

The **Freedom to Act** conference took place from January 11-13, 2013 at Shetler Studios in Manhattan. Produced by Balance Arts Center and AT Motion and developed by Teva Bjerken, Belinda Mello and Ann Rodiger, this was the second year of what is already a valuable resource for performing artists and Alexander Technique teachers. The producers brought together some of the country's top Alexander teachers currently working with the Technique as a tool for actors. With a multitude of approaches and applications it was a challenge to decide between the workshops being offered. Whether Shakespeare, clowning, singing, Stanislavsky, physical theater or film- it was apparent Alexander Technique could be useful to all varieties of actor. The presenters included:

Jed Diamond, Kathleen Baum, Diane Gaary, Christine Stevens, Teva Bjerken, Ruth Rootberg, Greg Seel, June Ekman, Cathy Madden, Joe Krienke, Jessica Wolf, Mona Stiles, Michael Raine, Jean-Louis Rodrigue, Carolyn Serota, Richard Feldman, Kathryn Armour, Constance Clare-Newman, Clare Maxwell, Jean E Taylor, Meade Andrews, Ann Rodiger, Belinda Mello, Sarah Barker, Gabriella Minnes Brandes

Rife with choices, the conference offered workshops scattered across 4 floors of two different rehearsal studios, but all the participants moved seamlessly between the rooms throughout the weekend; a testament to the producing team's creativity and organizational prowess. They also provided ample time to connect, network, meet and mingle, which is just as valuable to a successful conference as the abundance of information to ingest.

On arrival Friday evening, the conference was off and running with nearly full attendance already packed into the **Introduction to the Alexander Technique** workshop led by Sarah Barker and Jed Diamond. Sarah demonstrated her introduction of Alexander concepts to a group, by "guiding us through a bit of experience." In order to truly understand how AT supports actors, one needs to experience the Technique in practice. She led us through a few simple activities (sitting and standing), calling attention to our sensory awareness of the action. She emphasized the importance of an indirect approach and the balance of inward focus and outward attention. For actors, balance of this awareness cannot be underestimated nor can the increased sensory awareness that came from following Sarah's coaching.

Back in the main penthouse studio, Teva Bjerken brought the group together in a welcoming activity and led us through a "tuning exercise." Asking the participants and presenters to walk in a specific pattern through the large room, Teva also guided us into a different awareness of our (and others') bodies moving through space and the immediate environment. It was a really nice way to begin, to take everyone in, to connect with both familiar and new faces. Then Ann Rodiger's had us working with partners taking small objects in and out of visual focus each time adding a new challenge, showing us how we respond to the stimulus of seeing it or the expectation of its appearance. The feedback from the group was silly and playful, lighthearted and excited and let us experience some of Alexander's principles: awareness, local vs global thinking, end-gaining, and kinesthetic response.

By the end of the first two hours, I was enthusiastic about the conference ahead. What brought me to attend the conference for the second year was my own background as an actor working with the Alexander Technique as the foundation of my work. Now, as a trainee to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique, I am interested in learning from others' experience working with both disciplines. As Alexander Technique is predominantly experiential my descriptions are entirely subjective and deeply personal, but not unique. It was fun to see so many participants reawakening to joy of creating.

On Saturday morning, my day began with Kathleen Baum's **The Alexander Technique as an Effective Means for Learning and Teaching Some Basic Acting Skills**. Kathleen is an Alexander teacher with a background in physical theater and movement-based approaches. Her workshop was created to bring to light how Alexander supports various disciplines of acting often taught separately. As a multifaceted, multidimensional art form her interest is in finding connections between the various approaches. She focused on Meyerhold Biomechanics and the Stanislavsky System and how they connect to Alexander Technique (through awareness, inhibition, and direction).

Meyerhold, which is quite athletic and demanding, underlies many physical theater disciplines. Actors who train in this technique are in a kind of boot camp, of which Kathleen shared an overview. Stanislavsky looks at an actor's neutral: a "clean slate" free of one's personal idiosyncrasies or habits to create character from. Actors are multi-taskers, and Kathleen was interested in cultivating through a physical training the power of one's own awareness as a tool while being in the moment and finding emotional availability.

An actor's work is undermined if the audience can see how hard s/he is working. Kathleen led a series of exercises, added increasing demands while encouraging less effort, and cultivated in us a balance of energy and ease. With each physically demanding activity, she reminded us about direction and gravity and to apply Alexander principles to find release into the challenge. We explored the limits of balance paying primary attention to the head/neck and the feet/floor.

We worked on physicalizing an objective using Alexander's direction (not just our own use, but as *directed* movement) allowing intention and motivation to emerge free of intellectually imposed ideas. By allowing the body to lead, characters and relationships were simply revealed to the actors. She then layered in both Meyerhold and AT's use of pause, or stopping. As in music, the rests are as important as the notes.

Kathleen's approach was clear and direct and gave us time and space to play and discover. Her application of Alexander Technique to movement-based approaches of creating theater is easily accessible to both actors and teachers.

Next up was Ruth Rootberg's **The Show Must Go On! Managing Performance Anxiety with the Alexander Technique**. Taking a quick poll of the attendees we realized nearly everyone had some personal relationship to performance anxiety or were working with actors who did. It has been said

that more people are afraid of public speaking than dying, so it is valuable to investigate how Alexander Technique can help.

Ruth created a few scenarios to help guide our awareness towards our reactions and pointed out that we *always* react but Alexander can help us manage those reactions. Anxiety really pulls us inward and cuts us off from the whole environment; it has a direct link to self-critique, doubt, and perfectionism. When did “not at our best” become “not good at all?”

When panic or anxiety sets in the brain floods with neurochemicals that take time to dissipate. Our response determines if these chemicals stay longer. Using Alexander's inhibition we can better control our reactions. By practicing stopping (adding in a “positive no” thought to stop the reaction, and having the courage to take the time you need) she empowered us to feel more in control of this reaction process. Her description of a “positive no” is akin to Alexander saying no to stimulus, e.g. telling yourself *you're not going to speak* before you do to intercept the habitual response to the thought of speaking.

She guided us through a lie-down on the floor and encouraged this as a really good practice to help quiet anxious thoughts. Using the lie-down to simply ask the negative thoughts to cease and to quiet down can alter their influence. Practitioners of Alexander technique know that lying down (or *constructive rest*) can have a very calming, quieting effect and Ruth encouraged us to use it purposefully at the onset of worry or doubt. Of course, like all things with the Alexander Technique, this is not a quick fix but a practice which can help the anxious performer gain control over habitual responses. Repetition is vital in acting as in Alexander; it's a whole process which takes time.

She encouraged a couple of the actors in a simulated moment on stage to consciously manipulate a “bubble” of direction (like an imagined sphere: up, wide and forward) including the other actors in the scene or choosing not to. With practice we can learn to create different relationships to our partners on stage and to the space around us, thus decreasing anxiety-provoking stimuli.

Ruth led her workshop very gently and patiently, which was appreciated by many people involved. She provided performers with tools they can use to help themselves and teachers with activities to aid their students.

After a lunch break, I attended Jessica Wolf's workshop **The Art of Breathing**. After certifying as an Alexander Technique teacher, Jessica continued her education with Charles Stough. Her depth of study in the complexities of breathing was apparent and palpable throughout her presentation. The two disciplines of her study are now deeply entwined in her approach.

First, Jessica led us through a physical activity and then an imagined emotional scenario to provoke a fuller experience of our breath. Without deciding, the body knows how much breath it needs and adjusts to the demand without our conscious control.

She shared her three maxims to breathe by: exhalation is the active part of the breath, the in and out flow is continual, we don't need as much as we think we do. Natural breath functioning happens when we're well organized and don't interfere. Using beautiful ocean imagery, Jessica led us through her *Art of Breathing* lie-down highlighting the synergy between the waves and our breath. As one who loves the beach, I wanted to stay here for a while and feel my breath wash through me.

Jessica shared with us her belief that diaphragm is “the muscle of emotion”. As it moves up and down on each breath it makes contact with both our guts and the base of our heart. For actors, the importance of this link between our breath and our emotional life cannot be denied. As we get out of own way, we gain more access to our impulses. She illuminated that breath can be a vital element in character transformation as well. From Shakespeare to Chekhov to Williams: how does the environment, the physical and emotional life of the character alter the breath?

Performers often get conflicting information about the best way to breathe for a given task. There are many schools of thought providing endless contradiction. Jessica's simple, practical, human approach and understanding helped me feel in better contact with this vital part of myself by doing less and allowing more.

Jean Louis Rodrigue's workshop was **Acting in Film and the Alexander Technique**. I have heard Jean-Louis casually referred to as the “Alexander Teacher to the Stars” and was curious to see his work. He's a very charismatic, enthusiastic and generous Alexander teacher who has been working in Los Angeles for many years. His client list is impressive, working with Leonardo DiCaprio on multiple films, Hillary Swank and Josh Brolin, to name a few. But even more impressive was the zeal he genuinely conveyed encouraging the room of Alexander teachers to do this kind of work with actors (“they love it”) and especially on film where simplicity is essential. In the best case scenario, he works with it as a preparation before filming, helping actors find transformation and become more aware of how they interfere. Part observation, part discussion, John-Louis spoke of his career and some of the highs and lows of working in Los Angeles and with actors on film. Often there isn't much rehearsal before actors are on camera, so Jean-Louis gives them tools to more fully ready themselves.

Three different scenes (each with two actors) rehearsed for us and we observed (live and on a TV monitor) how he worked with the actors. They knew their lines, but had not rehearsed with their scene partner yet. In the third scene, the actors were also new to working with John-Louis. Each duo sat in chairs facing their partner (profile to the audience), with a camera over their shoulder to record their partner. Behind them on two monitors, each actor's face was in close-up.

The scenes ran once, he asked questions and provided direction then gave hands-on to actor A and invited long time colleague Diana Bradley to give hands-on to actor B. Using the given circumstances of the script to strengthen the actor's choices (“although she's old and fatigued, she is excited to arrive”) he put hands-on and in the second take the actor's emotional connection to the environment deepened and she opened up to her scene partner in a beautifully vulnerable way. In scene 2, he had the two actors improvise the moment directly before to propel them into the scene.

After their first take one observed, "I felt a little locked, and a little in my head". Jean-Louis' & Diana gave both actors hands-on and a few controlled exhalations to connect the breath which ignited them. The audience witnessed a more visible and present connection to each other and the material.

The final duo had not worked with Jean-Louis before, hadn't rehearsed with each other, and didn't have the full script. After the first run he helped the actors strengthen the choices they were making ("is she lying or isn't she?") and raising the stakes. He provided one of the actors with a specific character-driven focus, resulting in a freeing of his neck, and power and urgency lit up the room. The scene came to life and choices emerged from both the actors in a more believable and motivated way.

It was a pleasure to see Jean-Louis artfully demonstrate how hand-in-glove acting and Alexander work are. The actors in the room were inspired and the Alexander teachers wanted to know more about how to work on film and television. It was late in a long first day, but the full-attendance revealed the enthusiasm of the participants

Constance Clare-Neumann and Clare Maxwell began their Sunday morning workshop, **Sharing Curriculum: For Alexander Technique Teachers working in a Theater Program**, with a guided lie-down and a large roll of butcher paper taped over the studio mirrors. Inspired by their own collaboration and discussion over many years about the challenges of working with AT and theater students. They created a think-tank session for others working like them to foster support and learn new ways to best reach their particular students.

How Alexander Technique folds into a curriculum is as varied as the teachers and institutions themselves. Sharing successes and challenges, the attendees engaged in a lively discussion, which could have continued well beyond the 2 hours time. In some ways the variety of challenges seemed endless: adjunct positions, confused or ever-changing administration, undergrad vs. MFA vs. professional conservatory, mandatory vs elective, private lessons vs group class. But the successes shared by both teachers and students kept spirits from feeling hopeless, but rather like something necessary was being established .

Clare said, "Actors are people willing to feel what the rest of society does not want to." As teachers Constance and Clare are interested in helping their actors with improved use and igniting creativity. It can be quite a solo endeavor to be the often lone Alexander Technique teacher in a performing arts program. I appreciated this workshop's objective of collaboration and curriculum-sharing and learned from everyone there. The facilitators gathered and shared examples of syllabi from the participants- which to a new teacher is an invaluable resource and for everyone can help to refresh ideas. The generosity and spirit of collaboration was unprecedented.

My final stop was Ann Rodiger's- **The Actor who Sings**. She ran the workshop as both lesson with practical exercises for everyone who uses their voice and master class with demonstration by already exceptional singers. Understanding through observation of voice is how F.M. Alexander made

his discoveries and thus led directly to Ann's interest in how our use affects our sound.

Her passion for this work is clear and she packed a lot into the given time. With very clear anatomical guides (looking at the skull, and detailed cross-sections of the larynx) she guided the participants through a series of Alexander practices, including breaking down the whispered 'ah' and giving us ample time in partners to practice her suggestions. It was fun to be in a room with seasoned and expert Alexander teachers realizing something new for themselves.

Experimenting first with breath and adding sound, varying pitch and vibration, the exercises were designed to help us make contact with how and where sound was resonating in our heads. In Alexander Technique, respiration is sometimes explained as a *column* or *tube of air* within us. Ann helped us learn how to remove obstruction to allow the vibration to most optimally exit the body, aiming toward the resonators of the skull. The resulting sound in the room was remarkable.

For the second hour an accompanist arrived and we listened to Ann's approach in practice with her students. Three, golden-voiced women sang a variety of operatic and classical arias. As she reminded them of their soft-palate, nasal cavity, tube of air, feet opening on the ground, and hips freeing with the breath, each singer transformed, relatively quickly in front of us. Their voices filled out, warmed up and reached into the room sounding powerful and effortless. With remaining time two other workshop participants worked with Ann and also found more resonance and more vulnerability in their sound, each in just a few minutes with Ann's suggestions and hands-on.

After the final workshops wrapped up, the participants reconvened for a send-off led by Belinda Mello. The enthusiasm shared by the attendees was palpable. Many of the actors in the room, both young and old, relayed moments of clarity and expansion. People seemed transformed, eyes open and seeing the room and everyone in it differently.

This was my second experience with the **Freedom to Act** conference. Already it has grown into a wonderful and highly anticipated event. The variety of workshops offer options for actors, acting teachers, Alexander Technique teachers, and anyone with a general interest. There is a balance of background and experience being brought to bear, but sharing, collaboration, new approaches and imagination abound in each workshop I had the pleasure to attend. As with last year, I was left wanting more, but also inspired and charged in a way that is rare. For anyone interested in either discipline or the overlap between I highly recommend the **Freedom to Act** conference.

For further information on the presenters and their workshops and to find information about

**Freedom to Act 2014**

as well as the upcoming **Freedom to Dance** and **Freedom to Play and Sing**

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