

& Movement, and Oral Interpretation of Literature. She also runs a seven-week Alexander course for professional actors in Los Angeles and regularly works with actors at Lesly Kahn & Company. Jennifer is a graduate of the Alexander Technique Training Institute of Los Angeles and holds her MFA in Acting from the University of South Carolina.

Getting Ready to Perform

Maret Mursa Tormis

At the workshop, I shared my practical experiences as an Alexander Technique (AT) teacher at the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, where AT is a compulsory two-year course involving weekly group and individual lessons.

In my daily work with aspiring performers, I see more and more students with poor use of themselves, who have difficulty in coping with the more challenging basic exercises (movement, singing, diction). Over the years I have developed an approach to addressing these difficulties, based on conscious inhibition and directions.

I begin this paper with a few introductory remarks about our two-year work process with drama students and some insights I have learnt from my practice. I go on to explain and demonstrate an exercise that AT teachers working in the same field could use in their work. In the final part I touch upon some connections between the approaches traditionally used in training actors (notably Stanislavski's system) and AT.

The drama school admits new students every second year, and they start from the from the ABC of the Alexander principles. By the end of the second year, the students are able to use the acquired tools, conscious inhibition and primary control, as 'means-whereby' in role development.

WORKING WITH HABITS

Students learn the importance of conscious inhibition by discovering their habits in the use of themselves, possible obstacles to their proprioceptive awareness (in case of faulty sensory perception), coordination and quick adaptation, through psychophysical training as well as by acquiring the tools they can use for expression.

Regular work with the drama students over the two years of their studies has made me a firm believer in the importance of conscious inhibition as an inescapable precondition for an adequate and continuous self-analysis.

I have also worked for more than ten years with the dance students at Tallinn University (Estonia), where we carried out a project together with a Finnish medical doctor, senior physiotherapy lecturer Jouko Heiskanen, who specialises in the problems specific to musicians and dancers.

USING BIOFEEDBACK

We used real-time ultrasound (GE LOGIQ E9) as biofeedback for muscle status and tonus evaluation as well as for teaching muscle recruitment and activation. Biofeedback enables the teacher and the student to visualise in real time the muscle inhibition, activation and fatigue of different muscles during physical exercise. We are mostly interested in the functional stability and optimal mobility of the middle body and cervical spine muscles, which are important elements for performing artists.

First, we tested the stability of the pelvis, with the centrum getting into focus when going into a movement. If there is instability, it is most often caused by overwork. By using conscious inhibition and directing between the tailbone and the navel, we achieve an optimum muscle tone for movement. The movement involved was a simple lifting of a leg, requiring stability of the pelvis. This stability is established at its most optimum when all three muscular layers, the intrinsic, intermediate and superficial layers are working together, beginning with a contraction of the deepest intrinsic muscle layer.

We found that dancers mostly use superficial muscle layers and have insufficient conscious inhibition. Both over- and underwork were evident, triggering a compensatory program elsewhere in the body.

'TAIL-NAVEL' EXERCISE

This discovery made me look for a solution and prompted some experimentation using Alexander's tools, which could help a performer to receive adequate feedback and find an optimum tone of readiness. I observed that by inhibiting and directing the muscular activity between the tailbone and the navel, we can develop an optimum muscle tone for movement. As a result, I designed an exercise I call 'tail-navel' (saba-naba in Estonian), involving work with the body's central axes. It has proved effective in practice, supporting the transition from being in a neutral axis to an active readiness without losing the back.

This exercise, which I will not describe in detail in this paper, develops a clearer understanding of how to access stability through efficient muscular engagement by being attentive to the body's central axis.

The exercise has a number of phases. First we establish how stable the pelvis remains during a simple lifting of a leg. Then repeat it in the semi-supine position where it's easier to differentiate what's happening in the body (see fig. 1). Excessive movement of the pelvis indicates that the centrum is unstable. Now the student coughs slightly to trigger the muscle tone, then, conscious of the tone she lifts the leg again and only now can use conscious



Fig. 1. Performing the 'tail-navel' exercise in semi-supine.

inhibition and primary direction to give the directions tail-navel and discover the deepest muscle tone accumulated in the lower abdomen. The exercise cannot be performed without prior AT training.

The exercise, carried out in several phases, is one of a series of exercises I use during the early phases of the work to create a readiness for subsequent practice, enabling the student to cope with the physically demanding work during the first year of the drama school. In fact, it is much like the preparatory work done while lying down in the semi-supine position to acquire conscious inhibition and primary control. It is important to bear in mind that the exercise works only if combined with the use of Alexander's principles.

CHOICE AND MOTIVATION

The role of motivation cannot be overemphasised in AT. You can only change a habit once you have discovered it, only then is there the choice. Having a choice means not only having the tools but also being decisive and motivated.

Alexander himself was extremely motivated to find this obstacle, as he wanted to be back on stage. The various interpretations of AT may rigidify into an unchallengeable conviction, thereby losing their aliveness.

There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction.¹

What is the right direction? Is primary control like Konstantin Stanislavski's 'super objective'? Does primary direction require the presence of a

set objective, that the 'means-whereby' serves? Is primary control a conscious 'super objective'?

In my daily work with actors I often complement the phrase 'be without doing', expressing the process of conscious inhibition, with another one, 'be without knowing' – I know and I don't know simultaneously.

The concept of 'standing with one's back to the event' in Stanislavski's system describes the actors' state of readiness where they know the chain of events about to happen, which their character could not possibly know. Serving the super objective unlocks the potential, enabling them to know and not know simultaneously.

A state of readiness is achieved when the tone of intrinsic muscles is at an optimum and when the best synergy exists between all muscle groups. This allows the fine motor coordination to be at its best and a meaningful movement to happen.

The psychophysical unity must work in its entirety to carry out a set task. We can discover an obstacle by consciously inhibiting the reaction to the set task, the stimulus, and stay in the moment of inhibition to become aware of what is triggered. We can overcome the obstacle by using conscious inhibition along with primary direction, because activating and merging the opposing directions joins the unity into obstacle-free readiness.

To sum up, I would like to quote the thank-you speech to the AT teachers by our top graduate, now award-winning actress Teele Pärna, on the 20th January 2018, when the event marking the birthday of Alexander took place for the 17th time in Estonia.

It is said that when a conductor raises her hand, this gesture, called the upbeat, should already contain the whole piece – its tempo, dynamics, mood, everything – so the musicians can get a glimpse of the piece as a whole. They should get the hint of the direction in the pause right before the music starts. This upbeat reminds me of the Technique. I need to raise my hand to drop it, I need to inhale to exhale, I need to stop to sense motion. But I am no musician, just an acting student, so I should probably stick to what I know. Stanislavski has the term 'the given circumstances'. In order to play a character, I have to know all the circumstances she is in. The better I know who she is, why she is like that, where she is, where she goes, where she comes from, the better I can live her life. But I think this applies to real life also – the better I know my given circumstances, the better I can live my life, and I think the Technique is one of the best ways to get to know my given circumstances. During my practice, I have discovered many circumstances and met quite a clumsy, a bad version of myself, but I believe that the moment I witness the bad version of myself I also witness the possibility of the best one.

This article was translated into English by Piret Usin.

Reference

1. F. M. Alexander, 'Teaching Aphorisms' in *Articles and Lectures*, Mouritz 1995, p. 194.

Maret Mursa Tormis completed her training as an Alexander teacher at Alexander Technique Institute of Finland in 1999. She has worked full-time in private practice and with the music and theatre students at the Drama School of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre since then. She has also worked as an Alexander teacher in other Universities in Estonia (the Choreography Department at Tallinn University and the Viljandi Culture Academy of Tartu University). Before finding her way to Alexander Technique, she was a professional actress at the National Youth Theatre of Estonia for 14 years and still participates in various theatre projects. Her doctoral research concerned the use of conscious inhibition in the work of a performing artist (parts of her research are published in *The Alexander Journal* no. 25, Winter 2015 pp. 41-50; <http://www.lavakas.ee/aj25.pdf>). She has also staged a play, *Four View*, connected to this research. She is the Head of Training at the Alexander Technique Institute of Estonia in Tallinn, which opened in January 2016. Since 2001 she has organised an annual event in Estonia to mark F. M. Alexander's birthday on January 20th, bringing together A. T. teachers from all over the world to give free lessons.

Creating Dynamic Learning Communities for Performing Artists

Ariel Weiss

Following the extraordinary model of watching Marj Barstow teach in the 1980s, I have been interested in how the Alexander work is taught to groups and in activity and have developed my expertise in teaching the Alexander Technique (AT) to groups of performers since 1988.

My primary aim for presenting at the Congress was to highlight the benefits of teaching performing artists in groups and to outline strategies for creating dynamic learning communities for group class, master class, workshop and conference formats. The workshop was organised in three sections:

1. Setting the scene: why groups work and how to create safe learning environments to build a constructive culture within a learning community.
2. Teaching a process of discovery: supporting self-learners and modeling experiential learning.