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The Anatomy of Expression:
Explorations on the Intersection of Acting and the Alexander Technique

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Abstract

THE ANATOMY OF EXPRESSION: EXPLORATIONS ON THE INTERSECTION OF ACTING AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

By Kelley S. Schoger, M.F.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes
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The aim of this paper is to illuminate how the principles of the Alexander Technique and the role of bodily systems can serve as a foundational support for actor training. Inclusion of the Alexander Technique in the acting curriculum proves to be an effective tool for bridging the gap between kinesthetic learning and its application to beginning acting training. Starting with the nervous system, the operating principles of the Alexander Technique are discussed through research and personal insights. Next, in light of how self-discovery plays a key role in the first year of actor training, the idea of release in the neuromuscular system is explored as a way to

support that process. Delving further into the actor's process of character development, the efficient use of the skeletal system and the spine specifically is examined as the center of physical expression. Lastly, the breath and proper use of the respiratory system is discussed in relation to how it aids actors in making connected use of themselves. The outcome of this thesis through research, my personal journey as a teacher trainee of the Alexander Technique and observations and feedback through conducting workshops, elucidates the importance of creating harmony and release within the whole mechanism as a means of facilitating full expression, of mind, body and spirit, in the actor.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to illuminate how the principles of the Alexander Technique and the role of bodily systems can serve as a foundational support for actor training. Finding the natural integration of these bodily systems becomes a roadmap toward fully embodied acting. Inclusion of the Alexander Technique in the acting curriculum proves to be an effective tool for bridging the gap between kinesthetic learning and its application to beginning acting training. The outcome of this thesis through research, my personal journey as a beginning teacher trainee of the Alexander Technique and observations and feedback through conducting workshops, elucidates the importance of creating harmony and release within the whole mechanism as a means of facilitating full expression, of mind, body and spirit, in the actor.

If you ask someone how many curves the spine has, I've found that most people venture to guess one or two. In my early explorations of the Alexander Technique and the developmental movement work of Raymond Dart, I learned that the human spine has four curves. We are not born with these four curves; rather we develop them. It is through the naturally progressive movement of the body in infancy and early childhood that these curves develop. We are born with a primary "C" curve. This is the fetal curve of our bodies in the womb. Once born, when we are placed on our bellies for tummy time, the baby wants to look out in reaction to a stimulus, to something it hears or sees. The arms and hands press into the floor as the head looks out and the low back arches. The secondary curves of the cervical spine and lumbar spine begin to beautifully form in response to the baby's desire to explore its world. The body is a supple and ever changing mechanism. Our thoracic spine, or middle back, and sacrum make up our primary curves. The spine becomes a springy central column from which

all movement, and expression, stems. In acting workshops I've taught, I began by using Alexander teacher Kelly McEvenue's exercise of having students draw a picture of their skeleton from their mind's eye. This exercise not only produces some entertaining artwork, it reveals a lack of knowledge about the very instrument we use in the craft of acting: Ourselves.

In middle school I remember having a "spine test" in physical education class. We all waited and when we made it to the front of the line we had to bend forward so the curve of our spine was revealed. It turned out that my spine had more than four curves. I had a noticeable sideways twist, or "S" curve, in my lumbar spine. I was taken to a doctor who said I had already stopped growing and a brace would be pointless. My additional fifth curve remained as I grew, and I did continue to grow. This curvature never caused pain but it was visible. My right hip sticks out and my left side is straight and tensed. My left pant leg is always longer. In time I noticed that the muscles around my low back were somehow compensating for this alien curve. Well into my thirties I did start experiencing discomfort in my low back. I attended a yoga-for-scoliosis workshop and was told I have quite a severe left lumbar curvature. The muscles to the left of the curve are raised and built up around the spine while the muscles on the right, or the underside of the curve, are somewhat atrophied. Misalignments of the body do catch up with us as we age, especially if we are unaware of physical habits that form to compensate for them. In my quest to continue movement work as a performer and teacher, and as a person who does not consider back surgery an option in the future, my journey into the Alexander Technique stems from not only the desire to help students develop full bodied expression but also for wellness and whole body health.

If one has an extra curve or two, a metal rod or fused vertebrae, an injury or a broken heart, how can we work through these 'misalignments' to achieve the stamina required for a life

in the theatre? The spine is not only central to all our movement, but it also houses the central nervous system that sends messages from our brain. We must keep this complex structure and all systems that stem from it free and supple in order to achieve beauty, ease and openness in performance.

While I am a Stanislavski-based actor and teacher, I do adhere to the belief that one should begin training and performance from the outside in. As a young actor I couldn't possibly conceive of this but as I kept stumbling into roadblocks on the journey to fully embodied acting, movement work became a miraculous tool for me. As Uta Hagen suggests in *Respect for Acting*, talent is innate and "you can only hope to God you've got it," but craft is learned (13). Developing the body and our craft through a psychophysical technique allows us to meet the emotional and physical demands of acting. I believe the way to honest, internal and presentational acting as Uta Hagen describes can happen through development of the body. If there is not a clear channel through which to reveal innate sensitivity and vulnerability, then it will become stuck. The Alexander Technique does not seek to fix or correct, but to dissolve blocks.

In an art form that is elusive, we have the opportunity to work with a very sensitive yet durable and tangible instrument if we so choose: our bodies. Through working on our use we can discover and reveal the deep, still pools of our humanity. In Tasmania, Australia, where F.M. Alexander was born, a plaque honors his contribution to society as a "discoverer of fundamental facts about functional human movement" (C. Nicholls viii). In this thesis I will explore these fundamental facts, which really are, as Carolyn Nicholls describes, "an in-depth study of how human reaction, co-ordination and movement play a significant part in all our doings – including our well-being" (viii). In advocating for the study of our bodies as a starting

point for actor training, I have divided the chapters by the primary anatomical systems that Alexander teachers listen to and work with. These systems are deeply interconnected but I find it important to look at each one while relating it to the work we do in training actors - what I am calling the *Anatomy of Expression*. In Chapter One I will discuss the operating principles of the Alexander Technique as I understand them and the role of the nervous system as the initiator of all movement. In Chapter Two I begin by talking about the first year of actor training, its focus on self discovery and how we can look at the neuromuscular system as a means of aiding in that discovery by advocating for the inclusion of movement, specifically the Alexander Technique, in the first year curriculum. Chapter Three continues to look at actor training with an eye toward character creation and the role of the skeletal system, with the spine being the center of the actor's creativity and expression. Lastly, in Chapter Four I examine the respiratory system and the role of the breath in aiding actors to make more connected use of themselves. In the process of working toward integration of the whole, actors are given a process and foundational tool for good use that can be applied to any other type of training going forward. Most importantly, the whole body approach of the Alexander Technique proves to not only be a brilliant technique for actors, but a profound technique for living.

Chapter 1

Operating Principles of the Alexander Technique and the Role of the Nervous System

In one way this thesis is the culmination of my work and research in graduate school. In another way it serves as just the beginning of my work as a first year teacher trainee in the Alexander Technique (AT) and my lifelong goal to work with actors on their craft through the technique. I am indebted to the undergraduate theatre students of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) for their heart and hard work, and also their awkwardness, confusion and joy (all a great place to be as a young actor) as I, and other teachers, worked with them in their training process. Reflected in them, I saw many of my own struggles as a young actor and it is only through age, experience and continued training that I clearly see what I can offer as a teacher: teaching, coaching and directing actors based in a technique that would assist them, psycho-physically, toward their job of authentically revealing themselves through acting. This year has been a constant revelation about how the technique is an invaluable tool for the actor. Through AT training, teaching workshops, receiving a research grant to attend a conference on Acting and the Alexander Technique in New York and through directing and coaching plays, I believe this year has led me to the conclusion that the Alexander Technique should not only be taught in the big acting conservatories, but all BFA and BA theatre training programs across the country.

The Alexander Technique is not about the acquisition of a specific skill to be tucked away in the actor's tool kit; it is a process of transformation of the self that the actor can then

apply to all aspects of his or her theatre training and performance. I have also come to believe that the Alexander Technique should not solely fall into the realm of “movement training.” In addition to private hands-on lessons, the technique can be integrated into the acting classroom.

I had the good fortune of meeting the extraordinary Alexander teacher and coach Kelly McEvenue of the Stratford Festival in Canada at the Freedom to Act: Acting and the Alexander Technique Conference in New York, January 2012. I read and presented on her book *The Actor and the Alexander Technique* as part of a graduate pedagogy class and was inspired by how the Stratford Festival utilizes her expertise in the Alexander Technique in all rehearsals and productions. In addition to her teaching in academia, she uses the technique specifically to coach actors in the professional theatre to make creative, healthy and sustainable physical choices. Within the world of theatre, the AT should be an integral part of training and performance. As Kelly McEvenue states, “an astute mind and body is imperative for the acting craft. The Alexander Technique is an adaptable tool which, when used properly, will support the actor throughout the exploration of a theatrical undertaking” (101). If an actor were to have a long and varied career in the theatre, an adaptable technique of mind and body would serve her well.

In the art and craft of acting our bodies are our instruments. Our bodies tell the story. It makes sense that we should know our instrument, just as a violinist knows the violin or the painter understands color. How is it then that most young actors don’t consciously understand their instruments or take time to work with their bodies in any disciplined sort of way? I believe there are two reasons: that the discipline required in any form of self-study is lacking and that young actors have trouble bridging the gap between what they learn kinesthetically and intellectually. How do we connect newfound physical freedom in a movement or dance class to the application of that freedom in an acting class? In most actor training programs students are

not given a technique, or they are offered a tasting of many different techniques. For a young actor this can be very confusing. From my own actor training experience to teaching and assisting actors at VCU, I know students need a foundation for their developing process. A practical, psychophysical technique would not only solve the problem of discipline for the committed student, but it would also provide a concrete way for students to bring physical freedom directly into their work. The Alexander Technique is not a series of exercises but a methodology for bringing conscious awareness *to activity*. It is the ‘means whereby’ one can journey toward a more conscious use of self and ultimately a more poised self that is free of the habits that constrict full expression. In addition to private lessons, this can be directly applied in the acting classroom.

Actors Need Choice

Alexander defined “use,” or the use of ourselves, as the freedom to choose (Gelb 12). I find this a liberating way to look at our use. It implies that there are many choices in movement rather than one right way. Teacher Michael Gelb states, “Alexander concluded that his ‘manner of doing’ did indeed affect his functioning. This was the beginning of his realization that the choices we make about what we do with ourselves to a large extent determine the quality of our lives. He called this power of choice ‘Use’ (12). Acting is all about making bold choices. The more choice we have in regard to characterization the richer our acting will be.

Gelb points out “the question of individual responsibility is at the heart of Alexander’s work” (25). This is why I believe the Alexander Technique should lie at the center of the actor’s craft and at an early point in training. In taking this personal responsibility, discipline is instilled. If the Alexander teacher is well qualified, students will have the desire to work with

themselves in this way as the hands-on results are felt so strongly and quickly. We are our instrument; therefore we must fully understand our instrument in order to use it well and effectively. Our instruments are incredibly complex mechanisms. Our physical bodies are made up of vast, interconnected systems that speak to each other instantaneously: nervous, muscular, skeletal, circulatory, respiratory, digestive. Our brains house the senses, the intellect and the emotions. Energy is a part of our being, determining how we move through space, react to gravity and give voice to thought. F.M. Alexander was truly ahead of his time in creating a psychophysical technique that addresses all these areas because, of course, they cannot be separated. In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander chronicles the evolution of his technique as he searched “for a means whereby faulty conditions of use in the human organism could be improved” (21). He began his explorations as an actor and reciter of Shakespearean verse suffering from throat and voice troubles in the late 1800’s. He went to medical doctors to find out what was ‘wrong’ with him. After seeing many specialists and finding that he was perfectly healthy, he knew that he must be *doing* something that caused hoarseness and audible breathing issues while performing. His beginning explorations led him to look at the physical, “conceiving of body and mind as separate parts of the same organism and believed that human ills, difficulties and shortcomings could be classified as either ‘mental’ or ‘physical’ and dealt with on specifically ‘mental’ or ‘physical’ lines” (*Use of Self* 21). His medical doctors and voice trainers diagnosed him as having irritation of the mucous membranes of the nose and throat and inflammation of the vocal cords; however, his explorations, which were based on self-observation and that of others rather than theory, led him to know that the physical and mental cannot be separated in human activity. He theorized that if his hoarseness came about only when going to perform rather than in everyday speaking, then there must be some physical reaction to

the mental stimulus of performance that led him to this problem rather than solely a physical problem, which had been ruled out by his doctors.

The Nervous System

What does the nervous system have to do with movement and the use of ourselves? It seems rather obvious to me now, but it was not until I began to study the technique that I learned the nervous system is the initiator of physical action. To put it simply, we have a thought, the thought hits the nervous system and our body responds. For example, my brain realizes that I have run a red light, panic hits the nervous system and I inhale sharply and the muscles in my arms and hands engage to grip the wheel almost all at the same time. Dr. Lulu Sweigard, a specialist in Ideokinesis, states there is “an inherent capacity of the nervous system to determine the most efficient neuromuscular coordination for each movement” (v). The most efficient neuromuscular coordination is of course what we were born with but is not what continues to happen throughout our life. Habits of use begin to form as we grow and adapt to our world and experiences, yet isn’t efficiency and ease what we want as fully expressive actors? Sweigard goes on to say:

Movement is a neuro-musculo-skeletal event. The nervous system initiates movement and controls its patterning. It stimulates the muscle, the workhorse, into action to move the skeleton, the machine for movement. There can be no efficiency in movement, nor can there be realization of the full potential for movement unless all three components – nerves, muscles, bones – perform with optimal facility (3).

In December 2010 I traveled to Malibu, CA to attend an Alexander Technique residency program with master Alexander teachers. This was well before I began my teacher training or the bulk of my individual private lessons. In my first lesson at the workshop a teacher took my head in her hands and instructed me to not let her turn my head left or right when she attempted to do so. I did what she said. Then she instructed me to allow her to turn my head on the next attempt. Afterward she moved in front of me and with very bright eyes asked me what it was that prevented and then allowed her to move my head. I thought for a moment and then answered “my muscles.” She replied that it was actually my thinking, that I choose a thought and my muscles respond. It was as simple as that. I had a thought and in that thought I had a choice. We can inhibit, or pause, and choose a direction or choose to redirect. That is the essence and power of the Alexander Technique.

It can be said that the Alexander Technique is a form of movement re-education. However, as Walter Carrington, one of Alexander’s prodigal students and world exponent of the technique, says in *Thinking Aloud*, it is very much a thinking process with our own “wishing and willing” carrying us toward more efficient movement (19). In order to attain more efficient and easeful movement, we must take a look at our thinking. This is not to say that we should get stuck in our heads, a sure trap for the actor. It is actually the opposite; we can voluntarily take a pause, which Alexander called inhibition, to break ourselves free of a neuromuscular habit. The Alexander Technique is not about relaxing the muscles and releasing tension, as people often think, although that will be a by-product. If the muscles are the ‘work horses’ for our intentions in action, then we must take a look at what motivates the muscles. Carrington beautifully and simply talks about the motivator of movement as being energy. We have weight and we have energy. In order for weight to resist gravity we need energy. I love this simple phrase as a

definition of movement, “energy is that which enables us to mobilize our weight” (Carrington 22). This is where Carrington’s words “wishing” and “willing” come into play. This stimulates my pedagogical interest in addressing the *how* of movement because an actor also works with the motivation behind a character’s action. How do we use our energy to move? Alexander addressed this in *The Use of the Self* and Carrington summarized his philosophy: “When I employ such phrases as, ‘I directed the use’, I wish to indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms” (Carrington 23). Alexander is saying that it is not just thought that motivates movement, but “energetic” thought (Carrington 24). This is an important distinction, especially for actors. The actor’s job is to carry out an objective or need within the text and to create an energy for the character, each role holding a different energetic quality. In order to do this the actor must first be familiar with her own energetic quality.

Movement techniques such as Alexander, Feldenkrais and Ideokinesis teach that the nervous system coordinates all movement. Ideokinesis practitioner Dr. Lulu Sweigard states that some movements “are under our voluntary control while others are left to the automatic wisdom built into the system” (4). She goes on to say that what is in our voluntary control is

Starting, stopping, direction, range, speed and force and that we do set the goal for movement, but this is where the voluntary control ends. The choice of muscles whose coordinated work will carry out the action or the selection of nerve pathways over which the messages travel to these muscles reside in the nervous system. We can voluntarily interfere with this process and redirect our movement if the goal in movement is not being achieved (4).

Her use of the word direction is important. In the AT, Alexander created basic directions to follow in the pursuit of improved coordination of the whole, knowing that we need to use thought to change coordination. The “interruption” she speaks of in the above quote is what Alexander called inhibition. Without inhibiting, or pausing, we will be unable to redirect our energy away from a poor habit. Perhaps this is also what Carrington more poetically coined “wishing and willing” (19). Ideokinesis creator Mabel Todd states “muscles respond instantly to thought” and in Alexander’s work we also look at the quality of that thought to motivate more coordinated movement (281).

Developing the Actor’s Kinesthetic Sense

The beauty of the Alexander Technique is the delicious hands-on experience of the practitioner listening to the workings of the student’s body with trained, sensitive hands. Before I began private lessons I read about the technique and was inspired by the possibilities. It wasn’t until I was deep into lessons that I experienced these possibilities. Hands-on work is the core of the technique and it is through touch that one truly begins to understand his principles and most importantly, our own body.

Hands-on work is done on a table, where we allow gravity to take our weight as we work with directions. This is what Alexander teachers call a table turn. It is also done while the student is upright, taking her through sitting, walking and later in any activity that the student does often. As habits form, our bodies compensate and they begin to feel normal. Our bodies are very intelligent but “due to the fact that our general awareness levels are low, we are mostly unaware of feedback or proprioceptive information” (C. Nicholls 14). Within the nervous system we have conscious and unconscious sensory receptors. Proprioceptors “monitor the

perpetual internal changes occurring to keep the body in balance and motion. They respond to changes in muscular activity; and, once movement has been learned so that it proceeds automatically, their impulses rarely penetrate our consciousness” (Sweigard 161). The saying ‘it’s like learning to ride a bike’ comes to mind.

We generally don’t listen to what our bodies are telling us unless we are experiencing extreme pain. The everyday act of balancing in space is not something that most people think about. As a result, “habit, repetition and an assumption that our bodily information is ‘right’ can all distort our kinesthetic sense” (C. Nicholls 14), but with the assistance of an AT practitioner we are guided to heightened awareness, slowly shifting our kinesthetic sense. Michael Gelb describes kinesthetic sense as the most “intimate” of all the senses, providing us with “information on our weight, position and movement” (52). What may then be more balanced in hands-on work might feel very ‘wrong’ at first. Alexander called this “debauched kinesthesia” which leads to “unreliable sensory appreciation” (Gelb 54). This phenomenon was a huge discovery in the development of his work with the self. He noticed this when he worked in the mirror with himself. He came to realize that he couldn’t trust the way he was feeling in his body. His kinesthetic sense had become unreliable because his habits were so ingrained. It wasn’t until he began working with students that he discovered they, too, were receiving unreliable sensory feedback. This is problematic. It means that eventually, after years of misuse, the brain registers the habit as normal and thus does not seek to correct it. A large part of our training as actors is about sharpening our awareness – of ourselves, our reactions, our environment and our surroundings.

The Stanislavski System of acting explores imaginary circumstances. Stanislavski believed that creating truth on stage lies in the imagination. In order to be truthful onstage we

must believe what we are doing and saying, but of course the actor knows the stage is not reality. However, she can believe in the imagined circumstances and therefore those circumstances must be vivid and specific. For example, the exercise “Magic If” requires the actor to ask, what would I do *if* I were this character or what would I do *if* I were in that character’s predicament? Therefore the “if” is the stimulus for the actor to make specific and truthful choices, thus creating the illusion of truth onstage. It is imperative that an actor’s awareness is sharp and heightened in order to live truthfully within imaginary circumstances, but if her kinesthetic sense is “debauched” she is living that much farther from the truth.

When I began Alexander teacher training, director Chris Friedman worked with me to find balance in standing. As she worked and I released, I had this sense that I was pitched forward and tilted way to the right. As she had me look into the mirror on the wall the person reflected back at me was someone who was standing beautifully straight and lengthened, not a hint of the left tilt caused by my scoliosis that I see in all the photos taken of me. I was shocked that what I felt was completely different from what I was seeing in the mirror. My distorted kinesthetic sense was staring back at me in that mirror. It was a revelatory moment. In my confusion I wanted her to tell me what I was doing so that I could re-create this on my own. She wisely said that I should not try to recreate this because by seeking the result, or “end-gaining” as Alexander called it, I would replace one fixed habit with another (*Use of Self* 57). It was enough at that early stage to simply note the difference and become more aware of my back. For example, replacing a left tilt with a right tilt would throw me equally off balance. Through lessons I had to bring awareness to weight shifting, unhitching my right hip while finding length on the left side while letting go of any type of result. The key is not to try to find the right way. That will only result in holding, causing further tension. Rather, there is a fluidity that comes

from inhibiting and directing and in so doing, my kinesthetic sense will eventually become more trustworthy. Taking this path, of course, requires dedication and patience. When I am on my own, my best guide is still the floor as I lie in semi-supine position. When I lie on the floor and let gravity help me lengthen and widen, my body can correct itself if I remain present and I am more likely to carry this body knowledge into standing.

In reading through the personal journals of my first year of Alexander training, I realize that studying the technique is really a journey into the self. So often we go about our lives in the forward progression of doing, rushing and completing tasks. We end up dragging our bodies along behind us instead of moving in any sort of conscious way. In each day of training I made subtle discoveries about my body in use: how much my arms and legs are extensions of the back and ribs; that my hips and pelvis seem to be fixed during such routine activities as sweeping and vacuuming, and that there can be more spiral and space within that area, which would relieve ongoing low back pain. Rather than moving up and down in space we are made to move in spirals and twists as part of our three-dimensional form. Slowly I began to awaken to myself.

In this awakening, major shifts begin to happen in the nervous system. Alexander was ahead of his time in understanding the mind/body connection. In order to wake up to ourselves, we must take a look at our thinking. We have a thought, this thought hits the brain and fires the nervous system and then the body responds. This all happens so quickly that changing any kind of physical habit requires a change in our thinking first. A conscious, constructive change in thinking will slow and quiet the nervous system. This quieting will allow room and space for the body to release and shift in beneficial ways. For the actor, this will result in a sense of ease and increased potential for expression.

Balance, poise, and ease are our birthright. Babies are the prime example of good use, but as we grow and respond to life with its changing physical and emotional landscapes, our use changes. We adapt, for better or worse, to the many forces in our lives just as the actor must adapt to the circumstances in each role they play. As Carolyn Nicholls asserts “our bodies work as a whole unit, not in separate bits, and we will compensate for tension throughout our whole structure,” so we begin to unwind all of this bodily tension by “learning to relate to gravity in a free and easy way” (16). We can re-educate our kinesthetic sense by awakening our awareness through studying a sequence of directions that we can rely on in any given situation.

Primary Control and Directions

Alexander identified the primary control of the body as the relationship of the head, neck and back. If the primary control is restored to its natural state of ease, like that of a baby, then the rest of the body has the potential to be properly aligned. His discovery of the primary control played a key role in the improvement of sensory feedback. He states “the fact that I was able, through my employment of the primary control, to bring about such an improvement in my reaction to the stimulus to use my voice that vocal activity did not result in hoarseness, is proof that quite early in my experiences a practical means had been found” (*Use of Self* 50). In order for the primary control to work harmoniously, the neck must be free. This is Alexander’s first direction. The neck must be free so that the head can go forward and up. As Alexander began to study himself in the mirror to figure out what he was doing with his body the moment before beginning to speak, he noticed that there was a ‘back and down’ pull of the head. It wasn’t enough, however, to just pull the head up. In order to prevent the depression of his larynx, the head would have to go up and forward in relation to the top of the spine, by gently nodding at the

atlanto-occipital joint between the first and second vertebrae. Carolyn Nicholls states, “a free neck allows the head to lead you upwards” (127). Dr. George Coghill, a famed biologist who admired Alexander and validated his work from a scientific perspective, discovered that all vertebrates have a relationship with initial movement from the head and its relationship to the spine. The head goes forward and up so that the back can lengthen and widen, so that the knees can go forward and away. These are Alexander’s subsequent directions. In giving ourselves these directions, we are not *doing* anything. These directions are merely thoughts. As stated before, these thoughts lead to bodily response. In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander defines direction as “the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms” (35). In hands-on work and in activity as our awareness grows, we can begin feel our bodies respond to these directions, but in order for this to happen we must move in these directions consciously and inhibit poor habits of use. To do this we must take pause, to give our systems a chance to respond outside of the habitual. This is inhibition.

Inhibition

The mind/body process happens through Alexander’s principles of inhibition and direction. One cannot happen without the other. Donald Higdon, an Alexander teacher based in New Jersey, defines inhibition on his website as follows:

Inhibition is the delay of habitual response long enough for reasoning to intervene. Given the speed of the brain, this pause is immeasurably small. Without this pause, there is no possibility of changing old habits. Contrary to Freudian inhibition, Alexander’s inhibition releases, rather than represses,

spontaneity. You can't satisfy your desire unless you think about what it is. Inhibition allows our true nature, rather than our habit, to express itself (www.donaldhigdon.com).

When we pause, we give ourselves the opportunity for something different to happen. While attending a lecture on *Inhibition and Brain* at The Alexander Technique Workshops-International, neurosurgeon Dr. Remi Nader spoke about the neurological aspect of inhibition. He stated that inhibition is a stopping off of a neuro-activity (Nader). What I garnered from his talk was that the frontal lobe, the last lobe to evolve only in humans, is responsible for higher functioning such as personality and decision-making. If we can inhibit in the frontal lobe to not search for a result, we send ourselves back to the hindbrain, which controls involuntary, life-sustaining processes. We can train this part of the brain through memory. Nader states, "with practice of conscious inhibition we can redirect our neuro-circuitry" (Nader). For example, if I go to pick something up off of the floor, I could take a pause, think my neck to be free, my back to lengthen and widen, send the hips back and the knees forward and away staying free at the ankles. Here I am moving in a position, as Alexander states in many of his books, of 'mechanical advantage' that allows my breath to flow freely as the primary control of head, neck and spine are not compressed. In pausing to consciously pick up the object, I am literally training my brain to direct my body to carry out the action more efficiently.

This position of mechanical advantage is often called "monkey" and is a position that an AT practitioner will take a student in and out of many times (see fig. 1). Alexander teacher John Nicholls says of monkey:

Head and hips opposing each other so that the back stays back and expands between them. This highlights the antagonistic pulls and counter balances

throughout the body that we require for good use in all movements, and the experience usually carries over quite easily into other simple movements such as walking (67).



Fig. 1. F.M. Alexander Teaching Monkey.

End-gaining vs. Means Whereby

A philosophical basis of the AT is developing a process of accomplishing an activity via the ‘means whereby,’ which is consciously breaking down the essential movements to complete a task rather than rushing to complete a task unaware of what it took, physically and mentally, to accomplish it. Alexander called this ‘end-gaining.’ He discovered that he must “emphasize the process of attaining his goal rather than a narrow focus on the goal itself” since he realized that people, himself included, tend to “let their immediate goals dominate the field of their attention” (Gelb 80). Gelb states that even if we set about trying to change our habits, if we do it from an end gaining mindset, “the muscles that habitually perform an act will automatically be activated, so the stimulus to act will result in a misuse of the organism” (80). Going back to the example of reaching for an object on the floor, I visually look to the object and go to grab it. I am not aware

of what my body is doing to accomplish this. I am most likely acting out of habit and not moving in the most mechanically advantageous manner and I am certainly blind to the moment. Acting is about action and pursuing an objective, but more importantly within that it is about staying present so that we are available to impulses that arise as a reaction to stimuli from moment to moment. I think it can be said that acting is pursuing an objective via the means whereby. In acting we must not short circuit the building of craft to arrive at a result, whether that be getting the part, gaining approval or getting a laugh.

Dr. Nader ended his talk with the example of batting a ball or juggling. When batting you should not concentrate on swinging and hitting the ball. By keeping your eye on the ball, you are more likely to allow the bat to meet the ball. In this conscious inhibition one releases the desire to end gain a result and allows the focus to remain on the intention, or the task more easefully. This couldn't be a more perfect example of the art of acting, which requires the actor to pursue an objective while maintaining the flexibility to change tactics and honor impulse along the way. If we drop the ball we can't freeze or the story stops. We must make a quick creative choice about how to proceed, just as a character may need to change course truthfully when a prop or line is dropped or an obstacle is encountered in the text.

Lastly, I want to address why the study of the Alexander Technique is a very gradual and slow process. Directing our energy in a conscious way does not happen after a day, a week or even a year. It takes longer than that to shift a lifetime of thinking and the resulting neuromuscular patterns of use. Carrington states that this is really what the technique is about: "it is persistence; it's no good thinking about it on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays" (27). While expansive thought does become more natural after awhile, it does not always stay conscious depending on the circumstances. Habit is a strong force. Emotions are a strong force.

Gravity is a strong force. If we can stay conscious and use these forces to find freedom rather than contraction we will find a difference in our use. It is work though. It takes time and discipline to develop craft.

Chapter 2

Discovering and Reorganizing the Self and the Role of the Neuromuscular System

There are many methods and opinions about what the actor's craft is and how to teach it. How we arrive at training theatre artists is much debated. In *The Presence of the Actor* famed theatre director Joseph Chaikin states "technique is a means to free the artist. An actor's tool is himself, but his use of himself is informed by all the things which inform his mind and body – his observations, his struggles, his nightmares, his prison, his patterns – himself as a citizen of his times and his society" (5).

Grounding actor training in a technique that addresses both mind and body, or the whole self, is essential to developing craft because cultivating the imagination is also a key aspect of the work of the actor. Chaikin goes on to say, "an actor should strive to be alive to all that he can imagine to be possible. Such an actor is generated by an impulse toward an inner unity, as well as by the most intimate contacts he makes outside himself" (5).

This is a tall order for a young actor. In some undergraduate theatre programs the freshman year is spent on self-discovery through the Stanislavki system, yet movement classes don't begin until the second year. It is counterintuitive to begin actors on a journey of self-discovery without addressing the body, or engaging in an inquiry into conscious awareness of the body and habitual tensions. These unconscious tensions will block flow of expression, so young actors will bump up against obstacles they don't even know they have. Even Stanislavski

changed his method for actors to include the physical rather than starting with internal work, stating, “the language of the body is the key that can unlock the soul” (Blumfeld 74).

While I was an undergraduate theatre student my closest mentor and director gave me the note “in this scene you are like a beautiful flower growing around a rock.” At the time that note struck me so intensely because while I was able to feel very vulnerable on stage, something felt stuck yet I didn’t know what the rock was. Later in my undergraduate training I began to explore contact improvisation and other movement work, which helped me begin to dissolve blocks but when I came back to doing monologues and scenes, the rock would reappear. I received another note in class from this same teacher that I have kept all these years. It read “this is a time of transition for you, you’re caught between the mind and the success of the body of last week.” Whether it was the lack of a psychophysical technique or the inability of a young actor to synthesize all that she was learning, it is apparent that these parts of myself were working separately. Now, as a teacher, I have observed the potential flowering of talent growing around rocks, whether they manifest physically or vocally, in my students.

In my study of the Alexander Technique, I have come to realize that this work was the missing link in connecting my mind, heart and body in performance. Exploring this link has become the basis of workshops I’ve taught in graduate school and theatre conferences. Alexander began his self-study to try to understand what ‘rock’ was hindering his vocal production onstage. The discovery that his use was effecting his functioning was a huge breakthrough for him; however, this was only the beginning of his journey. He later discovered “this wrong way of using myself constituted a combined wrong use of the whole of my physical-mental mechanisms” and that his response to the stimulus of speaking on stage must also be a habit in other activities as well (*Use of Self* 34). It did not occur to me all those years ago that

what was blocking my freedom to express had anything to do with my use. While the habitual use of myself surely had psychological origins, I didn't have a roadmap to follow to unwind whatever was bound up physically. Todd states in *The Thinking Body*, "structural unbalance reflects nervous unbalance. Because of the unity of the physical being, unbalance, even the most obvious mechanical kind, may have repercussions upon our whole mental and moral status" (294). Todd goes on to say the reverse is also true, that our bodily attitudes affect our mental states (294). I conducted an exercise in a movement workshop where I asked students to take on a physical pose of sadness. Once in this position I asked them if it was possible to smile or feel any genuine feeling of happiness or joy in this pose. Alternatively, when I asked them to take on a physical state of joy, I questioned if it was possible to authentically call upon and express memories of sorrow. It is virtually impossible to do.

Alexander teachers Belinda Mello and Teva Bjerken state in their recent article on acting and the Alexander Technique "one of the distinguishing features of AT work is its emphasis on the unity of the whole person, identified as psychophysical coordination or use of the self" (29). They define psychophysical coordination as "the way balance is created in the person via the nervous system. It is a phrase that we use to help students understand and reconceptualize how they move as an active expression of their thoughts and feelings as influenced by self-identity" (29). While I believe that I was a young person with a deep and searching sense of self-awareness and willingness to dig further, I never thought of studying how I moved as a way of exploring my self-identity. I have since taught young actors who, while motivated and willing to do the work, have strong physical 'isms' that prevent an audience from fully connecting with them. Encouraging them to move forward without providing any tools for self-assessment will

only build upon their habits of wrong use, or what Alexander called “*cultivated* habitual use” (34).

Finding A Clear Place

In the early stages of actor training the question remains: where do we start? I believe it starts with the willingness to throw away preconceived ideas of what acting is and simply start with being present with ourselves. Chaikin advocates “for the actor to find himself in a clear place, an empty place where the living current moves through him uninformed” (66). I have observed many young actors pushing to produce emotion or make their classmates laugh. This is all an armor that encloses the soft sensitive instrument of the self in a hard case. I have found that the Alexander Technique is a foundational and accessible tool for finding that clear, empty place.

While a good portion of the first year of actor training is on self-discovery, the focus is always to hone our instrument for performance and the truthful portrayal of a character, just as Alexander himself did not conduct his self study as a quest for wholeness or mental health, but as a means to improve his acting. The fact that whole body health and heightened awareness can be a result of the technique can only help the actor in a field that requires health, wholeness and stamina to achieve success and longevity. But just as all self-study can bring up personal issues, the hands-on aspect of the Alexander technique is likely to bring up emotions since memories and repressed feelings are stored in our physical body. John Nicholls states, “if we believe in psycho-physical unity, then we have to allow for the fact that the gradual release of chronic muscular restriction encouraged by the Technique will bring about change in the psyche, blocked off feeling may emerge” (32). Self study as it relates to Alexander work means addressing all

systems of the body and provides an opportunity to “translate psychological insight into physical action” which can bring about behavioral change (J. Nicholls 35). This last step is of course a choice and will only occur in the disciplined student who continues this work on her own. The aspect of translating personal discovery into physical action directly relates to the actor’s job of pursuit of action to create acting moments.

As a graduate teaching assistant at VCU I observed the same group of sophomore students in second year acting and first year movement. Since movement work doesn’t begin until the second year, students do not work with the body specifically with exception of learning actor warm ups. Therefore students are building upon defenses, tensions and blocks while they are learning to express themselves in exercises, monologues and scene work. Not only does the Alexander Technique peel away postural patterns of use to get to a more poised, easeful physical state, it provides a deep body knowledge or wisdom that students can then carry into their acting. Dr. Remi Nader, while delivering a lecture on *Neuro-Anatomy: Sensory Control and Balancing Mechanisms* at Alexander Technique Workshops-International, spoke about how peeling away layers of habit through inhibition and redirecting our thinking creates new neuropathways in the brain, in a sense resetting our nervous system, and stated that “memories can be formed by repetition” (Nader). For example, if the action of pulling down on the head and neck while preparing to speak is repeated, the same neurons are stimulated and a habit is created. However, Dr. Nader also stated “all functions can be modified”. Perhaps we can retrain ourselves out of a bad habit by the repetition of the non-doing of that habitual action. In acting or movement class, if the young actor with the same physical habits is performing new exercises, then those habits are being reinforced through repetition. What we want to do is rewire what Nader calls our

“neuro-circuitry,” or memory pathways. Perhaps this is a way to begin to dissolve the rocks and find a clear place from which to work.

Polish theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski thought that actor training should be “not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks” (17). He called this perspective “the via negativa” (Grotowski 17). His approach to actor training is similar to that of Alexander in this sense. While Grotowski created an aggressively physical system of exercises in which his actors move like athletes, there is a certain emptying that takes place to uncover or reveal the raw human being in performance. Grotowski also seeks to “eliminate [the actor’s] psychic process” resulting in “freedom from the time-lapse between inner impulse and outer reaction” (16). In the exhaustion of the physical work, the mind cannot interfere with impulse. This is far different from Alexander’s idea of taking a pause the moment before reaction to create a new, non-habitual choice; however, the idea of the via negativa is related to inhibition in that there is value in working with the physical body so intensely as to touch upon impulse. In this transparent state we can truly connect with an audience. This, as Grotowski states “demands a mobilization of the physical and spiritual forces of the actor who is in a state of idle readiness, a passive availability, which makes possible an active acting score” (37).

The connection between these two practitioners, while one begins with the nervous system and the other begins with the muscles through almost acrobatic physical exercise, is they developed systems that are based in disciplined, deep body listening that is not about skill building. Grotowski likened this to sculpture rather than painting. In painting you continue to add color whereas in sculpture the artist is chipping away at the clay to reveal the figure concealed inside (Grotowski 39). Alexander’s technique also seeks to reveal in each student his or her truest self, unmasked and not hidden behind habit. While Grotowski’s actors developed

dancer physiques, Alexander sought to work with what was rather than seeking physical perfection. In this way, the Alexander Technique is accessible to all.

There is a wonderful story of Alexander telling his trainees that he was expecting his best student for a lesson and that they should look for her when she arrived in the waiting area. The only person they saw there at the time of the lesson was a very stooped old lady. The students told him that she must not have arrived yet and he replied, “yes she has, that is her” (J. Nicholls 44). The point of studying the AT is not to become models of perfect posture. It is about “producing as much freedom as possible within the limits of the structure at that moment” (J. Nicholls 45). When a teacher places hands on a student, she is making an assessment of the student’s state and then through her own coordination, encouraging release with the “aim to teach the student to stop disturbing his own natural poise, not to impose a new pattern predetermined by the teacher” (J. Nicholls 60). The teacher is honoring and seeking to uncover the unique quality and gifts of that individual student. Additionally, in training to be an AT teacher we work with ourselves to inhibit and direct first and foremost, so we too are working from Chaikin’s “clear place” which is then communicated to our students.

The Alexander Technique and Playable Action

I am advocating for the AT to be included within the first year of training either as part of the acting curriculum or a first year physical acting course to be closely linked with content in the acting class. In addition to the essential individual hands-on lessons, principles of the work can be utilized within the acting classroom or in tandem with acting work assigned. Chaikin states, “there is no way to develop talent, only to invite it to be released. The teacher of the actor looks for the right steps for each student, and when the student is about to make his discovery,

the teacher must disappear. By taking this step himself, he discovers his own thoughts” (154). This is also the beauty of the Alexander Technique. In working with an AT teacher, whole new worlds of choice and kinesthetic awareness are opened through the hands of the teacher and then delivered into the consciousness of the student. Applying AT principles can illuminate acting work. For example, if a student is performing a particularly emotional scene, the direction to free her neck or unlock her knees will assist her in not falling back into old patterns that will block vulnerability or stifle emotional impulse.

I traveled to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in the fall of 2011 to observe Jed Diamond, an Alexander teacher and the Chair of Graduate Acting. He was my acting coach for a brief time when I lived in New York and while he was on the acting faculty of NYU Tisch School of the Arts. Our paths crossed years later at a conference just as I was beginning AT training. I was invited to UT Knoxville to observe how he integrated the AT directly into his graduate acting classes. Mr. Diamond has developed a program there that is one of the few in the country to use the AT as the foundation for a graduate acting curriculum.

Mr. Diamond’s teaching is Stanislavski based, focusing on direct action and developing craft through experience. Textual and verbal analysis supports the actor’s work but it is only through experience and time that one develops mastery. The AT supports this view in that it is gradually applied in activity. Each actor takes two private hands on lessons with Mr. Diamond each week to reinforce AT principles. In class, when actors are working on scenes and monologues, he uses Alexander’s principles to side coach them out of moments when they become stuck in their head while trying to work out how to fulfill an objective, or when he notices that a physical habit is adversely affecting their use, by asking them to inhibit and go back to their body. They have all developed a common AT vocabulary. For example, he will

ask the student to inhibit the desire to hold the breath or clench the neck in a moment of struggle. In doing this, a new way of approaching the moment or the line will emerge. Alternatively, in these moments he may physically go up to an actor and apply hands-on direction while they work.

In working with objective in a scene it is easy to over think or anticipate the next moment, so the directive to go back to the experience of the body is helpful. There was a moment in Mr. Diamond's acting class when an actress working on an Anton Chekhov scene became very frustrated because she didn't know what the character really wanted. While the action can change depending on the story, the objective remains the same and much of the time it can be unconscious. The actor knows it but the character does not. This subtext informs the quality of the action. I know in my own teaching of action and objective, it is very easy for students to get confused about what the character actually wants to *do*. The objective will always be a verb but many students define a need as a state of being. For example, if I ask a student what a character wants, she may answer that the character is angry. Anger is not playable because it is an emotion not an action. A playable action must be a verb, as in 'to humiliate'. The intellectual aspect of choosing the right objective can become frustrating and can certainly produce tension and block impulse. Mr. Diamond instructs students to simply make a choice and try something instead of talking about it. He tells them to go back to experience. The aid of Alexander's clear directions provides a channel for the actor to connect to impulse rather than intellect. In observing Mr. Diamond side-coach the Chekhov scene, I witnessed the actress make a more authentic and impulsive choice once she stopped worrying about intellectually figuring out the right choice.

Privately, I asked Mr. Diamond about the danger of getting fixated on something, as in trying to choose the correct objective or getting lost in what the character really wants. He answered by saying that we must trust that we might learn something kinesthetically, keep our eyes open and alert, listen and don't go too far inward. It is a danger for young actors to dig too far inward to find an emotion or a connection that we cut off our kinesthetic sense, our connection to our scene partner and our ability to discover something spontaneous. From a more alert and present place he can coach an actor to make a more specific and creative choice.

Misconceptions and the Neuromuscular Connection

Many people view the Alexander Technique as a means to gain relaxation or release tension. In their article *Cultivating a Lively Use of Tension*, Melinda Bello and Teva Bjerkin address this in terms of how the technique is often presented as a “relaxation skill set to be included in the actors’ warm-up” (29). In thinking about the image of the rock and working to dissolve it, I am reminded of a question that was asked of me as I taught a movement based workshop at the Southeastern Theatre Conference in spring 2012. A student asked about the effectiveness of the AT when acting is about conflict and tension as a result of obstacles. This is a fair question. This is also, I believe, putting the cart before the horse. At the beginning of actor training the student’s focus should be on establishing a level of consciousness around a process as a base line from which to work. If the foundation on which we build our craft as actors is one of conscious awareness and relative freedom in our bodies, then playing scenes of tension will be more expressive. If not, we are just watching actors and their ‘isms.’ As discussed in Chapter One, initial explorations in the technique through inhibiting and directing serve to quiet the nervous system so that new choices of action will become available to us.

Ideally, we want to train actors to find a balance between freedom in the mechanism and dynamic action. Teachers Bello and Bjerkin state, “in our teaching we are deeply interested in encouraging actors to work toward a generative ‘lively use of tension’ as opposed to a generic sense of natural relaxation” (29).

The AT is often thought of as a means to improve posture. This misconception can be addressed by examining Alexander’s directions. What do we mean by good posture? Usually we think of one who doesn’t slouch, whose back is straight and head is held high. While these attributes may be the result of someone who studies the AT, it is unproductive to seek the outward result. In only striving for good posture, undue tension and strain will be just as present for one who pulls down and slouches. What is it specifically that creates good posture? What is preventing us from standing tall? All these questions must be addressed, just as the actor must score her script with questions. It is through Alexander’s directions that we begin to lengthen and widen the back. Dr. Sweigard speaks of people having as many postures as they do positions of the body, but that the one posture we all share as human beings is “the upright posture” (173). For humans, unlike most quadrupeds, it is “a position in which joints can approach a neutral position for support of the body weight in equilibrium; that is, it is the position of mechanical balance of the first-class, weight-supporting bony levers” (Sweigard 173). The neuromuscular coordination required to stand is established early on in life. While the ability to achieve uprightness does require the work of the muscles and ligaments at the joints, strength is not the key factor in maintaining it (Sweigard 173). It is the “deep, small muscles, which are attached to the weight-supporting bones, such as those of the pelvis, that work to maintain uprightness” (Sweigard 183). In AT training we explore these deep postural muscles, such as the psoas muscle close the spine. We cannot consciously control or strengthen the

postural muscles, so through poor use such as pulling down on the neck or slouching they begin to weaken. We then use our larger and stronger superficial muscles in activity, such as those we are more familiar within the limbs and upper surfaces of the body such as the abdominal and trapezius muscles of the torso and quadriceps and biceps of the arms and legs. This is ultimately what causes tension, as these muscles should remain relatively free while the deep muscles provide tone for our uprightness (Sweigard 183). The superficial muscles are meant to “maintain equilibrium and need not work constantly; they become active intermittently in the location and to the degree that balance is threatened by gravitational and other forces,” in other words, as we carry out our activities (Sweigard 183). The extensor muscles, which run along the back body, must be strong to return the body to uprightness, but once we are there “strength is no longer the key factor in maintaining equilibrium” (Sweigard 183). What we are working toward in the AT is proper balance and tone of the extensor (back) and flexor (front) muscles. It is important to note which muscles we need to strengthen and which muscles we can relax in discussing our structure and freedom from excess tension. This speaks to the phrase “use your core” which is a common directive to acting students, often sending the wrong message. I have observed students actually tighten in response. The instruction is given to encourage the student to stay grounded and not collapse, but without knowing the mechanics of our structure they associate the core with the front body and the abdominal muscles, resulting in excess tension and holding in that area, which then restricts the breath and the natural movement of the diaphragm in the torso.

Alexander teacher John Nicholls discusses the relationship between the deep and the superficial muscles by way of a study conducted at the University of New South Wales in Australia and King’s College in London in *The Alexander Technique*. First, let’s distinguish further between the deep and the superficial muscles. The deep muscles are identified as non-

fatigable, or red fibers and the superficial muscles are fatigable, or white fibers (J. Nicholls 20). Dr. David Garlick of University of New South Wales hypothesizes, in response to research done on the effects of anti-gravity, that the AT “alters the distribution” of activity between these muscles. According to doctoral research done by Dr. Roger Tengwell on astronauts, in zero-gravity muscles have been shown to actually fold in on themselves. This validated Alexander’s assertion that “the body should lengthen naturally in response to gravity” (J. Nicholls 20). Dr. Garlick then suggests that “due to our cultural postural habit” of collapse in between “bouts of strenuous exertion, this leads to the lack of use and eventual atrophy of the non-fatigable [or deep] muscles fibers that are ideally suited to the task of ongoing postural support. Then when we do need to hold ourselves up, we have to recruit the white fibers [or superficial muscles], which quickly fatigue” (20).

The study helped me to understand why slumping and slouching is prevalent our culture. When I began my Alexander teacher training my first couple of months were spent in much pain as my body adjusted to using new muscles. Additionally, I have unbalanced muscle tone in my back due to scoliosis. All of this resulted in a good deal of pain and occasional muscle spasms. Unless we go through a slow process of strengthening these deep muscles we will not be able to maintain poised uprightness for any length of time. Those students who have sustained natural poise, such as dancers and athletes whose training has unconsciously strengthened these muscles, can also be helped by an AT teacher to make them aware of this information on the muscular system so that they may find greater ease in the fatigable muscles. The work with the neuro-muscular system, along with trained hands-on guidance of the AT teacher, supports the actor by toning the whole instrument rather than relaxing it. I believe this leads to increased stamina, flexibility and presence in the actor.

I think it is important to note here that in the AT our goal is not to strengthen muscle, although that is a by-product. Alexander's directions of neck free so the back can lengthen and widen results in a quality of tone rather than strength. John Nicholls describes tone in this way:

When a muscle lengthens, it brings the muscle into a state where it is more stretched and yet more relaxed at the same time, where it is in one sense both weaker because it has had to let go to lengthen, and yet stronger because a lengthened muscle has more potential strength. It's a dimension that is outside the experience of most people because they go from tension to relaxation, from strength to weakness and never experience the return of the muscle to its proper resting length (47).

Developing proper tone can be achieved in part by our thinking. To better understand this, it is helpful to know the anatomical relationship between the brain and the muscles. Michael Gelb describes the neuromuscular event by discussing how the brain sends messages to the muscles through the spinal column:

The muscles are made of muscles fibers and motor nerves and each individual nerve cell, called a motoneurone, originates in the spinal cord. A complex system makes up what's called a "motor unit" within the a muscle, which is stimulated by an electrical impulse that originates in the brain, travels down the spinal cord along the nerve connection and results in the contraction of its particular fibre bundle. The action of muscles is the result of the concerted firing of a particular pattern of individual motor units (74).

I have found that exploring our relationship to gravity is also an important part of understanding and developing tone. We can use gravity to root us, much like a tree, while Alexander's

directions seek to send us up. We have a reflex system that supports the body against gravity (Gelb 74).

Much is stored in the muscle fibers of our being. An AT teacher in my training course once defined habit in relation to muscles in this way: “muscles are loaded with pre-conceived notions, fixed ideas and emotions and with all this we drag the bones around, but muscles also learn to defer to the shape and the design of the bones to allow movement” (Cushman). In light of the profound connection of the brain to the muscles, it makes sense that emotional memory is stored in these fibres. In this view it would serve the actor well to find release in the musculature in the beginning of actor training to work toward heightened awareness and greater access to emotional response, rather than learning through unconsciously bound up energy in the body.

In order to achieve tone and release in the musculature AT teachers start by working with the primary control, “organizing one’s internal impressions around the central balance of the head, neck and trunk. The kinesthetic perceptions are then organized around that main axis of the body, which is the key factor in posture, balance and the organization of muscles tension throughout the whole body” (J. Nicholls 9). This is why the head and neck remain the place that Alexander teachers consistently go to assist students in improving their use. The image of the tent is an effective one. John Nicholls uses the image of a pole, or central axis, holding up the fabric of the tent rather than the tautness or stiffness of the fabric holding up the pole (12).

Dr. George Coghill, who studied developmental movement patterns in vertebrate creatures, saw parallels in his work with that of Alexander. He found that development proceeded “cephalocaudally, from head to tail, in the growing vertebrate organisms and the total neuromuscular patterns precede the partial ones” (J. Nicholls 17). This means that movement of the whole body precedes the movement of one part, such as a limb, separately. It is not that we

cannot move one part separately but that it should be in harmony with the whole as to not disrupt the proper functioning of the whole.

It would be accurate to say then that the Alexander Technique is about reorganizing our structure for optimal use rather than as a tool for relaxation. Going back to the misconception of the AT as a technique in relaxation, let's define what relaxation is and is not. Mabel Todd speaks of relaxation as "potential balance, experienced in the ideal state of well-being" (293). Todd goes on to say that "it is not negation, it is not passivity. The moment it is considered as such, flaccidity is encouraged, both mental and physical. Systems and parts hang in balance, ready to respond in any direction possible to them when new stimuli are applied" (293). Looking at the term relaxation as balance indicates movement. It is not a fixed state. Todd sees this balance as a "rhythm" in which we are moving between phases of rest and activity (293). In this view, relaxation is not a harmful state for the actor, but an important baseline for maintaining health, stamina and the ability to react without interference. Relaxation is perhaps a part of learning to reorganize, which is essential for the performer, but it does not mean that we strive to attain the rest phase while in performance. In teaching we can use the term reorganization rather than teaching. We can also narrow down the concept of reorganization of the whole into manageable tasks by starting with Alexander's sequence of directions. John Nicholls aptly called this sequence:

A distributive process where tensions reorganize themselves throughout the body rather than the person relaxes. The individual will undoubtedly feel more relaxed because tension will have been distributed to the places where it is necessary, having been removed from the places where it is unnecessary (48).

Constructive Rest as a Daily Practice For the Actor

In seeking balance and tone within our structure, the activity of constructive rest can be developed into a daily practice for the actor (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Semi-Supine Position for Constructive Rest.

Find a quiet spot on the floor on either a yoga mat or carpet. A bed or couch is too soft, not allowing for the spine to find proper resting length. Several books should be placed beneath the head. The height will vary from person to person. The aim is to attain a natural length in the neck without the neck muscles pulling down (with no books) or over straightening (too many books). The semi-supine position, as shown above, will require feet to be firmly planted on the floor with toes lengthened while knees are bent and facing the ceiling. This prevents over straightening of the lumbar curve, as might occur with the weight of the legs pulling on the back when the legs are stretched straight out (supine). There should be spaciousness between the torso and upper arms, with elbows bent and hands resting palms down on the torso or hips. It is very important that eyes remain open, alert and seeing. The act of constructive rest is just that, we remain present with ourselves and our surroundings as we consciously and constructively begin to unwind, lengthening and widening along the floor. Many students will want to close their eyes and have given me feedback that it is very meditative. I found the word meditative to be useful because, as I guided students through this process I encouraged them to connect with the natural rhythms of their breath, which I will describe in greater detail in Chapter Four. But it is important, especially for actors, to stay present with eyes open because the goal is to achieve a

relaxed readiness that will eventually follow them into the upright position and in activity. If we practice constructive rest for ten to twenty minutes a day, we will begin to experience a slow unwinding of habitual physical tension. While my scoliosis will never fully be corrected, I have experienced much relief from back strain as the musculature around the twist in my low back eased as a result of making constructive rest a daily practice.

I taught a workshop at SETC on finding actor's neutral through principles of the Alexander Technique. There are many misconceptions surrounding the phrase actor's neutral. I don't believe I truly understood what that meant in my early theatre training, and in teaching young actors and graduate students at SETC I noticed there are still misconceptions or blanket statements that do not instruct the student *how* to get there. Much like instructions for actors to be 'grounded' or 'use their core,' 'finding neutral' doesn't mean much to young actors unless they have a technique to understand and attain it. Oftentimes neutral is mistaken for relaxed or devoid of energy. From an Alexander perspective, neutral should be a state of readiness and presence without excess tension. In my teaching I no longer use the phrase actor's neutral. I have replaced that idea with one that speaks to an actor's balance, tone and clarity: a clear place.

Chapter 3

Creating Character and the Role of the Skeletal System

The Spine

Once a clear place within has been accessed, the beauty and wisdom of our structure can be enlivened, allowing the creative process to unfold. While the muscles and ligaments move the structure, the bones and joints beneath are designed for optimum, weight-bearing balance and expression. In *The Thinking Body*, Todd cites the characteristics of bones, most of which develop from cartilage as “high resistance to both compression and tensile stress, lightness and elasticity. These are the principal properties of steel” (81). This brings to mind the structure of skyscrapers and bridges, which are built to sway in the wind while carrying a large amount of weight.

The spine forms the framework for vertebrates and is made up of twenty-four smaller vertebrae that encase and protect the central nervous system. The human spine differs from those in other vertebrates because of our uprightness, and in that uprightness the spine has three main “loads” to carry and balance: the head, ribcage and pelvis (Todd 87). The neuromuscular coordination of the quadruped can be seen in the crawling human baby (Todd 87). This is also the basis of the work of Raymond Dart, who studied the evolution of the spine from the fetal curve to the development of the secondary curves. It is important to discuss the spine in detail because I find it to be a strong point of intersection between acting and the Alexander Technique. Some theatre practitioners, including Jerzy Grotowski, believe the spine is the center of

expression. Stephen Wangh, physical acting practitioner who was inspired by the work of Grotowski elaborates on the importance of the role of the spine in the work of the actor. Wangh states:

Normally we don't think of our backs as being particularly expressive body parts, but, in fact, our spines serve as the central energy transportation and communication lines for our body. If our spines are inflexible, they can block impulses and feelings from being felt or expressed. And conversely, if our backs are supple, they connect our mind with our whole body and permit impulses to flow from one part of our being to another (44).

Grotowski created many exercises to increase the suppleness of the spine, including undulations and yoga-like postures called Corporels. I have included many of these exercises in workshops and classes, although I have realized through my study of AT, like any other activity, these can be enhanced by Alexander's directions of proper use. In fact, in Grotowski's work, which is highly physical, injury can result if practice takes place on top of poor use.

The head itself is approximately a fifteen-pound weight atop the spine. Any constant imbalance imposed on the head-neck relationship is bound to cause problems down below. In addition to knowing the four primary curves of the spine and the origins of their development, as discussed in the introduction, I have found that a very helpful image in regard to the spine is the three-dimensionality of the spine and its depth within the body. Because we can feel the spiny processes of the vertebrae through our back, we hold the perception that our backbone is just that, only in the back. In fact, "it extends forward past the center of the trunk in its cervical and lumbar regions in order to give adequate support to the weight it carries" (Sweigard 180).

The vertebrae are larger in the lower lumbar spine and become smaller in the thoracic and cervical spine. Additionally, all the vertebrae are slanted with the exception of the level vertebrae at the center of each curve (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Anatomy of the Spine Side and Front View

This is important to note for Alexander teachers because “any willful attempt to make the vertebrae level, as with pelvis tucking, seriously interferes with the balance of the curves of the spinal column, as well as the balance of the pelvis” (Sweigard 180). The sacrum forms a curve ending at the tailbone by fused vertebrae, which provides stability for the pelvis.

If the spinal column occupies that much space in the trunk, then it makes sense for the Alexander teacher to encourage a student to gain more awareness of the back body. The ‘core’ then is the whole flexible three-dimensional torso. This includes the spine, the deep postural muscles, the gut, the pelvis and all the energy that is stored in this region. There is a lot of creative and physical power there. The abdominal muscles are merely a small part of the core. In knowing the basic structure of the spine, teachers can assist students in honoring its design for correct use and fuller expression in movement.

In an individual lesson with Rahimah von Brieson of ATTC-Charlottesville we explored the back and how much of it we have available to us. This includes the whole back of the body, not just the torso. As a society we are so aware of the front body and driven mostly by sight.

How can we move with more back? We can think of the back of the knees and legs and even the bottoms of the feet. When seeing with the eyes the stimulus is not just the point of vision with the eyes on the face. The image or stimulus is actually traveling into the brain via the optic nerve to the back of the head. We look and see with the whole head. This gave me a sense of my three-dimensionality, that the back isn't just the spine holding us up but the force of the whole back body supporting and moving us forward in space. This can help us move through space with greater power and confidence. Actors are telling a story through the use of themselves and the space around them. How we make use of that space around us with our bodies, sometimes called our kinesphere, is an important awareness to instill in the actor. This establishes presence.

Establishing Presence

An actor must not only portray a character with honesty, she must possess presence. One often hears of a great actor that she has a commanding presence. Is one born with presence? Can presence be cultivated? It is my belief and experience that one's full presence can most certainly be diminished by a number of factors: under-confidence, shyness, low self-esteem, and an untrained instrument. While perhaps some people possess a commanding presence naturally, I do believe that the Alexander Technique can be a tool for finding presence and for allowing us to stand in our full power. If we learn to strip away our habits, which often include defensive and fixed postures, and work toward finding our backs and the ground then we can learn to stand with ease, grace, vulnerability and strength.

How can the actor be expansive yet grounded at the same time? These are often words heard in the acting classroom, yet how does the student understand how to achieve both qualities that seem by definition contradictory? Now that we have established that the spine is a springy

column that balances weight, we can look further into the structure to find out how we can attain lightness while using gravity. We cannot have one without the other, or we would either float away or collapse. First, there exists a counterbalance of the weights of the head and tail. In this opposition of weight we can find length by grounding the feet into the floor or our sits bones in the chair as our necks are free and our heads are going forward and up. As our feet make contact with the floor, we reflexively go up. In AT training, teacher Sara O'Hare likened our body to a system of interconnected springs. If we are rooted to the earth by gravity, then like a spring we can go up by our reflexive nature. To understand this, I imagine playing on a pogo stick as a child. When the pogo stick lifts off the ground it is not just the metal stick and myself that springs into the air, it is energy. There can be lift and lightness when we release down and give our weight to the earth rather than trying to hold ourselves up all the time. This spring can give us our length.

The Alexander teacher trainees had a wonderful lesson on the use of gravity that beautifully illustrated the above pogo stick image. Teacher Brad Stoller asked us to try standing up by simply pressing feet into the floor and trying to go up. This was impossible. It was only when I leaned over and fell forward toward the floor from the hips that I was able to stand. We must go down to come up. We are not puppets on strings. We can use the energy and weight of our structure to give us our spring and our ground. Actors receiving hands-on work with an Alexander teacher can receive clear information from them about the often used but confusing directive "stay grounded." This is essential for establishing presence. Later, this awareness can become a tool for character building as the actor plays with the physicality and center of gravity of the character she is portraying. "Posture, movement patterns, and breathing patterns express emotional and mental attitudes. These physical attitudes then become material for the creative

process, to be worn by choice and with conscious skill” (Crow 2). For example, the actor should explore where the character is most weighted, what body part does she tend to lead with or what quality of energy does that particular character possess.

My own experience with exploring my skeletal structure has been profound. While some may work for releasing bound up energy and tension in the muscles, I’ve found that I must work with the natural lightness of my small bones to find my ground. I have discovered that the energy I use to carry out my movement is largely psychological as well as a result of my particular build. While some of these qualities serve me, much of it does not. I see now that not only are teachers working with my body, they are observing and working with my energy. While there are circumstances in which I establish presence, my default setting has a light and nervous quality. This may be a wonderful physicality to adopt for Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but I do not wish to carry myself like that through life. The AT can help actors find and undo their default setting as well as encourage actors to create a default setting for the character they will create.

Stimulus and Response

It is a wonderful perspective for the actor to view improving use as a means of developing greater choice in movement. Without choice every character is the same and playing a physically challenging role becomes impossible. In examining what choice means for the actor, I think what has struck me most in my training thus far is the idea of both acting and the Alexander Technique as acts of responding to a stimulus and providing a choice as to how we respond. If inhibition provides a window between a stimulus and our response to it, we then have the space for a new choice to be made other than the habitual. The key word is *response*

rather than *reaction*. In training when we use response it implies that we have more freedom. I know that when I am reactive, I am not thinking and no choice is made. This very often leads to the wrong choice, or at least a choice based in fear, which generally doesn't lead to expansion in movement. I believe this is because a reaction is not conscious. In thinking about this I wondered what the difference was between reaction and impulse. Impulse is something actors want and need to have access to. Impulse, as defined by Merriam Webster online dictionary is "a wave of excitation transmitted through tissues and especially nerve fibers and muscles that results in physiological activity or inhibition" (www.merriam-webster.com). Reaction is defined as "an action induced by vital resistance to another action" (www.merriam-webster.com). In this definition, the vital resistance is not something useful to the actor whereas an impulse, something that is transmitted through us, allows for more space and expansion rather than tension, allowing the actor to be a conduit for the life of the character. Joseph Chaikin's view on tension and the actor is as follows:

Tension directs him to particular choices, limiting possibilities and concealing alternatives. I know the opportunity of being present with a given audience is only once at a time, and I want to be there, available to the occasion. I feel myself straining and pushing when it's not intended. I'm experiencing now the imbalance of me and what I do. I'm overeager to be understood, which already a form of tension" (22).

This is the paradox of performing. We must be open and free so that we may express the tensions and imbalances of life and relationship onstage. Most acting pedagogy encourages students to use themselves in their work yet most young students are still forming their identities. In observing and teaching young actors I feel certain then that the Alexander Technique allows

for focus on something tangible and reliable – the body, which equips them for study in a craft that requires them to sway with even the toughest winds without breaking.

From a musculo-skeletal perspective on tension and stress, we can begin by looking at the startle pattern. A startle response is one in which we unconsciously react to something out of the fight or flight mentality, usually from a place of fear. This reaction initiates in the primary control, usually with the back of the neck and head pulling down and collapsing and depressing the throat and larynx. The shoulders may rise up to the ears as the breath quickens. John Nicholls describes this as a neuromuscular reaction to stress that disrupts our balance causing a “wave of contraction that starts in the head and neck muscles and moves down the body” (50). He asserts that Alexander’s directions are the exact opposite of the startle pattern. Because this is a neuromuscular event, if this pattern of stress is repeated frequently in childhood then it can become “partially fixed into the nervous system and body musculature” (J. Nicholls 51). In other words, one may think that the characteristics of this pattern are a natural part of their being.

This reaction obviously would have adverse affects on the speaking actor. Stress for the actor can range from fear of judgment to stage fright. I think of the audition situation when teacher Pippa Bondy states, “when the stimulus is strong, the tension in my body is greatest and the fear in my mind the strongest, this is the hardest time for me to release, but of course the most valuable” (381). The AT is something we can employ in this situation. If we are untrained, as “an unconscious, reactionary person” is, then we seem to “project from this sort of place” (Bondy 379). This is not what we want to project in the audition situation. In time one can begin to undo this “posture” while learning to direct and inhibit toward a new response that doesn’t compromise the use of the whole.

The following exercise was presented by Alexander teacher Meade Andrews at the opening of the Freedom To Act: Acting and Alexander Technique Conference in New York City to demonstrate how the quality of our thinking affects response to stimulus. I have since used this exercise in classes and workshops. Andrews opened by stating, “the AT is a duet between a thinking process and a kinesthetic sense, kinesthetic awareness being how we sense ourselves in our bodies”. She invited us to close our eyes while she asked three questions. We were asked to assess our response kinesthetically to each stimulus, opening our eyes and discussing between each one. The questions were as follows:

1. “I don’t have much time and I need to get this done quickly”
2. “I’m not good enough and I’ll never get what I want”
3. “I am at ease with myself and I have all the time in the world”

This was a wonderful example of how powerful our responses can be to a mere thought. Alexander wanted to look at our response to thought. If negative thought leads to poor form, then in that form, whether collapsed, sunken, rushed, we can’t be properly responsive. Most of the attendees said their breathing changed, or they felt a collapse in the chest area, or they felt a lightness in the shoulders in response to the last question. She went on to say that the ‘duet’ is facilitated by the gentle hands-on work of teacher with student. Therefore, the technique is not a series of exercises but rather a study of our reaction to stimulus, both internal and external. In this look at reaction to stimulus, Alexander asks us to become aware of our excess and unneeded stress and tension “but also provides a means to prevent (or let go of) habitual patterns. Once these habits are set aside, movement can be based on what is needed in the moment” (Bello, Bjerkin 30).

Opening our Receptivity

In the Stanislavski system of acting, although he “rejected external approaches to acting early in his life, he (and as many of his followers) later rediscovered the basic insight that Francois Delsarte had made one hundred years before – that the body can indeed provide a direct route to the emotions” (Wangh xxxv). Later, Grotowski created his aesthetic around this ideal, beautifully summarized by Jennifer Kumiega, “we do not *possess* memory, our entire body *is* memory, and it is by means of the “body-memory” that the impulses are released” (Wangh xxxvi). Wangh goes on to state that “an actor who has learned to listen to his body will find character actions, intentions, and objectives arise organically within the work itself, without the actor needing to sit down and do table work to figure them out” (xxxvi). While I believe that preliminary actor table work has its purpose to put the ensemble on the same page, I do agree that we can trust our bodies to make instinctive character choices once we are up on our feet working.

Let’s take the example of pursuing an objective. We have a need but run into an obstacle. I was working with an Alexander teacher on the scenario of doing the dishes at a sink and having the stimulus of hearing my child run out the door and into the street introduced. This would produce a startle pattern in most anyone. The startle response happens on the sagittal plane (up and down like a wheel), so how can we use our weight to spiral out of this place at the sink and spring into action? When given this scenario, I acted with the need to ‘save my child’ in mind. When she had me redo the “scene,” she directed me to first lead with the eyes to look and then spiral in the direction of the need. In that slight “pause” I stayed in my back which allowed for efficiency of movement through space by pushing off the surface of the “counter” (in this case the AT table) to move with more purpose and intention, unfettered by startle and habit.

My fellow students observed the clarity and strength of intention on the second try. What these physical instructions allowed for was response in the moment without anticipating. I, too, felt that I was not anticipating intellectually but my body was leading me to pursue this objective more urgently and truthfully. This was a very powerful lesson for me and cemented my belief that the Alexander technique allows for what Bello and Bjerken describe as the ability to “balance vital tensions while freeing ourselves from our own habits (and while simultaneously embodying a character’s intention and expression)” (Bello, Bjerken 30).

This is an example of how the Alexander Technique teaches the actor to listen to the body to support the work of pursuing an objective. It produces emotional clarity. Gelb states that while the point of Alexander work is not “to facilitate emotional release,” it is often a by-product (155). Gelb elaborates by stating, “recent research suggests that your emotions affect your nerves, muscles and immune system from moment to moment. By refining your kinesthetic sensitivity, the AT offers you the opportunity to become more aware of the subtleties of your emotional experience” (156). The actor should not strive to express an emotion on stage. This does not propel a story forward. By pursuing an action and stumbling into obstacles, the welling up of emotion is only a by-product or result of the action and the circumstance. The Alexander Technique opens the actor’s receptivity to the welling up of that emotion when it does come.

Alexander Technique and Coaching Actors

Students of the Alexander technique train in part by working on activities. We explore our use through the basic daily tasks of standing, sitting, walking and balancing in space. The technique is not a series of exercises but a methodology embedded in the science of the body in motion. To this end, the technique serves as a natural bridge to the difficult task of asking acting

students to bring physical freedom and emotional connection to a moment in a scene or monologue. I have observed students gain a newfound freedom in an acting or movement exercise, but when asked to go into the monologue, it falls away only to be replaced by personal habits or isms. At the Freedom to Act: Acting and Alexander Technique conference, Alexander teacher Judith Muir spoke of the AT as a tool for “self-empowerment” for the actor. In her workshop *Embodying the Monologue*, she observed the performance of an actor and then simply asked why he had made a certain choice rather than change it, empowering the actor to find ways to work with what he had chosen and to find freedom within that choice. The actor made a character choice to cross his legs while sitting. Rather than ask him to change this so he could find his sits bones on the chair, she assisted him in finding a more grounded presence within that posture. The AT will not impose choices. That is the actor’s process. She may go on to have them perform again, coaching with directives such as “try it again while maintaining connection to floor with feet” (Muir).

During Alexander training, I was being coached on a monologue in which the character is anxious, nervous and somewhat fluttery. While performing I knew that my use was poor in trying to portray this character but these were the physical characteristics that I have used for quite some time for this particular piece. Being a student of the AT, I knew that I was pulling down in the neck. My coach said that I could keep this fluttery, nervous character while not collapsing my primary control by staying in my back and keeping my neck free. In trying again I noticed that in order to do this, I needed to adjust my pelvis to be more over my legs. This is my own habit. After that the class noticed a powerful shift in expression. At the Freedom to Act conference, Muir asked us, “how do we give dynamic performance while recruiting energy from tension” (Muir)? She said that we must find it first without bracing, making the adjustments we

need, then “building back in strength without tightening so that we can replicate it with better habit” (Muir). My experience above speaks to this, as I felt that if I had release in my torso I could express the nervousness more in the extremities. I could build physical characteristics of tension or gesture back in once release had been found in my core.

Acting and Alexander Technique Workshop Ideas

I was invited to teach a two-day workshop on the Alexander Technique to undergraduate students as part of their Junior Movement class. It was an interesting challenge to design a workshop for a group without being able to do hands-on work, especially since I was only at the end of my first year of Alexander training. It was, however, a wonderful opportunity to conduct an acting class, using physical exercises I’ve taught before, only this time grounded in the principles of AT. What resulted was a wonderful dialogue and, for some, an eye opening experience about movement and the body and how they work with themselves in the context of acting. I learned that they were still very perplexed about how to use their bodies and let go of tension.

I began class with a brief discussion to introduce the technique and talk about my experience in training. I had worked quite extensively with this particular group of students when they were sophomores as their teaching assistant in Acting II and Movement for the Actor. I talked about the difference between understanding something intellectually and kinesthetically and that this process requires us to be gentle and disciplined with ourselves in terms of breaking habit. It is a lifelong process. A student of the technique will sense change in the body fairly quickly due to the immediacy of touch, but the responsibility to continue to grow in the work is

placed on them. It is a gradual process of change and reorganization. Just becoming conscious of one or two habitual patterns is a huge step.

The students presented very thoughtful and astute questions. One student asked if we have to get rid of what makes us unique in order to get rid of habit. This is a valid question for people pursuing work in a field in which uniqueness sets them apart from the rest. The goal of the AT is not to become blank slates. We still have our individual life force, personality and imagination, but we are looking to gain greater conscious control of our reactions. We don't have to react habitually – this limits us and does not allow for the expression of our true self. Habitual reaction and pattern holds us back from expressing who we truly are. I asked them what they knew about the Alexander Technique. They had fairly informed answers but, again, many of them were misconceptions. One student said that it is about finding a neutral place from which to work, another said it is about finding alignment while another said it was about finding a release of tension. All of these statements are correct yet there is a step more – Alexander Technique addresses *how* to achieve these things and it brings them into better definition. What is actor's neutral? What is proper alignment? What do we mean by muscle tension – don't we need some? The AT clarifies what these mean and *how* we get there. Alexander created a technique that defines the means whereby, or the steps we take to get there. This technique, constructive rest in particular, provides “scales” for the actor to work on, like a violinist practices her instrument or a ballet dancer practices at the barre.

The students were very engaged in the discussion and I moved into an anatomy exercise. In order to even begin talking about directions and freeing the neck they would need to know about the head and neck. I asked them to point to where they thought the occipital joint is located. Students were pointing to different places on the neck, some pointing to the very base.

We talked about the placement of the atlanto occipital joint and the structure of the first several vertebrae at the top of the spine, the condyles and the placement of the joint (with thumbs in indentation behind earlobes). This must be understood in order to work with the direction of head forward and up as opposed to pulling back and down. The A.O. joint, which is where the nod of the head originates, is much higher in the skull than most people realize. From here we explored semi-supine and constructive rest. I always begin with some stretches that open the hip flexors and encourage release in the low back, including bringing each knee to the chest while breathing into the ribs and back. It took them awhile to get adjusted and comfortable in semi-supine. This led me to realize that, even at their young age, it was hard for them to be on the floor due to a large amount of contraction and holding. I was able to provide some verbal and hands-on adjustments to make them more comfortable.

Once back on our feet we did a walk-about the space with several variations to introduce stimulus. Before we began I asked the students to point to their hip joints. Most of the men pointed to the iliac crest, or the top of the hipbone. I used this opportunity to introduce “monkey” to illustrate where the hip joint is actually located to correct the perception that we bend over by breaking at the back. The students seemed genuinely shocked that the hip joints were so low and by how easy it was to bend by sending the knees away and hinging at the joint rather than somewhere in the spine.

In the first walk-about, I used an exercise learned in my AT training where the students place a light hand on another’s back as they passed. This is to invite attention to the back body as we move forward. This was received very well, with feedback ranging from the awareness making them feel taller to feeling more connected as they moved through space. Also, one person said that just a placement of the hand rather than rubbing or patting was more helpful.

Simply offering our energy through touch rather than doing or overdoing something is more effective.

Having introduced this stimulus to walking, we had an impromptu discussion about stimulus and intention and how awareness of self and moving from the back body instills a greater sense of presence. I could not have been more pleased. I used the example of my experience playing the woman washing dishes at the sink and then noticing her son running out in to the street. Questions arose about stimulus with someone asking, wouldn't one naturally react in a startled or contracted way? Yes and no. This was a great introduction to my planned reaction to stimulus exercise.

The next walk about introduced the stimulus of a clap. AT teacher Brad Stoller taught a variation of this classic acting warm-up that was very effective. I expanded upon it in this class. At each clap the students had to change directions. Sometimes I placed the claps far apart and sometimes closer together. Afterward, students brought up feeling jolted at the clap and they described different and individual variations of the startle pattern (in body and breath). Some said that they felt calmer than when they have done this exercise previously due to the work we did on the floor and back body! One student said that he felt that he didn't have a choice but to feel startled at the clap. I was so pleased by this comment, it being a segue into the idea that as actors we DO have choice. You do have a choice as to how you react to a stimulus, which led right into the next phase of the exercise.

I decided to use a dowel rod on a block this time as the stimulus and I side-coached throughout. I told them that they do have a choice; they may change directions on the stimulus if they want to but they don't have to. I had them increase and decrease tempo. I reminded them to keep it alive and move with intention even though they were now aware of the startle reaction.

I said they could leap through the air at the stimulus or crawl or walk backward. The feedback on this variation was very exciting. One student said that she felt an increased sense of play. Another felt that in having choice they felt a larger range of motion. I pointed out that it wasn't me that gave that to her. She had that freedom inside all along. Another student announced that she felt more relaxed in her body as she changed directions. Some said that they found it difficult to not change directions, or that they felt the startle happen and they automatically changed directions sharply. This comment proved to be a wonderful way for me to introduce Alexander's concept of inhibition. In this exercise, taking a slight pause to make a choice to react differently, even if it felt awkward, stimulates a different neuropathway in the brain. A student then asked if this could possibly squelch impulse. I think it allows us to uncover our true impulses unfettered by tension, habit and unconscious limitations. I felt this was demonstrated by the increased sense of play. I also observed more freedom and improvisation in my students during this exercise rather than squelched impulses.

Another very successful sequence included ball toss exercises. This classic actor exercise is effective in building upon stimulus work while adding in work with pursuing an objective. We began in a circle by making eye contact, tossing the ball and catcher acknowledging thrower after the ball is caught and so forth, with the directive of tossing the ball being the action and keeping the ball in the air being the objective. Lessening the startle response is essential for keeping the ball in the air. We increased tempo, I added more balls and eventually added in text (saying the name of the person you're tossing to). At intervals I talked about the thought of keeping the neck free and the possibility of that loose nod at the A.O. joint while playing.

The next step was to play the same game with the same rules but when the ball comes to you, do not catch it but simply observe it fall. I learned this at a Michael Chekhov workshop at

the Southeastern Theatre Conference and thought it a fabulous way to look at our habitual response patterns. All kinds of reactions took place. Most giggled, some caught it reflectively anyway, another got annoyed, and some threw their arms up in the air or screamed. This was the most informative aspect of the workshop for me as a teacher. It illustrated that when confronted with a stimulus, we work largely from unconscious muscle memory that is almost always not efficient or effective. Again, the idea is not to squelch impulse but to simply gain greater awareness of ourselves. The students were quite taken aback by their reactions.

At the end of the workshop we had a closing feedback session. I asked students if they felt the information and exercises helped or deepened their understanding of the acting process and what most resonated with them. I was pleased to hear them speak about having a clearer concept of moving while acting. They loved the idea of a technique that they could carry with them into their own lives, also stating that it would take quite some time and more intensive training to incorporate it into their acting. Another stated that they were excited about how a fuller understanding of kinesthetic sense means that there are more possibilities for creating characters. Lastly, I was surprised to find that the directions lengthen and widen really affected them. One student felt that it strengthened him in a way that pointed him more toward his inner, healthy self.

Alexander Technique and Character Work

Kelly McEvenue, director of Alexander Technique at the Stratford Theatre Festival in Canada, who has worked directly with actors in their process within a repertory company states:

The body gives experience expression. The connection of the mind and body is crucial for the actor, having to relive and retell a story for eight shows a week.

Gaining knowledge and sensitivity of the body frees the actor to test and explore his physical and emotional range (102).

McEvenue has developed a very specific process in working with actors, with differences in training and coaching. In coaching she will ask the actor to find and perform the character while she observes how the body is organized, learning how the actor has chosen to shape his character physically. She looks to see where the “downward pressure and tensions are in his body, to discern whether we can relieve excessive strain and to analyze how best to support the body given the choice the actor is making” (McEvenue 102).

While I attended her workshop, *Working with the Actor in Classical Repertory* at the Freedom to Act: Acting and the Alexander Technique Conference, McEvenue talked about her process for helping actors on character work by creating a “movement design”. For example, she has worked with many actors on Richard the III. She says that you cannot play him with tension or damage will be done. She creates a design in which the actor isolates one pattern, perhaps only hitching up a leg into the pelvis as he walks to create the illusion of a humped back, leaving the torso and respiratory mechanism free. An Alexander teacher is trained to do this whereas a director is not. She believes the work must start early in the rehearsal process. She listens to bones with her hands and works with placing center of gravity in terms of the organs. For example, she will coach a female playing a male in a Shakespearean play by instructing her to “take up the center of gravity” which changes the use of the legs and hips, because a female’s center of gravity tends to be behind the bowel or ovary.

The beauty of the Alexander Technique is it is a malleable tool that can be used with the beginning actor or the more advanced professional actor, with each AT teacher bringing her own unique style to the work.

Making the Leap

Alexander and acting teacher Kathleen Baum calls the moment of bringing the freedom and connection found in an exercise into acting work “the dangerous corner” (26). In her work with actors, she has discovered that students who have experience in the Alexander Technique have made this transition from exercise to acting moment more effectively. She gave the example of acting exercises that ask students to close their eyes, thus shutting out some of the stimuli that may distract from connecting to the self or to memory, as with sense memory and affective memory exercises where a student may close her eyes while the teacher takes them through a series of suggestions or visualizations to allow a particular memory and emotion to affect them. Or physical activities in which students lie on the floor, “reducing external stimuli, establishing a sense of safety, and helping students work with less physical tension” (Baum 26). These all have their benefits but Baum asserts:

All too often, as soon as the eyes open and the actual scene is played, the old less free, less rich, more blocked ways of working reappear. From an Alexander point of view, it is probably fair to say that, with the return to the routine of rehearsal or performance (as opposed to the special circumstances of the exercise), habitual ways of functioning tend to reassert themselves. Fear, end-gaining, self-consciousness, excess effort, and a habitual level of physical tension re-emerge and partly undo the benefit of the exercise (26).

I would argue that it is not only in rehearsal and performance where freedom is lost but also, for young actors, in the acting classroom itself. I have observed the same set of young acting students in sophomore acting and sophomore movement, having served as a teaching assistant in

both classes during graduate school at VCU. There, sophomore movement did seek to integrate movement and acting. Students were required to work on both monologues as scenes through the lens of physical work, but the course was not based in a specific technique. Rigorous warm-ups were combined with physical scoring and other exercises using principles of contact improvisation, breath/sound and movement exercises, and some biomechanics work. Students did exercises that played with varying tempo, speed and rhythm, used the body to change tactics, employed music to explore mood, as well as animal and personal mannerisms exercises. While all of these exercises were beneficial and I observed growth in the movement potential of some, students never worked toward changing their own poor habits of use. To this end, students would have momentary breakthroughs but they were unable to transfer these bodily discoveries into their daily lives, much less their work back in the acting classroom. I have witnessed the positive results of hands-on work with an actor performing a monologue and Baum states, “an Alexander teacher working hands-on with students can help them become aware of how they change when they turn that dangerous corner. The AT teacher can offer ways of turning that corner without losing what was gained in the exercise” (Baum 26).

One key aspect of the technique is keeping the eyes active and seeing even while in constructive rest. I have observed AT teachers working with students with hands on the back of the neck who have instructed the student to look around the room. The teacher could feel the student’s fixed gaze through the slightly tensed muscles of the neck, because muscles in the neck are connected to the eye socket. In this way, “the ability to be acutely sensitive to one’s own inner condition while simultaneously being fully alive to and present in the world is fundamental to the AT” (Baum 26). The hands on experience of touch that encourages inner listening combined with the direction to stay activated and present in the world around us makes the

technique a powerful and useful technique for actors, who must always stay in the moment, be authentically responsive to the stimuli around them without anticipating the next moment. These skills are sought after in Stanislavski exercises in the early years of actor training, therefore I argue that the AT should be started earlier rather than later in actor training programs to support these exercises, giving actors a strong foundational base from which to then approach more specific skills and complex text later.

Actors must be sensitive and emotionally available beings capable of great expression; however, as a Stanislavski trained actor, the craft of acting is about pursuing an action, and emotional reaction is a byproduct of pursuing that action and running up against obstacles. In the Alexander Technique itself we do the same thing. Our objective may be to sit down in a chair or stand up out of a chair. In pursuing that action we may run into obstacles. Our ankles may feel tight; our backs may feel strain as we are guided into the chair from a position of mechanical advantage, unfortunately a position that we do not utilize habitually. In running up against these obstacles we learn to change tactics. The AT practitioner may ask us to stand with feet farther apart. Or through her hands she may invite us to do a little less holding in the low back, or encourage a widening in the thoracic spine and through the clavicles as we send our hips back and knees away to sit. Always, hands will return time and time again to the head and neck reminding us to release forward and up with the head atop the spine at the A.O joint. Eventually, these changes in tactics will improve our use. We may begin to experience more ease and fluidity. This ease may bring about feelings of freedom and joy, where there once was holding or pain. It is through activity that we do our work in the Alexander Technique. The work is not separate from action, just as in acting. As we learn to release the muscles so that the skeleton is free to move us through space, we will have greater creative capacity to use the body to tell a

story. As Mabel Todd states “the skeleton is nature’s mechanical triumph. Lines of force go through its bones, and the feeling of motion is in them” (*Hidden You* 64). In acting, if poor habits interfere with our structure they most certainly will interfere with our ability to portray a character onstage. Stanislavski states in *Building a Character* “every actor should so harness his gestures that he will always be in control of them and not they of him” (Lee 70).

Chapter 4

Breathing Life into the Part and the Role of the Respiratory System

It would be remiss not to address the role of the breath in a thesis on Alexander's work, the work of the actor, and my own journey in the Alexander Technique. I stated earlier that even though we are working with the systems of the body in order to find release for greater ease, efficiency and expression, we do not become devoid of our life force. I believe the breath to be our life force. What makes us unique as people and as actors is not the force of our habits, it is our spirit within. This spirit, or energy, can be expressed in breath. Often in theatre training programs, voice teachers have Alexander Technique experience or AT teachers work alongside voice teachers to complement their work. This really should be the case in all programs.

Breath is Movement

Breath *is* movement and as such, an Alexander teacher working with performing artists would do well to listen to habits associated with breath. Mabel Todd describes the mystery of the breath quite beautifully:

The diaphragm and its associates, both nervous and muscular, reach into the deepest recesses of the individual. It is tied up with every living function, from the psychic to the structural, and within its nervous mechanism sends out ramifications to the remotest points of the sphere of living. Like the equator, it is

the dividing line of two great halves of being: the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary, the skeletal and the visceral (217).

Since Mabel Todd wrote *The Thinking Body* in 1937, we have a clearer picture of the function and anatomy of the diaphragm from further research and technology. Alexander was researching and writing well before Todd and certainly before medical x-ray technology. While her observation certainly captures the elusiveness and integral nature of breath to our being, Alexander found a way to understand and work with the breath that is still, despite our expanded knowledge of the respiratory system, effective and essential today.

When I began my AT teacher training course I was surprised to find that two different, senior teachers seemed to identify my limiting habits of breath and voice. This was startling to me for two reasons: I know through theatre training my voice has presented challenges. Secondly, I didn't think that I would encounter problems in breathing patterns in "movement" training. In my theatre training I have always moved well and expected to be studying a technique that would help me to find more freedom in movement while acting. And here I had two teachers asking me to focus on my breath. I had done enough voice training to be able to perform a role in a moderate to long run and be heard and understood by the back of the house. That was good enough for me. What these Alexander teachers were asking me to do was look at habits of vocal and breathing patterns that stem from childhood; this hit a very emotional chord. As I am continually learning in this work, most habits are wrapped up in our sense of identity and most often are a result of fear. Truly facing our fears and confronting ourselves is at the heart of this work.

I was having a private lesson with one of these senior teachers one afternoon. She came in as a guest teacher and it was my first lesson with her. She asked me what I'd been working

with and if there was anything in particular I wanted to address in the lesson. As always, I launched into telling her about my scoliosis. As with most of the teachers I've worked with, they listen but then don't pay much attention to that. This was mysterious to me at first, but now well into my training I understand that in working to integrate the whole, AT teachers, unlike physical therapists, do not hone in on fixing any one part. They go up to my head and neck and begin there. Not fifteen minutes into the lesson she started talking about my breath and voice. My current Alexander teacher and director, who studied 'The Art of Breathing' with Jessica Wolf at Yale, also is working with me in this area.

Much of what they both noticed in me was not just a vocal issue. There is a certain self-perception that I manifest vocally. This is indeed a perception rather than a truth. This self-perception is old and surfaces from time to time, as a part of my mechanism. I daresay this may represent remnants of that old rock my acting teacher identified so long ago. I am naturally small-boned and soft-spoken. I was a shy child. I move lightly and have been described as graceful. It is as if I could, at times, float away rather than be substantial and grounded to the earth. Staying small is perhaps an old survival mechanism. If becoming an actor helped me find my voice, then the Alexander Technique is proving to build a more substantial and lasting base of support through my breath. For actors I would say it is key to finding presence. I have a tendency, when not consciously thinking about it, to keep my breath and voice small. Additionally, I am high energy and easily responsive. While this is a handy way to be as an actor, the ways in which I respond and react are habitual and not always the most effective way to communicate. My breath pattern tends to be shallow and I often take quick intakes of breath before speaking, or in reaction to something. In short, I interfere with my natural breath pattern, gasping for air and then not fully exhaling. What I have learned, especially with the breath, is

that trying to correct it interferes with the process even further. Learning to work with our instrument without judgment is very difficult, but the body has its own innate wisdom that if not interfered with can actually work with optimum proficiency. As we say in the theatre, we must learn to get out of our own way. This harkens back to Grotowski's philosophy of eradicating blocks rather than acquiring skill in the training of theatre artists.

This is precisely what Alexander had to do, but before he could get out of his own way, he had to closely observe himself so that he could become aware of his self-imposed habits. There may be some benefit to knowing why we develop habits but it was my first Alexander teacher that said knowing the *why* doesn't really matter; it's the desire to change it and what we do about it that makes a difference in our use. As discussed in Chapter One, Alexander began his quest into self-study because he would lose his voice at the critical moment of having to perform. The early days of the technique were lessons in vocal re-education. Walter Carrington reminds us that at the start of Alexander's work with performers, he was called "the breathing fellow" (64). Alexander believed that the voice could not be worked on without addressing respiration. "If the natural respiratory act is not under conscious control, neither is the vocal, and obviously indirect means must be employed and the two mechanisms (vocal and respiratory) dealt with simultaneously using the respiratory as the primary motive power" (*Articles and Lectures* 50).

Alexander deemed the 'primary motive power' of respiration as the "thoracic mechanism" (*Articles and Lectures* 50). In thinking about the power of the breath as coming from the thorax, or torso, rather than the muscles and passageways of the upper body, the neck and throat can remain open and less tense. In this view, "the existence of this natural action ensures that the throat and neck muscles, the larynx and the shoulders remain passive; the breath

will pass noiselessly in to the lungs, while those passages will be dilated instead of being contracted” (*Articles and Lectures 25*).

If the thoracic mechanism (the diaphragm, the ribcage, the muscles of the torso) is not properly, or naturally, engaged then the following results:

1. Raising of the shoulders, making correct respiration impossible; clavicular depression
2. A “sniffing” sound (nasal breathing) or “gasping” sound (mouth breathing) on each inspiration.
3. Contraction of the nasal passages
4. Poor thoracic mobility (vital capacity) – fixed ribs
5. Habit of mouth breathing, with its attendant ills [disease]. (*Articles and Lectures 24*)

The Diaphragm

There are many misconceptions about the diaphragm and how it functions. It is very helpful to give students a clear and correct picture of the diaphragm in order to assist them with understanding how their use affects their breathing. An effective time to do this is when they are on the floor in constructive rest, when the musculature is lengthened on the floor with the least amount of strain and doing. Mabel Todd states that the diaphragm:

Is a muscular structure, which forms the floor of the thoracic cage and the roof of the abdominal cavity. The whole structure is in the shape of a lop-sided mushroom with its stem nearer to the back margin than to the front. The heart rests on the top of the diaphragm, and the liver, stomach and spleen are immediately beneath its under surface. All of these viscera are in close contact with it and even directly connected with its tissues (221).

This information is relevant in that if the torso is hunched over and slumped, not only are the organs being compressed but also the diaphragm, in its billowy nature, cannot maintain its proper tone. As I learned more about this integral muscle I began to picture it as a pump that feeds the lungs. As a person inhales and the lungs fill and expand, the diaphragm is releasing and compressing down and as we exhale and the air leaves the lungs and the ribcage softly drapes, the diaphragm domes back up to its natural expanded state (see fig. 4).

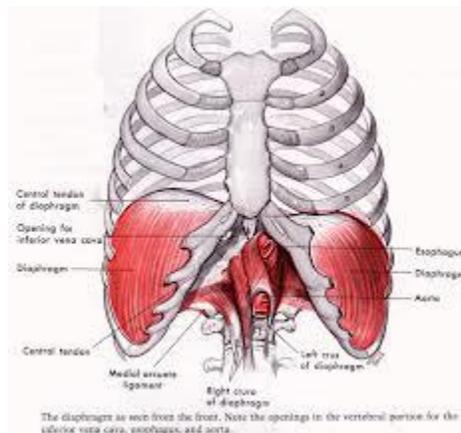


Fig. 4. The Diaphragm and its Placement in the Torso.

It is also helpful to understand the diaphragm in relation to the spinal column. Todd describes it as being connected to the twelfth thoracic vertebra, this vertebra being at the crossroads of many muscular attachments, with its “dorsal spinous process the lowest attachment for the trapezius muscle and the sides of its body the first and highest point of the great psoas” [the deep postural muscle that runs along the spine and down into the pelvis] (242). She goes on to describe in great detail how pulling down, as in slumping, creates a great disturbance in the spinal curves and our whole musculature. I found this bit of knowledge of anatomy very powerful and proof that Alexander was indeed correct about the thorax, making it clear that the directions of length and width are essential to healthy respiration. We essentially have two

pumps in our torso: the heart and the diaphragm. Their functions are actually closely related.

Todd addresses the interdependent rhythms of the body, such as the heartbeat and breath, stating, “in primary patterns of movement, in the absence of structural fixities superimposed by man, the breathing apparatus and the locomotive apparatus interrelate, aiding one another. This must be so, since locomotion and breathing developed movement and form together” (243). In this view breathing really is movement and should remain fluid, responsive and adaptable to all our activities.

Lastly, based on the research on the diaphragm by Dr. Carl Stough, with whom AT teacher Jessica Wolf worked closely, he was able to see, through techniques of cineflorography, the inside of the thorax and the motion of the diaphragm and he “saw how the movement of the ribs was the result of the excursion of the diaphragm. The diaphragm works as an involuntary muscle so it is not necessary to initiate the movement of the ribs to breath” (Wolf 18). Yet he observed, as many people still do today, that we use “accessory breathing muscles,” muscles located in the neck, chest and shoulders to pull air in. Stough discovered that using these muscles to breathe actually weakens the diaphragm (Wolf 18). Through re-education via indirect means, such as taking a full exhalation to allow a reflexive inhalation, the diaphragm can be developed once again. According to Wolf, while Alexander suspected this many years earlier, Stough proved it and created breakthroughs in breathing coordination and rehabilitation with the aid of technology.

Now that we have a better picture of the power and fluidity the thorax holds as the ‘primary motive power’ of the breath, we see that getting out of the way of these natural rhythms is the best way to begin to work on the breath. Alexander did not claim to have found a system

of working with the breath and voice, but rather a technique that honors what nature gave us (*Articles and Lectures* 42).

Nose vs. Mouth Breathing

I will highlight several key aspects of Alexander's work with the breath that I have found to be very helpful in understanding his approach. Alexander cites contraction of nasal passages as a problem to natural breathing, stating, "whenever the thoracic mechanism is in operation the nostrils will be dilated with each noiseless inspiration" (*Articles and Lectures* 25). Adversely, when we are solely breathing through our mouth, thoracic rigidity results. I taught an exercise by Carolyn Nicholls to a class to demonstrate the difference between mouth and nostril breathing. Students can either lie in constructive rest or sit with sits bones evenly rooted on the chair or floor and back lengthened. I would encourage all young students to choose constructive rest. I asked them to take several deep breaths in and out through the mouth and then several deep breaths in and out through the nose. I then had them repeat this but with one hand on their stomach and one hand on the ribs to observe which parts move in these two types of breath. The general feedback was that in nostril breathing the breath went a little deeper, moving the ribs and that it was slower and calmer. It is true that mouth breathing doesn't require much use of the ribs. C. Nicholls states that "the habit of mouth breathing makes our respiratory system lazy" because so much air comes in through the mouth that the ribs don't have to move very much (74). This speaks to Alexander's assertion that respiration must occur in the thorax, or torso, if we are to carry any vocal power. I found it fascinating what both C. Nicholls and Carrington say about the nostrils. The nostrils were designed for the intake of breath, with hairs to filter toxins and good blood supply close to the surface to warm the air to body temperature before it hits the

lungs (especially in winter) (C. Nicholls 74). I also realized, through the exercise, that I wasn't engaging my jaw and neck when I breathed through my nose. Later, I read a passage from Carrington in which he said, "mouth breathing has to do with slumping, pulling the head back and collapsing the soft palate" (69). Our breath was designed for activity, such as running, singing and speaking, so we can breathe through our mouth when we need more air. Otherwise, the air we take in through the nose is enough. C. Nicholls states succinctly, "there is a direct connection between a stiff, tight neck and fixed ribs – often the result of years of poor breathing habits. As you begin to let go of some of the tension in your neck, and keep your mouth closed as you breathe, your ribs will start to creak back to life" (74). This has proven to be more helpful to me than much of the voice work I've undertaken. Understanding the anatomy of the respiratory system has been crucial to my understanding of its natural function.

Inhalation and Exhalation

Walter Carrington asks a wonderful and simple question in regard to working with students on the breath: "how do we interfere with our breathing" (64). Interference can happen in a myriad of ways and in different places in the body. But Carrington goes on to say that whatever the interference, the result is usually the holding of breath (64).

My own experience learning to scuba dive heightened my awareness of how often I want to hold my breath because in scuba you must never hold your breath while breathing through the regulator. It is dangerous to do so and at certain depth you risk damaging your lungs. Additionally, your lungs become part of your floatation device to maintain neutral buoyancy at different depths, in other words preventing you from sinking or floating up too much. It was challenging to not hold my breath in reaction to the strong stimulus of breathing underwater and

the uncertainty of what I might see down there. The most profound aspect of this underwater exploration was that the constancy of my breath, which I could hear through the regulator, became a meditative and comforting presence. We know this from meditation practice which asks us to focus on the in and out breath. We can also trust our body to produce the breath we need when we run up the hill or belt out the song - our breath rate increases to support the action and feed the muscles the increased oxygen and then it slows down when we do. We don't have to interfere with this natural process. Jessica Wolf, creator of the work 'The Art of Breathing', which combines the work of Alexander and Dr. Carl Stough, and Alexander teacher at Yale School of Drama says, "I learned to become aware of how often I was holding my breath and came to realize that releasing my breath was the key to finding my primary control: my head/neck/back relationship" (18).

The two points that I want to emphasize here are Alexander's work with the unprepared exhalation and the non-interference of the resulting incoming breath. To summarize, "when things are working as they're supposed to work, the breath comes in quickly. According to the best studies in respiration, the outgoing breath is always supposed to be slightly longer than the incoming breath. Breath should go out more slowly than it comes in. What you are looking for is a quick return of breath without and habitual sucking and gasping" (Carrington 67). In focusing on adequate and proper inspiration, Alexander asserts that at the end of expiration "the mechanism is absolutely disorganized" (*Articles and Lectures* 46). Alexander believed that attaining control over the expiration was the key toward improving our vocal use.

Whispered Ah as a Daily Practice for the Actor

Instead of trying to control the inhalation Alexander created the Whispered Ah [a], a procedure that serves as a tool for learning to consciously control the exhalation. In this procedure we are using inhibition and direction to allow the natural breath to happen. As stated earlier, the work of the diaphragm is both under our conscious and unconscious control. We continue to breathe when we aren't even thinking about it, as in sleep, yet we can control or change it to serve a specific purpose, as in singing. What Alexander wanted to do was unpeel layers of habit to get to the naturally occurring breath as a starting point for healthier vocal production. I have found, and still do find, the Whispered Ah challenging. I do it as part of my daily practice and it never ceases to put me right up against my habits. Breathing is such an automatic and integral part of our being yet it is very difficult not to interfere with it. For me it is truly exemplifies the most difficult part of getting out of my own way. In this procedure I find that my exhalation is short and seems to escape me all at once. I've had to learn not to judge it and let it be what it is and then allow the in breath to happen within my torso rather than pulling it in via my upper chest. What I have come to realize is that the affects of daily practice and not 'muscling' though my breath as Alexander teachers say, has resulted in change.

Alexander chose the whisper for the exhalation because there are usually not as many habits associated with it as in vocal production and it does not cause strain on the vocal mechanism. He believed that we must work on the respiratory and vocal mechanisms at the same time, so in choosing to whisper on a vowel sound that opens the mouth vertically and raises the soft palate, we can consciously control "the release of sound" without the habits that can cause strain to "re-educate" the vocal mechanism (McEvenue 96). Alexander and voice teacher Jane Heirich also says the whisper does not include vocal fold vibration, only the folds are close

enough together that the air creates a rushing sound occurring at the larynx (20). She also states that an alternative for those who've had vocal nodules can use the hiss rather than the whisper, with the constriction of air at the teeth rather than larynx, where excess tension there has caused the nodules (Heirich 20).

I've found that the most interesting and difficult aspect of the procedure is that you begin with and an "unprepared" exhale to "allow the in-breath to take place as a response to exhalation already having taken place" (Heirich 20). Observing that moment when the air is gone after working to consciously exhale by not pushing the air out or letting it all escape at once was confusing to me. At first I thought I was holding at the end of the breath, but the teacher working with me said that there is a moment that feels like nothing is happening but really the diaphragm is still finishing its job. I had to learn to trust this moment as natural instead of interfering by taking a big breath in. Todd describes this "slight pause after expiration" beautifully:

Like the 'rest' that the musician employs in composition, to enhance and amplify appreciation of musical tone quality and variation in phrasing, so Nature employs frequent rest periods. It is as though Nature must reestablish the potential energy balance before allowing it to be employed again in kinetic form (222).

In its simplest form, the Whispered ah is as follows:

1. Settle into constructive rest or sitting with the eyes active and alert; direct the neck to be free
2. Rest your tongue on the floor of the mouth and place the tip gently on the inside of the lower teeth

3. Think of the beginnings of a yawn or something that makes you smile, which allows the soft palate to relax
4. Exhale on a whispered ah
5. Close the mouth and breath in through the nostrils and repeat

This is more challenging than it appears on paper. It is very important to do this exercise initially with an AT practitioner who is trained to observe and listen for subtle habit and also to encourage, with hands on, proper release and tone at the head, neck and torso. I am fortunate that the director of my training course, Chris Friedman, has not only trained in the Art of Breathing with Jessica Wolf, she is an intuitive and gifted teacher herself and I continue to learn a great deal from her and hope that I can pass that wisdom on to my own students.

The Breath and the Knees

Kelly McEvenue talks about the role of the AT in voice work for the actor, beginning with the fact that the vocal mechanism is “housed in the throat where the head and the neck conjoin” (88). Thus, freeing the primary control will benefit freeing the vocal mechanism. Also, “sound is created by breath resonating in the body and the skeleton and body structure of the body provides the sounding board for the breath to resonate off” (McEvenue 88). Alexander focused on uncovering the natural breath in approaching vocal problems and working with the whole structure in order to do this. In looking at the whole structure, McEvenue describes why locking the knees constricts the voice from a structural perspective:

The lower back and pelvis are locked into a fixed position when the legs are set because the femur of the leg comes into the hip socket and restricts the movement of the entire pelvis. One always wants to have the potential to move at the hip joint. When we are standing or sitting still, the option to move from the hips

should be available. Otherwise, the body will settle down on to the joints, creating a downward pressure on the body and restricting freedom of movement in the joints. When we release the downward pressure and allow the body to move forward and upward, the body will move with greater ease and the subtle movement of breathing will also improve (88-89).

Just as Alexander stated that respiration must be worked on simultaneously with vocal production, we must also not forget to look at the whole structure when working with young actors. Carolyn Nicholls asks us to think of the voice as “the messenger of your body. If you want the message to be open, clear, strong, round, gentle, powerful or a changing palette of all those qualities, then your body has to enable that, and the best way is to allow yourself to lengthen and widen” (87). It is the job of the performer, whether actor or singer, to be supple in body and voice to portray character. Inevitably, Alexander teachers work with the voice not only because it is part of the whole mechanism but also because it is a system that actors must know how to use, change and keep healthy. If we can learn to honor the natural rhythms of breath, then as actors we can use our work with intention to create variation and nuance.

While many factors play into the formation of habits in breathing, such as the breath’s response to our emotions, we can learn to work with the breath to either gain control of those emotions or enhance their expressive possibilities. In other words, we are blessed with a highly responsive instrument both mentally, physically, vocally and energetically. I have found that Alexander’s work allows us to explore and re-educate all systems if we are willing.

Conclusion

Harmony of the Whole

In our study of the Alexander Technique, we experience glimpses of wholeness within. If we are disciplined, these glimpses lengthen into periods of integration that become our lifelong joyful work. I have had these glimpses, where I have felt more balanced than I've ever been in my asymmetrical frame. Through my journey into the technique thus far I see the promise of a more balanced, expressive and pain free existence. I've also learned that there really isn't such a thing as symmetry in nature. In the Alexander Technique we don't strive for symmetry, we work toward harmony within the incredible and unique structure we each possess. One of Alexander's earliest students in London was a woman by the name of Lulie Westfeldt, who suffered from polio as a child. It wasn't the result of polio that truly debilitated her. In her day, the doctors' answer to correcting her limp was to fuse her ankle joint so that she no longer had one. Her inability to sway back and forth from the ankle caused the rest of her musculo-skeletal system to lock as well. Years later she traveled from the US to England to study with FM Alexander. It was through his work that she gained relative ease and mobility. She also became a teacher of the technique. Through the wisdom of his hands he was able to give her a lifelong technique that she could hold in the palms of her own for the rest of her life. There is no greater gift a teacher can give.

In my first several weeks of teacher training I wrote "I hope to get nearer to myself, to get a little quiet in the mind, to find grace and ease from within through my body - the body first so

that my heart can rest a little". From an early age the art of acting allowed a profound connection to myself, to fellow actors on stage and to the audience watching. To be free and open enough to make contact and affect or inspire others in some way is what we want as actors. Acting is an intimate affair that happens in public. The Alexander Technique is a process-oriented technique that can facilitate this dichotomy.

In the study of the Alexander Technique, we make this connection with our self through non-judgment or self-criticism. We focus on the positive, on what is going right, rather than what is stiff or crooked or broken. In one of my very first lessons several years ago I complained about the pain in my low back and my teacher said, but think about all the things that are going right. Is there pain in your shoulder, neck or foot? We focus on what is going right and we focus on the whole. I believe getting into the habit of being kind to ourselves is one habit worth cultivating. For the actor, this is essential. The actor faces a career in which she must be confident, persistent despite rejection and tough as nails yet also vulnerable, open and highly responsive. If we are determined to go into this career, then we owe it to ourselves to know our instrument and be gentle with ourselves in the training of it. This does not mean undisciplined. The Alexander Technique is a gentle process that instills extreme discipline and vigilance. I also believe that in our acceptance of ourselves and our imperfectly perfect bodies, we cultivate a unique vulnerability and tenderness.

Lastly, while the Alexander Technique teaches us more about the beauty and function of our structure, it goes deeper than that. We must take a look at our thinking as well. This is how we attain harmony within the whole self. Walter Carrington states this most eloquently:

The problem is that focusing on mechanical and anatomical and physiological and biological terms constitutes a danger because it brings the wrong emphasis into

our whole work. It gets us thinking about structures and even though we're thinking of moving structures, we're really not so interested in moving structures as we are in the willing and the wishing *behind* the movement" (16).

To be an actor takes enormous will and courage. It takes discipline and training and precision. It takes silliness and a willingness to fail and keep going. To borrow a phrase from Frank Capra, it takes a little "guts and stardust". Striving toward harmony within our neuro-musculo-skeletal structure through the Alexander Technique promises to put us on a path toward fuller expression.

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Vita

Kelley S. Schoger was born on March 27, 1975 in Los Angeles, California and is an American citizen. She graduated from First Colonial High School in Virginia Beach, Virginia in 1993. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance from Virginia Tech in 1997, during which time she also studied at The Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin, Ireland. She went on to live in New York City for the following ten years working as an actor, puppeteer and in various other capacities within the arts, including with such organizations as The Roundabout Company and Inside Broadway. She subsequently moved to the Tortola, British Virgin Islands where she taught drama, puppetry and directed plays within the community. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012. While at VCU she taught Introduction to Stage Performance, Audition Technique, Puppetry Arts and Effective Speech. She is currently an AmSAT teacher trainee of the Alexander Technique at The Alexander Technique Training Center of Charlottesville, Virginia.