

## **Report for Freedom to Act Conference**

*by Constance Clare Newman*

The first Freedom to Act conference, held in NYC January 13-15, 2012, developed by Teva Bjerken, Belinda Mello, and Ann Rodiger was produced by Balance Arts Center. The weekend was marked by warmth, personal connections, and inspiring teachers. The fact that it was organized by Alexander Technique teacher members from both AmSAT and ATI helped bring a wonderful variety of teaching styles and an acceptance of lineage not always experienced by this conference attendee.

As an Alexander Technique teacher who teaches in an acting program, I was immediately drawn to this conference. I signed up as soon as I read about it in AmSAT News. All my workshops were directly applicable and I took away many practices helpful in so many ways. From experiential exercises (or procedures, if we prefer) to pedagogical understandings, to personal connections, I came away with much to process and integrate into my work.

I had so many great conversations with colleagues, some who I knew already and some who I met for the first time and look forward to working with in the future.

I learned that some of us work in an integrated way with other faculty, for example, when we teach Alexander in the context of rehearsals and production. And others of us work in relative isolation, not even knowing what other Alexander teachers at our school are doing in their classes. Most of us work somewhere in the middle of this continuum.

I learned that there are as many ways the Alexander Technique fits into a program as there are programs, from integrating Alexander into all aspects of actor training, to group classes with no private lessons to private tutorials only, from 1 semester required to 3 years required, and everything in between.

I learned that most of us develop our own curriculum, sometimes by trial and error. Many of us relish this work of finding our own voice and what works for our particular student body.

I came away excited for our field, both for the general teaching of the Technique and in the training of the actor.

With so many workshops to choose from\*, which all looked fascinating, I chose mostly what seemed relevant for me, but did a couple of workshops in areas where I have little experience. (Masks, Film)

\* List of presenters: Meade Andrews, Sarah Barker, Teva Bjerken, Bill Connington with Karen Braga, June Ekman, Judith Grodowitz, Kim Jessor, Cathy Madden, Babette Markus, Kelly McEvenue, Belinda Mello, Judith Muir, Cynthia Reynolds, Ann Rodiger, Ruth Rootberg with Christine Stevens, Greg Seel, Carolyn Serota with Richard Feldman, Daniel Singer, Mona Stiles, Jean Taylor, Tom Vasiliades

### **A brief summary of each of my workshops, in order of attendance:**

#### **Judith Grodowitz—Inclusive Thinking for Actors: Being in the Back**

What a wonderful way to begin this conference. While her work focused on being in the back, with experiential work on the floor and in movement, Grodowitz shared her years of experience and punctuated her presentation with inspiring quotes and how they are relevant to the work in acting.

My favorite was a quote from Daniel Nagrin, dancer and choreographer, "A task of self-knowledge for the performer: to find what liberates your strengths...One must ask — what am I doing to keep me from my full potential/powers?"

What an Alexandrian question! What a profound but simple way to approach the teaching of Alexander Technique to performers. As Grodowitz led us through gentle warm-up movement, and into connection with partners, her focus was on spatial and three-dimensional awareness. As we practiced several partner exercises, we compared and contrasted what it was like to be in our backs versus what it was like to be less aware of back, and more aware of the front/face/personality that is typically two-dimensional.

One of Grodowitz's lovely teaching tools was the image of Athena's crown, which is a large headdress that, with imagination, can be accessed to sense fullness of head direction forward and up. After we looked at the image of a sculptural Athena with her curving headdress, we moved in the space with more access to our own regal three-dimensional bearing.

## **Catherine Madden—Image Rehabilitation for the “Electronically-Raised Actor”**

Child development research and correlating experience in Madden’s classrooms infused this workshop with a heady mix of information and practices designed to respond to the current predicament of working with electronically-raised actors. Rather disturbing information about youth that have been (are being) raised with so much digital media was presented with quotes and references. Integrated into the research and stories from Madden’s classrooms were practical ways to bring students into their senses and train their image-making from two dimensional to three dimensional.

Given the deterioration of sensitivity to all stimuli that is occurring at a rapid pace (research shows that every year there is a decline in human sensitivity), all acting work must include presence work, or exercises to bring about fuller embodiment for the student.

At the same time, since much of current media feeds responses rather than encouraging the brain to creatively develop in imagination and ideas, images of the electronically-raised are often flat, two dimensional, small, and disconnected from sensory reality.

As a way to build new neuronal pathways, Madden led us through several exploration experiences that can be built upon as students advance. One of the ways Madden excels as a teacher seems to be that she continually asks questions of her students to find out what they are seeing, what they are sensing, what they are thinking. Then she devises practices or explorations that help to broaden those visions and feelings and thoughts.

## **Greg Seel—“The Latest Breath That Gave the Sound of Words...” King Phillip – King John III-I**

Wow. The 3 young actors that Greg Seel brought with him to the workshop were already excellent when they showed us their first version of their monologue. The hands-on and verbal coaching that happened during each next recitation was impressive. The students all had a strong understanding of the

Alexander work and were able to work with Seel in his “shorthand” gestures and verbal coaching to deepen and change the way they performed the text. As Seel then upped the ante by asking each actor to respond to the (imaginary) character from very close, and then from very far, and then from several (imaginary) roles of being a servant, soldier, son. The actors responded with immediacy, sensitivity and depth. It was wonderful to see each monologue get fuller and more moving each time.

Several times during the workshop, Seel said that he believed actors should be able to change on a dime, and his actors certainly showed that skill. When a director wants something different, how can the student use the Alexander Technique to change pathways and respond in a new way?

As Seel discussed his statement, “All acting is some combination of Use of the Self and Use of the Text,” he also showed us how he works with hands-on so that the actors could release their own personal habits and develop more options and choices. Habits like head nodding, jaw tightening, chest thrusting are so pervasive that the un-doing of habit and just “letting the text out” is hugely beneficial.

Another of Seel’s emphases is summed up by his statement: “Breath is where the audience meets the text.” Seel’s hands-on work clearly changed each actor in his or her ability to let the text out while staying emotionally, energetically, and mechanically centered and coordinated.

### **Bill Connington and Karen Braga—Using the Alexander Technique to Help Create Film Performance**

What a treat to watch a film actor (and Alexander Technique teacher) perform in his own film and then discuss how he uses the technique in his acting for film and theater.

After watching Connington’s very scary short film, “Zombie,” Connington shared with us how much his Alexander work was necessary.

Before “Zombie” was a film, it was a stage production. For the stage production, Connington dealt with fully inhabiting this dreadful character, night after night, and then needing to un-do and release back into his own self and life.

He used the principles to inhabit the “C curve” that his character slumped into, while still breathing and remaining present. Remaining curious was important to Connington so that he could continually respond to the director and allow for subtle changes during the run.

Connington mentioned that for both stage and film, the actor must often spend time waiting around, while being ready to go at a moment’s notice. By staying with the back, with the breath, with the directions, Connington remains in a place of semi-readiness, rather than dropping the energy or staying too energized to sustain it.

For film, Connington emphasized that the main issue for many is a fear of the camera or excess tension which makes an actor look forced. Stimulus of the camera can be met with staying back, breathing, and imagining that the camera is a good friend.

When it came time for group practice, Connington and Braga led us in a fun exercise that helped many of us experience what an actor might feel in a stressful situation. In groups of four, one person played the actor and three people played hair and make-up person, lighting person, and director, with each simultaneously talking over and around and to the actor, who was being poked and prodded and directed with more stimuli than he could possibly respond to. We did a few versions, and of course, the actors found that staying in their backs, while breathing, and not tightening was the only way to be able to respond to anything.

For the last hour of this workshop, a panel answered our questions about using the Alexander Technique while working on camera.

**Panel Participants:** Bill Connington, Karen Braga, Jorge Luna, Rutanya Alda, Valda Setterfield, Gary Cowling, Cathy Madden.

Consistent with all the conference presentations, the discussion centered around being present to self, fellow actors, and the environment—not tightening into contraction, not blocking energy. Several actors spoke of Constructive Rest being an important part of their preparation and that they practice the technique in their life, so that it is organic, and doesn’t have to be called up as a “technique” in rehearsal. Regarding the camera,

again, using the imagination to experience the friendliness of the camera, or the camera as a sun that is beautiful and warming and helps you to stay in your back. Inviting the camera to be with you as a living breathing person.

Gary Cowling, from Brooklyn College, suggested that actors practice letting themselves be a conduit for the work, letting the camera come to them, receiving the camera while remaining a living breathing person.

Cathy Madden emphasized that the camera will pick up non-constructive thinking. So, again, invite the camera to be with all of you, as you stay aware of the psycho-physical environment, and can, therefore, fully respond.

### **Belinda Mello—Playing with Defensive Actions: Alexander Technique and Masks**

This mask workshop was so engaging emotionally that I have little in the way of notes. The beauty and profound humanity of the mask work had many of us almost hypnotized.

Before we got to play with masks though, Mello led us through several exercises that had us explore following another persona. We paired up and partner A put a hand on partner B's back. Partner A was the leader, or the "Mask" and partner B followed, or played the "Actor." Sensing the wishes of another being, while staying with self, was one of the explorations. This was rich work that could be applied in any acting class, masks or not.

Mello's mask collection was created by her and were representations inspired by the Four Defensive Actions: Attack, Submit, Withdraw, Freeze. Each "Defensive Action" had a male and female mask version and were evocative of those emotions but included many qualities of a human face.

When two young actors put on the masks and Mello coached them carefully and sensitively into movement, the room went still with fascination. The movement seemed to stem from response to one another only, unlike so much movement that actors think they should/must do. And it was quite beautiful. Discussion of this work was rich with questions about how putting on a mask enables an actor to let go of some of their own personality and "stuff" about being a performer, and how

allowing response from a centered three-dimensional presence to emerge is facilitated by the masks.

For the next exploration, four Alexander teachers put on masks, and responded again to each other and to the audience reaction, while being coached. Mello is sensitive in allowing space for the actors to find their way, and the four actors were sensitive with each other and with their own inner responses. This exploration played out in about twenty minutes and it was deeply moving and mesmerizing.

### **Kelly McEvenue— Working with the Actor in Classical Repertory Theatre – the Alexander Technique as an Actor’s Tool**

McEvenue began by making the distinction of Training the Actor versus Coaching the Actor. Her own work includes both, but is centered on coaching actors as they prepare and rehearse for a play.

I found this to be a useful distinction, as my classes are in training actors, but so many actors really want quick tips of how to deal with some of their typical conundrums (wigs, masks, period costume, specific movement); they want detailed strategies that help them in their work.

McEvenue gave us some ideas and practices that directly address some of the common questions. She showed us that it is possible to give them Alexander Technique principles in clear, digestible experiences. We were led through a simple walking in the space exercise, in which we compared and contrasted meeting each other with awareness of our breath and holding our breath. As with many other workshops in this conference, we experienced that holding our breath led us to see others as two-dimensional and lacking connection. When we kept breathing and even breathed *to* the other person, we experienced a fuller self and a fuller other.

As we got into twos and practiced breathing and directing spatially, we experienced more possibilities. Breathing just half way to our partner kept us feeling withdrawn from them. Including our partner, but breathing up and over and around them felt very enlivening, and three-dimensional. Breathing into one another’s heart/center brought a sense of intimacy. These

stimuli and responses may sound obvious, but in my experience, these are exactly the kinds of clear concrete exercises that my students need. Using spatial direction with sensory awareness builds access to emotional states that can be used in their acting.

McEvenue also gave a demonstration of how she coaches actors on gender in walking. Since the female pelvis is wider and the hip sockets are placed slightly lower, a man directs his center of gravity lower, which immediately seems to widen as well, and brings a swing to the hips. A woman can direct her center higher and narrower, and all of a sudden the movement changes to a more masculine gait.

We ended the workshop with again moving through the space attending to our front and side space, and contrasting that to attending to above, behind, down, all around space. Expanding our field of attention clearly changed the quality in which we moved and saw one another.

What all the workshops had in common was a heightened focus on three-dimensional presence. At the time, I was struck by the different teaching styles, language used and varied ways into the work. But once I looked back at my notes in preparation for writing this article, I realized that all the teachers were unified in their focus on three-dimensionality as a way into Alexander Technique for actors.

Not an unusual place for me, as in my own training with Frank Ottiwell—whose program included equal teaching time shared by Frank, Bob Britton, Rome Earle, Simone Biase and Larry Ball—I experienced a wide range of teaching styles. My teachers each had distinctive practices and priorities, which caused some confusion, but ultimately taught us many paths towards a unified self. Similarly, in this conference a wide range of practices and language all led to the goal of accessing fuller three-dimensional presence and the ability to direct voice, breath, and energy spatially. These are exactly the skills my young students need most.

One of my favorite aspects of the conference was realizing that the pedagogy of the Alexander Technique—teaching better Use of the Self through Awareness, Inhibition and Direction—shines through all the presenter's work as well as my own.



Keeping to that simplicity, yes purity, in our many variations, is profoundly important to the training of the actor. All the presenters demonstrated their own path to teaching better Use of the Self. These main principles that F.M. gave us so many years ago are more applicable than ever in an actor's life, especially in this digital age. Awareness of an embodied self has become a basic acting skill to build upon, and can not be assumed. Most students arrive at classes having excelled at pushing and striving, not paying attention to their own signs of discomfort or pain. Or, on the other hand, they arrive completely disembodied, unable to discern the most basic senses, and go through life collapsed. Learning to experiment with themselves, reason things out, and come to more conscious choices demonstrates how (and why) this work is more needed than ever.

### **“Creating Collaboration as a Future”**

Teva Bjerken brought us all together on Sunday for a closing circle and conversation. After acknowledging the delight and warmth many people had expressed to her about this convergence of talent and sharing, Bjerken declared that the first step has been taken. By strengthening our communication, expanding our horizons and engaging with the many approaches we have each developed in our teaching and practice of the Alexander Technique, we have opened the dialogue.

As preparation for the conference and the coming semester, Bjerken re-read articles and books (several of which had been written by conference attendees) and encouraged us to write about our work, continuing the dialogue.

As we strengthen our own work, building relationships with other faculty/theater directors is essential if the Alexander work is to continue to thrive in acting programs. Co-teaching with Voice faculty and other movement disciplines, as well as building trust with acting faculty and directors, are natural progressions and represent an ongoing process.

Bjerken invited participants to share their experiences about what has been helpful or effective in this kind of collaboration.

Cathy Madden responded that it is important to teach both the actors and the faculty how the Alexander work can be

integrated into what they want and need. Sarah Barker agreed and expressed that AT, Voice, Movement, *is* acting training. Sometimes they can get pigeonholed into separate skills, but we can help fellow faculty to see how the whole acting process depends on all the aspects being integrated. Kathryn Armour remarked that she used the term Integrative Awareness Practice, which resonates with acting faculty.

Jed Diamond reminded us that actor training is the meeting of Use of the Self with Use of the Text. This work is essential. And, it is important to support each other as individuals in programs far from each other geographically. He recommends “chasing teachers” that you resonate with, and learning from the old-timers.

Richard Feldman observed that this conference, this collaboration, is exactly what we need. He suggests that AT teachers go to scene study classes and offer their help (after praising the excellent work of the scene study teacher!). Each Alexander teacher must negotiate with each director, to find the best ways to work together.

Belinda Mello shared that she finds it helpful to take photos or videos of students, before and after. Even if it’s a little reductionist, these tools make it easier for students (and faculty) to see how the work makes such a difference.

Julie Edwards (one of the young actors in attendance) said that in her training, guest artists made a huge impression on her. And that might be a great avenue to explore in supporting and collaborating with each other.

In closing, I’d like to extend a big Thank-You to the organizers and all the presenters! I encourage anyone interested in the field to join us next year for more stimulating and inspiring collaboration!

Comments? Questions? Ideas? Go to the Facebook page, and communicate! On Facebook, search for “Freedom-to-ACT-2012”

Also, to see all the presenters and the workshops they offered, and to watch for next year’s flyer, go to Ann Rodiger’s Balance Arts Center page, [www.balanceartscenter.com](http://www.balanceartscenter.com)