

Alexander Technique for Actors

Actors, do you ever feel emotionally blocked during rehearsals? Have you ever found yourself struggling to get rid of an ingrained physical habit that seems to be impeding your ability to develop the physicality of your character? Do you sometimes feel you don't have the ease of movement you need to fully express yourself physically on stage? If so, it may be because you haven't included enough Alexander work in your movement training.

"The Alexander Technique is fundamental to all movement work," says Tom Vasiliades, a stage, film, and television actor who also teaches the Alexander Technique. "It's all about helping people to understand how they are organizing themselves physically, how they are coordinating their bodies. And if they're not doing that well, if they are somehow misusing their bodies, then whether they take a dance class, a mime class, a clowning class, a mask class, or any kind of movement class, they're going to be doing all those movements with a basic misuse of the body."

Vasiliades is chair of the movement department at the New School for Drama (a three-year MFA program) and an Alexander instructor in the undergraduate drama programs at NYU and the Juilliard School. He also works privately with professional actors and as a movement coach on theatre productions. He coached Alan Rickman and Lindsay Duncan in Broadway's *Private Lives* in 2002, coached Pablo Schreiber for his performance in the recent Lincoln Center Theater production of *Dying City*, and worked with the cast of Off-Broadway's *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*.

Becoming Aware of Physical Habits

Vasiliades strongly believes that all performers should study the Alexander Technique. When he first began studying it as a young actor about 30 years ago, he noticed remarkable changes in himself. He felt taller, bigger, freer, and more open. His voice quality changed, becoming more resonant and full; he enjoyed greater ease in creating characters; his emotions were more available and his capacity to express them had grown. "It really had a profound effect on my acting work," he says.

"The technique helps actors become aware of physical habits they have that might be interfering with their performing," Vasiliades continues. "It then helps them change those habits so as to improve elements of their performance work." The detrimental habits that many people have and that the Alexander Technique helps to eradicate are general patterns of compression, restriction, and misuse that can occur in any area of the

body. "We don't just focus on one body part, however," Vasiliades explains. "We look at how a person is functioning as a whole, at their overall body coordination. The habits we are trying to correct usually involve some kind of rigidity or excessive or unnecessary ten-

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sion. They can also include a shortening or narrowing of the body. They are physical habits that we have unconsciously developed through the stresses of our day-to-day living."

Alexander work generally begins with exploratory exercises designed to develop sensory appreciation, or an acute awareness of what an actor tends to do with his or her body. "The whole thing is very much about using one's thinking to sense and to transform what one is doing physically," Vasiliades says. "In other words, we first work on making the students conscious of the fact that they're compressing or misusing their body. Then we try to teach them how to prevent themselves from continuing to engage in those habits. And finally, we teach them how to direct themselves to do something new and different."

Though the body habits that individuals develop vary greatly, in his 13 years of teaching Vasiliades has discovered there are certain patterns of misuse that are much more common than others: "For example, many people will exhibit a pulling down of the head and neck or a pulling of the arms and legs into the torso. But what's difficult to explain about the Alexander work is that we don't relate to the individual body parts. We relate to the person as a whole; we treat their body as a totality. So even though we might say to a student, 'You're pulling your neck down' or 'You're pulling your head onto your neck; you need to let your neck release, let your head move forward and up instead of back and down,' we're looking at all of that in relationship to the torso and to the arms and legs as well."

Its holistic approach, according to Vasiliades, is essential to the Alexander Technique's ability to correct body problems: "For example, let's say you see a performer on stage and his right shoulder appears to be up by his ear. Why doesn't someone just tell him to put his shoulder down? you might wonder. But telling him to do that wouldn't necessarily be helpful to him, because he will then try to force his shoulder down. And that forcing will

simply create another kind of problem. From an Alexander vantage point, we would look at his overall body use or coordination in order to find what is producing that shoulder-going-up-to-the-ear habit. Our directive to him would be more likely to involve asking him to focus on freeing his head and neck and allowing the torso to lengthen and widen and the back to spread. And also to think of the legs and arms being free of the torso."

Helping Your Vocal Technique

In addition to its movement benefits, the Alexander Technique can also significantly improve an actor's vocal technique. "If your body is engaged in some kind of compression," Vasiliades explains, "you may not be allowing for movement in the rib cage. Not allowing your ribs to move and your diaphragm to move will inhibit your breathing and interfere with the quality of sound you are able to produce. Also, if you're held, pulled down, or collapsed, you are cutting yourself off emotionally to what's going on around you. And you're cutting off your own ability to feel and express emotion. So the Alexander work, though it's often placed in the movement department of an actor's training, really transcends movement, voice, and acting."

It was a turn-of-the-19th-century Australian actor, Frederick Matthias Alexander, who invented the technique that bears his name. A specialist in Shakespearean recitation, a then-popular form of theatrical entertainment, Alexander began having vocal problems as a young man and found himself unable to sustain his voice for a full performance. "He felt hoarseness and eventually lost his voice," Vasiliades says. "He went to doctors, and they simply told him to rest his voice. He did that, but when he went back on stage, he lost his voice again. So he decided to figure it out for himself. And what he did was to set up mirrors—a triptych of mirrors, like a tailor would have, where you can look all around yourself. What he noticed was that when he began to speak, he would tighten his neck, pull his head onto his spine, and grip in his ribs. He hadn't known before that he was doing that. He then went through a long process of trying to analyze what was going on and eventually discovered that he was able to prevent himself from doing those habits and to direct himself to change. It took a long time, but it was through this process of becoming aware of his habits, directing himself to prevent them and to do something new, that he was able to cure himself of his vocal problems. And he realized that not only were his discoveries important to the production of sound, but they were also relevant to virtually every kind of movement that humans do."

For those who have never studied the Alexander Technique, Vasiliades advises that you simply "go in with an open mind and see what happens. Go in with the understanding that you are going to explore something, but you don't know what; you're just going to be open to wherever that exploration takes you." <

For further information about individual or group instruction in the Alexander Technique, you can call Vasiliades at (212) 564-5472 or visit www.atcpd.com.