number of lessons an actress or actor has had is not known. When the number of lessons is either listed as 1 or as 4, one cannot assume a circumstance where Alexander taught or ‘treated’ the actress or actor during a course of lessons, or perhaps demonstrated his methods; therefore, in these cases, when no statement about ‘benefit’ has been found, a ‘NO’ is listed in the ‘Benefit’ column. When an actress or actor’s number of lessons could not be established, and also no statement about ‘benefit’ has been found, a double omega is listed in the ‘Benefit’ column.

In his advertisements, advertising pamphlets, and his statements during the court case on 30 July 1909, discussed above in this case study, Alexander listed 17 actresses and actors in total who had had lessons from him. Judging from the information in sections above, only 7 of those 17 persons can be listed as having benefited from the lessons — as clearly stated by them. Incomplete information about 3 actresses and 1 actor does not lead to any conclusion regarding them. Subsequently, 2 actors definitely did not derive any benefit from their lessons from Alexander — as they themselves have argued at the court case on 30 July 1909. Further, 1 actor who had 4 lessons merely tried to form his opinion on Alexander’s lessons to advise his actress-daughter; it was not his intention to gain benefit from Alexander’s lessons. Lastly, 1 actress and 1 actor mentioned by Alexander had only one lesson, and 1 actress had 4 lessons, numbers too low to be able to honestly state whether someone would benefit from it.

Therefore, this account can only confirm that 7 of the 17 Edwardian actresses and actors, mentioned by Alexander, have benefited from his lessons; 6 have not benefited, and we cannot conclude anything for the other 4 people.

Postscript

The reader wonders — perhaps a little less after reading the above: Was Frederick Matthias Alexander between 1904 and 1910 really known as a, or perhaps *the*, voice production and breathing instructor who treated eminent actresses and actors of his time, as he, AT teachers and Alexander adepts want us to believe? Reports of the July 30, 1909 Westminster County Court case ‘Alexander v. Loraine’ (*e.g.*, Watson, 1909) give an alarming picture to those who actually believe Alexander (and his followers) — by revealing that the summoned expert witness Professor Dr. William Hayman Cummings, then Principal of the London Guildhall School of Music and Drama, had never heard of Alexander or his methods.

Actress/Actor	Lessons	Benefited	Actress/Actor	Lessons	Benefited
<i>Oscar Asche</i>	?	ΩΩ	<i>Matheson Lang</i>	100	Yes
<i>Dora Barton</i>	?	ΩΩ	<i>Marie Löhr</i>	4	No
<i>Kate Bishop</i>	1	No	<i>Robert Loraine</i>	15	No
<i>Lily Brayton (Mrs. Asche)</i>	?	Yes	<i>Herbert B. Tree</i>	4	No
<i>Sarah Brooke</i>	?	Yes	<i>Maud B. Tree</i>	?	ΩΩ
<i>Constance Collier</i>	?	Yes	<i>Viola Tree</i>	150-200	Yes
<i>Harry B. Irving</i>	circa 25-50	Yes	<i>Lewis Waller</i>	4	No
<i>Sir Henry Irving</i>	0 or 1	No	<i>James Welch</i>	?	Yes
<i>Norah Kerin</i>	?	ΩΩ			

Figure 26: Table showing names of actresses/actors, number of lessons taught by Alexander, and whether actresses/actors (indicated to have had) benefited from Alexander’s lessons, or not.

Notes

1. This way of advertising his voice production and breathing methods was not unusual in his case. For instance, the *Morning Post* of January 4, 1905 had Alexander’s (1905b) announcement:

Respiration and Vocalisation. Write for Mr. F. Matthias Alexander’s pamphlet on “The Cultivation and Development of the Human Voice.”

The notification most probably refers to *Mr. F. Matthias Alexander — Specialist in Respiration*, an undated 4-page pamphlet (Alexander, n.d.). This pamphlet carries the under-title ‘Founder of a Respiratory Method which has been imparted for ten years in Australia and since June, 1904, in London, To Patients of Leading Members of the Medical Profession Of Melbourne, Sydney and London and successfully applied in the *Cultivation & Development of the Human Voice*, And in Physical (Body) Development’ (italics added). During the years preceding his departure for London in spring 1904, Alexander had frequently used the expression ‘The Cultivation and Development of the Human Voice’ in Australian newspaper ads and advertorials (e.g., Alexander, 1903, 1904). Even Australian media at the time used the expression while reporting on his activities (e.g., *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1900).

Next, in June 1906, Alexander (1906b) published his booklet *Introduction to a New Method of Respiratory Vocal Re-Education*, and immediately started to refer to it in a 16 June *Morning Post* advertisement (Alexander, 1906a). Following the announcement in July in the medical journal *The Lancet*’s (1906b) that they had received a copy of the booklet, the *Lancet* (1906a) in September informs its readers Alexander had written a letter to the *Lancet*’s Editor. The letter was never published; perhaps Alexander referenced his 1906 booklet in it?

Last in this list of examples, in 1908, following the publication of ‘The Dangers of Deep Breathing’ — a Letter to the Editor in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of March 14 (Alexander 1908b) — and a small pamphlet (Alexander, 1908c), Alexander (1908a) referenced these texts in a *Morning Post* advertisement. Judging in retrospect, all of these activities already formed part and parcel of Alexander’s advertising strategy since his 1895 New Zealand tour (see Staring, 2009).

2. When Elsie Watson (1909) reported the Westminster County Court case for the Sydney, Australia newspaper *Evening News*, she wrote that Judge Woodfall “thought that the man who had treated Miss Kate Bishop and Miss Marie Löhr, the whole acting Tree family, H. B. Irving, Lily Brayton, and was recommended by Oscar Asche, was no quack.” The Judge was probably unaware of the fact that he spoke not of one, but of several acting families; Marie Löhr was Kate Bishop’s daughter and Lily Brayton was married to Oscar Asche.

3. Letters from Alexander’s mother, his brother A. R. Alexander, and his friend Robert Young in my collection and in a separate Private Collection (see Note 5), written in 1904 and 1905, addressed to F. M. Alexander, indicate that actress Lily Brayton followed lessons during several, different periods in 1904 and 1905, and that Alexander visited Liverpool in the autumn of 1905 to be of her assistance.

4. Interesting enough in this connection: in September 1904 — three months after Alexander — Australian actress Edith Tascapage arrived from Australia in England (Bloch, 2004). She was a long-time close friend of Alexander and was married to Robert Young, Alexander’s best friend in Australia. (After Young died in September 1910, Tascapage became Alexander’s wife in August 1914.) Already in November 1904 she gave a “very pleasing performance, full of simple and genuine sentiment” as Ivy Arden in *The Union Jack* (*Era*, 1904). In 1907 she was elected a member of the Actors’ Association (*Era*, 1907a-b). Her husband Robert Young’s 1905 letters to Alexander show that Alexander helped her meet influential London actresses and actors and find a job at one of the London theatre companies (e.g., Figure 23). In the autumn of 1907, Edith Tascapage replaced an actress in Welch’s company. From November 1907 to well into 1908 she played the Beehive’s widowed landlady in *The Boatswain’s Mate*, at that time the front piece of *When Knights Were Bold* at Wyndham’s Theatre (*Morning Post*, 1907b; *Stage*, 1907b; *Standard*, 1908b; Wearing, 2014). Perhaps Welch already then, in 1907, played a grateful student of Alexander’s methods in this coincidence?

5. The author appreciates the assistance and permission given to cite letters addressed to F. M. Alexander, ‘Private Collection’ as in Bibliography below.

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