

Voice Related Movement Studies *Sheila Gordon and Dana McConnell, Associate Editors*

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The Alexander Technique: Rehearsal Tools For Releasing the Actor's Voice



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The Alexander Technique is thought of predominantly as a teaching method offered either privately or in actor training centers. It is there after all, where students have the luxury of time to invite and integrate instrumental changes into their work gradually. Yet in spite of the Technique's emphasis on gradual change, it often brings about positive changes with surprising speed, as is appreciated in the condensed rehearsal periods of professional and educational theatre.

The focus on specific results necessary in the rehearsal period often means that actors revert to less than ideal habits of movement, speaking, and even thinking in order to get the job done. The actor's best intention to produce the desired result often stimulates varying degrees of anxiety and tension that manifest physically and vocally. The voice is a powerful barometer of psycho-physical states of being and as such, may be said to reveal aurally what the body reveals visually. The most obvious manifestations are vocal tension, hoarseness, mumbled diction and poor projection. The less obvious (and more insidious) manifestations include: emotional blocks, poor listening, an inability to respond in the moment, and limited creativity.

This paper will illustrate how the principles and practices of the Alexander Technique may be used to free the actor's voice in the creation and rehearsal of a role. Specifically, I will elucidate what the Technique is, describe what the learning process entails, provide examples of its successful application as a coaching tool, and offer practical tools for actors to apply in rehearsal and performance. I will focus my discussion on the following common goals:

1. Re-connecting with the innate ability to breathe
2. Opening the channels for sound,¹ particularly when demands are extreme as in screaming, shouting, crying.
3. Allowing for deep emotional connection and expression.

The History

Frederick Matthias Alexander was an Australian actor of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He began to lose his voice in the middle of performances. Doctors ordered vocal rest, and the problem temporarily disappeared...until the next performance, when the cycle would start over. So debilitating were these bouts of hoarseness and loss of voice that Alexander was close to ending the career he loved. But his career was saved and the Technique born with one thought. He reasoned that since there was no illness present, and he recovered when he stopped speaking, it must be something he was doing to himself when he was speaking that interfered with the normal functioning of his voice.

Over the next ten years or so, Alexander engaged in a thorough program of self-observation that led to the creation of his technique. As he observed himself in a mirror, he noticed that when he began to speak, he would pull his head back and down, grip the floor with his toes, constrict his abdominal muscles and compress his rib-cage, thus limiting his breathing. He concluded that this habit of pulling down and using far more effort than necessary was adding force and weight to his vocal musculature that it could not withstand. So he set about changing his habit. Thus was born the Technique that bears his name.

Key Principles of the Alexander Technique

Psycho-physical Connection: We now take for granted the concept that the mind and the body are in fact one complex system, not separate from one another, but inextricably linked. However, the concept was revolutionary about a hundred years ago when Alexander introduced his principles. Alexander put forth the notion that our thoughts may be enlisted deliberately to change our movement. He called this “constructive conscious control of the individual.”²

Contemporary neuroscience is now measuring the effects thought, belief, and imagined stimuli have on human motor function that Alexander observed. In *Mental Imagery in the Motor Context*, M. Jeannerod proposes:

...motor images are endowed with the same properties as those of the (corresponding) motor representations, and therefore have the same functional relationship to the imagined or represented movement and the same causal role in the generation of this movement...Accordingly, many neural mechanisms are activated during motor imagery, as revealed by a sharp increase in tendinous reflexes in the limb imagined to move, and by vegetative changes which correlate with the level of mental effort. At the cortical level, a specific pattern of activation, that closely resembles that of action execution, is observed in areas devoted to motor control.³

The body's musculature responds to the thought of moving, as well as, to literal movement of the body through space. The key thing for the actor to bear in mind is that she may direct her thoughts consciously to initiate non-reflexive movement—however subtle or grand. Her conscious awareness of habits that interfere with optimal Use is the first step in freeing herself from them.

When teaching the technique, we do not refer to “the body” or “the mind,” but rather to “the Self.” This language seeks to reinforce the truth that to regard the two as separate is an artificial differentiation used to focus on how our perception of the Self may be most noticeable. Likewise, Alexander encouraged his students to think of themselves more as the sum of one's parts—a unified whole whose components cooperate in a continual process of moving in response to stimuli. This is in contrast to the notion that there is a correct or right way to stand, sit, or move. The emphasis on being right tends to suggest a fixed state of alignment that does not allow for individual differences or an instrument that is flexible and responsive for acting. Therefore, students and teachers of the Technique refer to the unified function of the Self as the “Use of the Self.”⁴ When we use ourselves in a well-balanced manner, free of extraneous tension, we refer to this as “optimal Use.”

Direction: When we direct our thought to guide the natural forward-and-up movement of the Self toward something of interest to us, we experience the engagement of the anti-gravity reflexes that enable us to stand up. When we employ too much effort, we in fact add weight and force to gravity, thus making it that much more difficult to move than necessary. Our perception that activities require a lot of effort is often not accurate.

The notion of direction challenges the messages many of us were taught to “stand up straight,” “pull your shoulders back,” “lift up!” All of these states are effortful, rigid, and unnatural. Direction is a much more subtle state that balances necessary muscle tonus with ease. It refers most specifically to the musculo-skeletal engagement brought about by thinking Alexander's now famous directions to *allow one's neck to be free, head to go forward and up, and back to lengthen and widen*. This may or may not mean obvious movement through space. It may also refer to active stillness.

It is well to remember that “up” refers to thinking of lengthening towards the head, not necessarily up in vertical space. With that important distinction made, the actor is free to go forward and up while hunched over a campfire, digging a trench, or standing on his head—all while maintaining length, width, and spaciousness.

Inhibition: Not to be mistaken with Freud's definition of this term as the suppression of an instinct, Alexander's principle of inhibition simply guides us not to respond to stimuli in a way that interferes with well-being and the naturally buoyant Use of the Self. Students learn to identify negative responses to stimuli, such as clenching the jaw or tightening the abdominals, and then begin to practice inhibiting those responses.

End-gaining: End-gaining refers to hyper-focus on the achievement of a goal at the expense of noticing the *means whereby* we achieve it. When we are so focused on the end we hope to reach, we revert to familiar habits of Use to get us there as quickly as possible. The result is often less than desirable.

A Private Lesson/Coaching Session with a Certified Alexander Teacher

When schedules allow, the ideal coaching scenario during the rehearsal period consists of a combination of private lessons, followed by work with the text and characterization. The most useful tool for me to gauge actors' Use and progress in both group and individual coaching sessions is my hands. When I place a non-doing hand on an actor's neck, it calms them almost immediately, settles their breath, and gives me a wealth of information that I may not be able to see visually.

The lesson usually consists of sitting and standing from a chair, under the guidance of the skilled teacher's hands, usually offering verbal instruction as well. The simple acts of sitting and standing reveal much to both student and teacher regarding the student's Use.

This is often followed by a "table turn," where the student lies on a table in the semi-supine position with knees bent—to encourage widening and lengthening of the back—and one or two paperback books under the occipital lobe of the head to approximate the head/neck/back relationship one has while standing. Then the teacher gently and slowly goes about lengthening and widening the student's whole Self, by giving hands-on directions to the head, neck, arms, legs, and back.

It is common, following an Alexander lesson, for actors to emerge saying "I feel so relaxed!" They are responding to the release of restrictive and exhausting patterns of neuromuscular holding, which feels like an enormous relief when they finally fall away.

It is important to clarify with actors, that the Technique is not a relaxation technique. It is not something done to them, as passive recipients. Rather, it requires their active partnership and ongoing attention to habit. It encourages a state that might best be described as calmly attentive. The state of curiosity, engagement with the environment, presence in the moment, and natural responsiveness characteristic of the Neutral Mask is a better likeness of the Alexandrian state of being.

This is the state from which character can be built. Even extreme demands, such as shouting, fighting, or playing a role with a physical limitation or disability such as Richard III, may be achieved when the state of optimal Use is the touchstone.

1. Reconnecting With the Innate Ability to Breathe

Breathing is a natural, reflexive action that fuels our lives. It stands to reason therefore, that if we (or the character we are playing) perceive ourselves to be in danger or conflict, our bodies will respond with the fight or flight syndrome—its precursor being startle reflex pattern. This familiar silhouette is comprised of a strong downward pull in the center of the body, shortening of the back of the neck, suppression of the larynx due to compression of the head on the neck, and an overall muscular tightening and pulling in and down.

The startle reflex serves all vertebrate animals as the pre-cursor to either fighting or fleeing. It is therefore, a preparatory and protective complex of movements designed to quickly transform into life-saving movement through space. Typically, it

involves a quick inhalation (gasp) and then holding of the breath, in the milliseconds it may take to choose to fight or flee. Unfortunately, many actors remain in some degree of perpetual startle reflex pattern unconsciously and habitually. The result (among other things), is a limited capacity for breath. The startle reflex is designed to result in action—desired both in art and nature—but when prevented from doing so through the release of a vocal impulse or movement, the result is less oxygen to the brain, which very quickly creates even more exaggerated fear. And so the cycle goes—accompanied by further tightening of the muscles required for phonation, especially the jaw, tongue, muscles of the face, and the back of the neck.

The Whispered Ah—Alexander created this exercise as a means of helping himself unwind his own faulty vocal habits. I find the Whispered Ah highly effective in assisting actors to release the excess tension that accompanies the startle reflex and to get out of the way of their breathing. It is usually done in the position of mechanical advantage he called Monkey, that balances the two heaviest parts of the skeleton—the head and the pelvis.



Fig. A.
Monkey: Alexander's position
of mechanical advantage

The Whispered Ah calms the actor and encourages an uninterrupted free flow of breath upon exhalation. It is also a good antidote to a common habit many actors exhibit: that of meting out the breath in a miserly way by compressing the muscles in

the torso and neck with the mistaken belief that they need to control the breath. The steps are as follows:

- Stand in Monkey—Give yourself the directions “I want my neck to be free, my head to go forward and up, and my back to lengthen and widen” while bending the knees and allowing the torso to tip forward at approximately a 45 degree angle. It is important to maintain your length and not allow the back to round or collapse. You may balance your knuckles on the back of a chair or table if you desire more support.
- Exhale through the mouth making sure not to tighten the neck or abdominal muscles. Allow the breath in through the nose.
- Think of something pleasant or funny to elicit a gentle lift of the soft palate.
- Place the tip of the tongue on the back of the lower teeth. This will encourage the tongue to lengthen forward freeing the vocal tract. The tongue is attached directly to the hyoid bone, which is in turn supported by other muscles in the neck.
- Allow the mouth to open and the jaw to drop to its normal open position, back and down. This is the point when many people tighten the back of the neck, thus making more work for the jaw and restricting the throat.
- Freely release a steady whispered “Ah” until you reach the end of your breath. At that point, close the lips and *allow* the breath to drop in (do not *take* a breath).
- Repeat the Whispered Ahs 3-4 times, reminding yourself to free the abdominal, pelvic, and neck muscles.

I usually encourage actors to continually think of generously giving the breath away to help them avoid controlling the exhalation (which really means holding the breath to some extent), and creates more tension and pulling down in the core.

I have also found success in having actors lie prone with their bellies on a large exercise ball:

- Allow the back of the neck and the jaw to be free as the head hangs freely toward the floor.
- Speak the text, breathing when necessary.
- Because the actor does not need to organize himself in an upright position, the ribcage is allowed to hang off the spine in a favorable relationship to gravity. He gets immediate feedback from the buoyant ball when he connects to breathing from the center of his torso.
- This position also encourages more length and width in the whole back and hip flexors, which allow the lower ribs to expand fully upon inhalation.

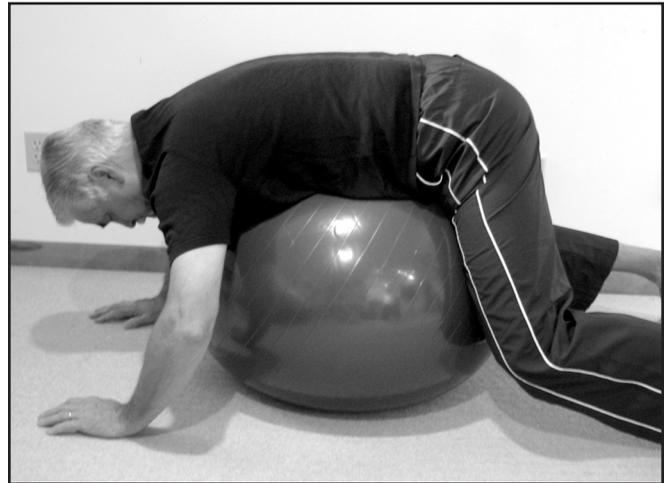


Fig. B.

2. An Open Channel for Sound with Extreme Demands

Extreme vocal demands present another set of challenging circumstances for the actor. Screaming, shouting, and crying reveal in greater relief how the actor is thinking about herself, the character, and the task at hand. To avoid injury and to best serve the play, it is particularly important under extreme circumstances, for the actor to be fully consciously aware of how her accomplishment of these activities reveals her thinking and beliefs.

Actors faced with extreme vocal demands often suffer under the belief that more effort is required for more size, movement, or power. The unfortunate result of that belief is physical tension, muddy and generalized thinking, less flexibility, and, sadly and ironically, diminished power. If, as Kristin Linklater notes, “vibrations are murdered by tension,”⁵ then the actor, when in the throes of such stifling tension, is cut off from her breath and must strain to eke out whatever sound and fury she can. These habits are particularly tricky because they seldom occur singly. They usually comprise a cluster of characteristics whose causes are difficult to identify by the actor, and thus difficult to overcome.

The practice of inhibition is a good place to start undoing this habit. But how do we make this practice seem sexy, or even palatable, to actors? How do we communicate to actors, trained as they are to root out conflict and fight for objectives, that choosing NOT to apply effort and force may actually allow the actor's instrument to function more freely and powerfully? Doesn't fighting always require effort? I find this issue troublesome, particularly, with actors who love the vigor and feel of demanding physical effort. To them, extreme effort is the very means towards achieving a final emotional release. They often equate *effort* with *power*. Powerful, strong, expressive movements

and sounds are in fact best achieved when the physical instrument is free of extraneous tension.

I have found that actors resort to effort when their thinking and choices are not specific. They intuitively know that they need help in getting their point across or reaching for their objective; and their belief is that if they work harder, they'll succeed. However, just the opposite is true. It is time well spent exploring with these actors where power lies on a continuum and when (as well as how) it transforms into effort and strain. When they employ conscious direction to their movements they discover, often very quickly, that power releases up and out of the body and effort compresses in and down. The feeling of greater ease, the more direct connection to other actors, and the bigger, more resonant voice this state produces offers solid reinforcement to the actor.

Direction occurs when thought organizes the dynamic balance of the musculature evident especially in the relationship of the head to the neck to the back—referred to in the Technique as the Primary Control. Such balance requires ongoing movements in immediate response to stimuli. Such stimuli may be information gathered from the actor's vestibular apparatus in an effort to remain standing, an inner thought or impulse, or an action aimed his way from his scene partner. In short, when an actor is engaged in playing dramatic action, like all conscious intentions, it activates the muscles in the body. Actors need to trust that thought manifests clearly and powerfully in the body and voice, without effort or strain.

I have found Kristin Linklater's horizontal yawn exercise⁶ to be especially emotionally evocative and a perfect marriage with Alexander's principles.

- Similar to the Whispered Ah, think of allowing the soft palate to raise and the back of the tongue to release down while initiating a yawn.
- Think of yawning horizontally, rather than the typical vertical yawn. This requires that the back of the neck be free and the head go forward and up to allow for the largest possible pharyngeal space.
- The large, round open space this creates summons an almost immediate open release of the voice. The eyes and nasal mask are awakened.

The size and scope of this gesture evokes a feeling of vulnerability and awe that often takes actors aback in its immediacy. The horizontal yawn demonstrated in figure D provides the open channel necessary for the release of a scream, wail, or keen.

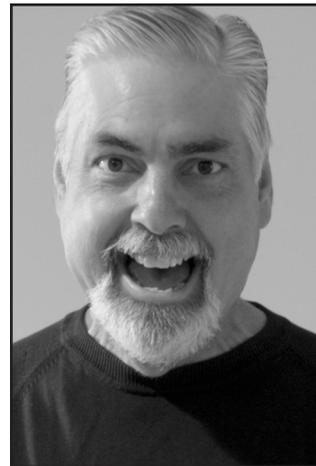


Fig. C.

The horizontal yawn with the neck thrust forward, shortening the back of the neck, adding excess weight and strain, and restricting space in the pharynx.

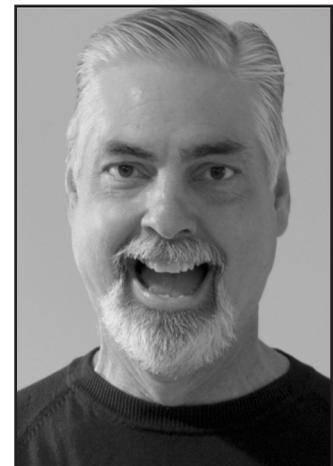


Fig. D.

The horizontal yawn with the neck free, the head going forward and up, allowing for adequate pharyngeal space.

Texas Christian University's 2007 production of *Getting Out*, which T.J. Walsh directed and I coached, involved a requisite amount of screaming and shouting. One of the chief things we worked on was how to facilitate the actors' screaming in a way that would preserve vocal health. I held a special group session on screaming that began with letting go of extraneous tension, connecting with the breath, and generally warming up. What soon became apparent in several actors was that these sounds were being squeezed out from a place of very little physical space. The sounds seemed to reflect the actors' emphasis on their characters' *obstacles* rather than their *objectives*. I suspected that this focus on obstacles revealed the belief described above, that power is achieved by over-tightening of the abdominal muscles, compressing the intercostals, and shortening the back of the neck thus closing off the back of the throat and pressing down on the larynx—in other words, startle reflex pattern. Not only is this especially potentially vocally damaging when making extreme sounds, but the sound is often muffled and hoarse.

We strove then to inhibit compression of the Self, and to replace it with a more open, free, and powerful state of release.

3. Allowing for Deep Emotional Connection and Expression

How often have we heard the actor who exits the stage saying "Wow! I really felt that tonight! That felt great!" when in fact their performance was unclear, tense, and self-indulgent? Such actors get mired in the generalized feelings of their character's states of being at the expense of pursuing a change in another character. This is a particular trap with characters who plumb great emotional depths. To such actors, physical sensation

becomes the primary measure of their effectiveness, taking precedence over conscious thought and the pursuit of clear, active objectives.

It is well to remind the actor that physical sensation serves the acting process best when it is not an end in itself, but rather one possible feedback mechanism alerting her to the need to inhibit excess tension. A mirror or coach will provide the most objective feedback to the actor, unhampered by her faulty sensory awareness. The goal is to keep one's instrument open and free of holding patterns of tension in order to release the voice with size, power, depth and color.

This reflects the Alexander Technique's focus on not doing rather than doing, and is counter-intuitive to the way most actors are trained. It is a tall order to distinguish between the desire to make active choices and to accomplish what is referred to in Alexandrian nomenclature as "Non-doing." In fact, Non-doing really refers to *inhibiting extraneous and inexpressive choices* that do nothing to propel the action of the play. As basic as it sounds, it remains an ongoing challenge even for many professional actors to trust the thought of dramatic action to be enough, without adding anything external to the equation. The more specific the thought is, the more alive and active the imagination is, which then yields rich and emotionally connected sounds.

Stillness presents its own unique challenges for the actor. It is difficult to remain poised and focused for a length of time without letting tension creep in, and feeling one has to "do more." Reminding the actor that direction means movement—not a fixed posture—is vital in the quest to liberate her from interfering effort. It is important to emphasize that when the actor is directing her movement, she need not necessarily move through space. She can achieve extraordinary specificity and presence in stillness by continuing the character's thoughts, consciously inhibiting tightening, and directing her neck to be free, her head to go forward and up, and her back to lengthen and widen.

Cal MacLean, who was at the time Artistic Director for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival, directed a fine production of Marivaux' *The Triumph of Love* in 1996, which I coached. Cal recalls the challenges confronting the actors who needed to tap emotional depth through active stillness and specificity:

The artistic problem in *Triumph* is to communicate great internal movement (changes of the mind, heart and spirit) while many of the characters *are fighting* that change externally. The movement must communicate the external characterizations of this particular world's presentation of Self, but also the radical internal adjustments, and personal presentation, that the world's philosophical views will not allow. It is a profoundly difficult performance problem to

express the *energy* of such change without allowing it to bubble out externally—or tie it all up in tension. (The Alexander work) with the actors, as I recall, was so very helpful certainly, in finding just the right movement, at just the right moment. But (the) work also strived to allow that transformative energy to be ever present and alive, without stamping it out with extraneous tension or stress—despite the characters *apparently* trying to do just that. This artistic success, it appeared to me, had much to do with...utilizing Alexander's principles to help illuminate the human action. In short, (the technique was tied) to the story, allowing the actors to make use of (it) as part of the action, and within the context of the action.⁷

Our work on that production went something like this: the actors and I began with a discussion about this internal movement of the characters—wanting something deeply and intensely but fighting it; feeling pushed toward change but fighting it, etc. A common habitual response in such a situation is to stop the breath and tighten the throat.

The actors then explored choices they could make if they were to literally move through space to express their desire or inner conflict. Once they had an experience of this process in their bones, we began using the principles of inhibition and direction.

This requires a particularly nuanced approach to avoid creating more tension as one endeavors to create more ease and expressivity. So I invited the actors to *think* the movement, think of what they would like to say, to keep it alive, but to consciously *choose* to remain still. This kept their breath continuous, and yielded an alive and active state of stillness at once responsive and highly expressive. When they did speak, the clarity of their thought yielded deeply connected and layered vocal expression.

Conclusion

Alexander work is all about opening and allowing the space for nuanced as well as, enormous expression. Actors in rehearsal are well served in a coaching situation when they are encouraged to simply pause, inhibit habitual responses, and allow the Self to open and release. What they discover so often and so jubilantly, is that this practice brings them into the moment in the play; it makes them present to the text and the given circumstances, and clarifies the thinking process which can now work brilliantly with the breath to release the full extent of necessary expression. The belly is free, the torso is supported, and the jaw, tongue, throat, and lips are all free. In short, the channel for sound is open.

End Notes

1. Kristin Linklater's term for the throat, tongue and jaw, which must remain free of tension during phonation. See Linklater, Kristin *Freeing the Natural Voice*, New York, Drama Book Publishers, First Edition, 1976. p. 57
2. Alexander, F.M. *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1992
3. Jennerod, M., "Mental Imagery In The Motor Context," *The Neuropsychology of Mental Imagery*, Behrmann, Kosslyn, and Jennerod, editors, New York, 1995
4. Alexander, F.M. *The Use of the Self*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1985.
5. Linklater, Kristin *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Hollywood, Drama Publishers, Revised and Expanded, 2006. p. 87
6. Ibid. p. 165
7. Cal MacLean, Artistic Director of The Clarence Brown Theatre and Chair, The University of Tennessee at Knoxville—email dated December 28, 2007

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