

Moving into Performance: Using the Principles of the Alexander Technique to Underpin and Enhance an Actor's Training

Niamh Dowling

What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!¹

Born in Tasmania in 1869, Frederick Mathias Alexander was an actor. In his first book, *The Use of the Self*, he quotes Hamlet with all his optimism and belief in the potential of mankind. However, like Hamlet who finds that 'Man delights not me', Alexander continues:

But these words seemed to me now to be contradicted by what I had discovered in myself and others. For what could be less 'noble in reason', less 'infinite in faculty' than that man, despite his potentialities, should have fallen into such error in the use of himself, and in this way brought about such a lowering in his standards of functioning that in everything he attempts to accomplish, these harmful conditions tend to become more and more exaggerated? In consequence, how many people are there today of whom it may be said, as regards their use of themselves, 'in form and moving how express and admirable'? Can we any longer consider man in this regard 'the paragon of animals'?²

Plagued with severe tension and vocal strain, Alexander noticed that in performance he experienced hoarseness and chronic vocal fatigue. He and his doctors eventually realised that it was something in the way he used his body on stage that caused him to lose his voice. By observing himself in performance and in everyday life, using a mirror, he noticed that as he spoke he shortened the back of his neck and pulled his head backwards, depressing his larynx and sucking his breath through his mouth. In performance this habit became exaggerated, putting pressure on his vocal folds and creating tension in his neck, shoulders and arms. The tension had a knock-on effect throughout his body and he came to realise that the voice, breath and body

were all closely related and could not be dealt with separately. He realised, too, that he was doing something in his use that interfered with the natural engagement of his vocal mechanism. He recognised that his *use affected his functioning*.

Many of the problems in performance are the direct result of the way actors use their bodies; *how* they do what they are doing. The way they consciously or unconsciously do things in their everyday life affects the way they function, and therefore the way they perform. Consider this in relation to the voice: a young actor slumped in a contemporary posture, hands in the pocket of low-slung jeans, gaze dropped, shoulders rounded and collapsed into the front of the body. In this posture, the actor is compressing the spine and the ribcage, squashing the diaphragm and leaving no space for the efficient working of the breath. Even a slightly collapsed and compressed spine and ribcage cause excess pressure and create tension in the diaphragm and on the delicately suspended larynx. How, then, can this actor recreate the posture and voice of a character without collapsing?

Contemporary voice practitioners such as Patsy Rodenburg,³ Cicely Berry,⁴ Kristin Linklater,⁵ Barbara Houseman,⁶ Rob Macdonald⁷ and Jane Ruby Heirich⁸ recognise that the voice is affected by physical use. Each therefore begins voice training with attention to the body, emphasising that an awareness of posture and physical tension is paramount to understanding the way in which the functioning of the voice is affected by the use of the body. If the tension in the body is released, there is an immediate impact on the vocal facility. The sounds are fuller, richer, deeper and more resonant and the words themselves have colour, texture and depth. Because the breath is not interfered with by habitual tension, it is more supported and the body itself more connected and grounded.

Rob Macdonald acknowledges the role of posture in voice work:

Because the voice is suspended in the body, its free activity depends on the postural mechanism working efficiently; any inefficiency of the postural body will impose limitations on the voice. The Alexander Technique, by bringing about natural body support, gives the voice the support it needs and the chance to work freely. It then helps us move into energised activity while avoiding any interference that limits it.⁹

Alexander recognised that stiffening his neck and pulling his head back began the series of muscular responses that produced the misuse of his whole body and voice and triggered a series of habitual muscular responses.

The pattern of habitual muscular responses is intended for emergencies or short periods of alarm – an instinctive reflex designed to deal with danger and threat. We stop, pause, brace, tighten our muscles, hold our breath, investigate and respond. If the threat is severe, or repeated, the startled pattern may deepen. We may collapse or freeze in the shoulders, tighten in

the back, lock in the knees, pull the neck forward or back, drop the gaze or become rooted to the spot. This reaction can then persist or increase until it becomes a continuous part of the physical structure. Situations of stress can exaggerate the everyday pattern, causing a greater change in the musculature and posture, the shape of the diaphragm, constriction in the throat and neck, a change in the body's relationship to gravity and an alteration of physical sensations, emotions and thinking. These physical and vocal patterns will have a resulting psychological and emotional affect. The physical, vocal and emotional demands of performance create a potential situation of stress for actors, so their everyday habitual pattern will become exaggerated.

Think back to the acting student with the exaggerated collapsed and slumped posture: sagging head, sunken chest, depressed diaphragm and abdomen and pelvis protruding. The student appears caved in, collapsed, low in self-confidence and pulled down. There are associated feelings and emotional states and the actor can appear disinterested, detached, apathetic, low in energy, as well as seeming resigned, weak, unappreciated – even resentful – and not engaged or proactive. Conversely, picture the acting student with an exaggerated, fixed, rigid structure: tight and frozen muscles, pulled-up legs, taut diaphragm, tense shoulders and arms. This one appears aggressive, braced and unable to soften: seeming to dominate, challenge and control. These are two acute examples of limiting extreme physicalities. The patterns that are fixed in the body deeply affect actors' capacity for transformation. They can physically transform only to the degree to which they can relinquish their own patterns. If actors do not relinquish these patterns, each of their characters will have the identical physicality as the actor with the same rhythm and emotional responses. They will not be able to move away from themselves physically or emotionally but will restrict their interpretation of the role to the realm of their own physical, emotional and vocal range, whereas in actor training we set out to expand the actor's range.

Stanislavski notices the effect of these patterns on the actor's work:

You cannot, at the beginning of our work, have any conception of the evil that results from muscular spasms and physical contraction. When such a condition occurs in the vocal organs a person with otherwise naturally good tones becomes hoarse or even loses his voice. If such a contraction attacks the legs, an actor walks like a paralytic: if it's in his hand, they grow numb and move like sticks. The same sort of spasms occur in the spine, the neck and the shoulders ... The spasm can attack the diaphragm and other organs connected with breathing and interfere with proper respiration and cause shortness of breath. This muscular tautness affects other parts of the body also and cannot but have a deleterious effect on the emotions the actor is

experiencing, his expression of them and his general state of feeling.¹⁰

The application of Alexander's principles in actor training proposes a *set of conditions* in the body's alignment rather than the adoption of a fixed *position*. It does not advocate – to the collapsed actor – standing up straight, with shoulders held back and chest pushed out. Rather, the achievement of control and freedom with the head moving forward and up, the back and spine lengthening and opening, widening across the upper part of the arms as the shoulders fall into the back, the knees unlocking – this encourages direction, alignment, inner support, greater rhythmic quality and vitality. Attention to the movement of the spine creates a moveable column that has freedom, flexibility and the potential for transformation.

These conditions are integral to movement and voice work for actors. With the set of *underlying principles* proposed by the Alexander technique, they can progress into any kind of training with an awareness of their use – whether in acting, voice, dance, combat, mask, physical theatre, singing or acrobatics. If they can become aware of their false sense of 'right' – a *faulty sensory perception* – they can learn to *notice*, to catch themselves *about* to move into a habitual pattern and then inhibit their response to it. This understanding, thinking in activity, relates to more than the physical: it is in fact integral to the whole acting process. It is a place where actors can learn that they must set up conditions before entering into work rather than attempt to repeat a scene and fix what they have discovered.

When Alexander noticed that it was his physical habits that brought about the strain in his voice in performance, he concluded that these vocal problems were the result of the misuse of his head and neck. He realised that there is a universal tendency to shorten the back of the neck and to pull the head back and he worked to find a way to prevent this habitual misuse. Wilfred Barlow emphasises how Alexander observed the head-neck relationship as being vital to the process:

He observed that the USE of the head-neck region was of paramount importance for psycho-physical functioning. Not only did Alexander delineate the nature of body misuse but, more importantly, he devised a method of extreme subtlety by means of which we can re-educate our faulty habits.¹¹

To undo the tendency to shorten the back of the neck, the student has to learn to release the powerful muscles that are pulling the head back and down by *thinking* or *directing* the head forward and up. In his initial experiments Alexander had tried to stop pulling his head back and down by pushing his head forward and up. This had not rectified the problem, so now he simply *thought* that he wanted his head to go forward and up and that he didn't want it to go back and down. This he described as *giving directions* to his nervous system and setting up *primary control*. Primary control describes the correct

relationship in posture and movement of the head, neck and spine; its maintenance during movement is essential to good body mechanics.

Glen Park summarises this in *The Art of Changing*:

If the primary control is working well in a person, there is an integrating and releasing activity occurring all the time throughout the mind and body, which is usually experienced as a feeling of lengthening and widening in the torso and of 'going up', and this is the essence of good use. Movement becomes more poised, lighter and freer. What stops primary control working well is that we interfere with its natural functioning.¹²

Alexander then took his attention to the moment *before* he began to speak, teaching himself to pause before the habitual pattern of pulling his neck back could begin. He decided that rather than trying to get it right, he should put all his attention to *not* doing it by way of stopping getting it *wrong*. This all-too-important decision to pause before moving into his habitual response he termed *inhibition*.

My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli, and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.¹³

Inhibition is a conscious action. In the moment of inhibition, the actor can make a choice about how to proceed. Conscious inhibition is the mental act of refusing to react in an automatic, habitual way. Inhibition is the start of having a choice about how to proceed. Without inhibition, the entire attempt to change one's habitual behaviour becomes redundant and meaningless. Learning consciously to inhibit gives the possibility of freedom from slavery to habits. It means we operate from choice and not from habit.

There are a number of techniques used in the training of actors that aim to develop kinaesthetic awareness in order to change previously unconscious habits of movement. The Alexander technique, Feldenkrais and Pilates share a similar understanding of body function and dysfunction and they each use different approaches to help individuals to learn to change the ways in which they move. They are all useful as an aid to postural alignment and as a means to relaxation and releasing tension, therefore contributing to the preparation for rehearsal and performance by calming and centring the actor, deflecting 'stage fright' and creating conditions for performance whereby there is no interference to the easy use of the breath and the direct access to emotions.

However, it is *conscious* inhibition that makes the Alexander technique distinctive from other movement education processes and that creates the moment of choice for the actor in rehearsal and performance. The moment of responding is not automatic but chosen. Having inhibited her/his initial response, the student takes this attention to giving specific *directions*: to

allow the neck to be free and to direct the head forward and up. As a result, the back lengthens and widens, opening across the upper part of the arms, and the knees are sent forward and away from the lower back. By inhibiting a habitual response and thinking in action, the student sets in motion the muscular mechanism essential to the correct performance of the monologue. This helps her/him to stay in the present and not to *end gain* – or to rush to create a ‘correct’ postural position. End-gaining means trying to reach our goal without much thought as to how we get there; the *process* must take priority over the *end result*. The muscles are being taught how to stay *in the present*: how to move from moment to moment, from thought to thought and not to jump to an end result, in the same way that the actor, by not anticipating what she/he knows will happen in the scene, allows it to play out and to gradually reveal the outcome. This is a very important aspect of an actor’s process for both rehearsal and performance and it is being learned here at a deep, muscular and sensory level. Once this is established, students can consider, with directions working and the set of useful conditions at play in the body, how they can be maintained in the playing of objectives.

Meade Andrews and Saura Bartner summarise this process.

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.¹⁴

The conscious act of thinking plays a crucial role in this re-education. The training actors are using thought and sometimes images as a means to encourage release and change in their body and voice. They use thinking to direct, open up and free the body and to create the conditions whereby they are receptive to new instructions. Actors are making their thinking disciplined, specific, and detailed and training their thoughts to effect changes in the body and voice.

The process deepens further in relation to an actor’s *rhythm*. Inherent in an individual’s identity is speed of movement and pace of speech. If actors hold onto their *own* physical and vocal rhythm while in character they will impose this rhythm on a text and their characters will speak and move in this way. In relinquishing habitual patterns and going through the process of inhibition and direction, the actor opens the way to *hear* the character’s

individual rhythm through the language. The breath comes easily, the voice becomes fuller and more resonant and the actor can inhabit the rhythm of the text and the character. The speed with which the character moves or speaks – how punctuation, pause or stress are placed on words in the text – reveals an important aspect of the character's individual personality.

Having put aside their own patterns, actors can inhabit characters physically, vocally, emotionally and imaginatively. This manifests itself in the actor's transformation into the character. The images within the text are revealed and they inform and infiltrate the open responsive body and bring about a psycho-physical unity. Images are the core of our imaginative life and the imagination acts as an interpretative and creative source for the actor.

Imagery is the body of our imaginative life, and our imaginative life is a great joy and fulfilment to us, for the imagination is a more powerful and more comprehensive flow of consciousness than our ordinary flow. In the flow of true imagination we know in full, mentally and physically at once, in a greater enkindled awareness. At the maximum of our imagination we are religious. And if we deny our imagination, and have no imaginative life, we are poor worms who have never lived.¹⁵

To summarise: the Alexander technique embodies a clear set of principles that aim to identify habits and introduce conditions for the psycho-physical training of the actor. These principles provide a framework within which spontaneity and freedom are aligned in a focused and open body and voice which is fully prepared to respond: a body in a state of alertness and readiness to react; the body and voice of an alive, vibrant, versatile, flexible, physically and emotionally connected performer who is ready to use the appropriate amount of tension for the task in hand. The ultimate stage in the process is the release and embodiment of the imagination, which acts as an interpretative and creative source of inspiration for the actor. The actor is *in the present*: in the process of discovering what lies within the text while imposing nothing on it. Images in the text become alive and vibrant and we, the audience, receive its specific detail – pictures, smells, tastes and sounds – as the inner thoughts of the character are revealed.

NOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Act II, scene ii).
- 2 F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Methuen, 1985) 36.
- 3 Patsy Rodenburg, *The Actor Speaks* (London: Methuen, 1998).
- 4 Ciceley Berry, *Voice and the Actor* (London: Harrap, 1973).
- 5 Kristin Linklater, *Freeing the Natural Voice* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1976).
- 6 Barbara Houseman, *Finding Your Voice* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002).

- 7 Robert Macdonald, *The Use of the Voice* (London: Macdonald Media Ltd, 1997).
- 8 Jane Ruby Heirich, *Voice and the Alexander Technique* (Berkeley: Mornum Time Press, 2005).
- 9 Glynn Macdonald, *The Illustrated Guide to Alexander Technique: A Practical Program for Health Poise and Fitness* (Shaftesbury, Dorset [UK] and Boston [MA]: Elements Books, 1998) 122.
- 10 Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen, 1994).
- 11 Wilfred Barlow, 'Introduction' in Alexander, *The Use of the Self*.
- 12 Glen Park, *The Art of Changing* (Bath: Ashgrove Press Limited, 1997) 93.
- 13 F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living* (Kansas City: Centerline Press 1986) 114.
- 14 Meade Andrews and Saura Barter, *The Alexander Technique and the Actor*. Online at: <http://www.TheAlexandertechnique.com/articles/acting>.
- 15 D. H. Lawrence, *The Phoenix* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 559.

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