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Risk, Resilience, and the Essential Experience of Being Seen: Helping Actors Move from Self-Care to Deep Freedom with the Alexander Technique

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Directors and choreographers are arguably always exploring ways to innovate practices. However, since March 2020, we have seen increased need for innovation and creative thinking. The necessary calls for racial justice and anti-racist practice in the theatrical industry, and advocacy by organizations such as We See You, White American Theater, require transforming practices to find more equitable, inclusive, authentic ways of engaging in work and collaborative processes. Moreover, the honest reckoning with the injustices in theatre practices demands fostering greater physical and mental health in work and teaching. Likewise, the trauma and the personal and professional disruption of living through an ongoing pandemic and witnessing its significant impact on the fields have taken their toll individually and collectively. Indeed, at this point in 2022, despite the inspiration of artistic innovations, many directors and choreographers are in need of enhanced methods for self-nourishment and care.

The featured essay in this issue of the *SDC Journal* Peer-Reviewed Section addresses and offers a rich intersection of innovation and inspiration. As a certified Alexander Technique teacher, Jennifer Schulz offers directors and choreographers strategies for approaching work with actors through a holistic lens. Schulz advocates for the ways that the inclusion of Alexander Technique (AT) into rehearsal processes can aid directors and choreographers to support a more holistic approach to creative collaboration with performers, even outlining specific AT exercises directors and choreographers might incorporate into rehearsals and classrooms.

Even for those doing this or similar work already, it is beneficial to be reminded of and perhaps gain inspiration from the ways some are bringing expertise in other areas into their work. It is a goal of the PRS to offer a sense of extended community to Members who are teaching, directing, and choreographing in the hopes that it will encourage new modes of directorial and pedagogical innovation as well as sustainable, healthy work practices.

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY

EMILY A. ROLLIE + ANN M. SHANAHAN

RISK, RESILIENCE, AND THE ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCE OF BEING SEEN: HELPING ACTORS MOVE FROM SELF-CARE TO DEEP FREEDOM WITH THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

BY JENNIFER SCHULZ, POMONA COLLEGE AND CAL STATE SAN BERNARDINO

In actor training, Alexander Technique (AT) encourages release of tension, ease, efficiency of movement, and greater expressivity. It evokes deep transition into character, and helps the actor avoid injury. While AT often transpires in quiet spaces between an AT teacher and student, it can also be utilized as a practical tool by the director in group experiences, both in the classroom and in rehearsals, in order to restore expansiveness and brighten the creative inner life of the actor for the audience. Its principles are flexible and comprehensive, fostering freedom and play. While a certified AT teacher is required for full effectiveness and to impart the operational ideas in their entirety, the principles Alexander Technique is built upon support nearly all performance-based methodologies. It is my wish that this essay will present tools that will empower directors to build AT into their rehearsal and teaching practices in order to help performers more easily take risks—to “fail better” and spring back in their work (Beckett 101).

Actors are tasked with stepping into the world of another in front of an audience. This imaginative process can be thrilling and nourishing, but for some actors, the performative component of the work, the experience of *being seen*, activates the fight/flight/freeze response and dims inner life. Fear, the desire to be good, and the desperate need to get it “right,” overshadows the ability to freely explore within the world of the play. The Alexander Technique is uniquely positioned to help actors explore their habitual response to being seen while fostering self-awareness and availability. Because AT foregrounds

actors’ safety and well-being, it can be a powerful aid in positively contributing to classroom and rehearsal practices for the directors that guide them.

Developed by F. Matthias Alexander (1869–1955), an actor suffering from chronic laryngitis, AT is taught not only in performing arts programs around the world, but as an alternative way to support injury and alleviate pain. Most recently it has been found “to change functional patterns, reduce rigidity, and improve balance” in patients suffering from Parkinson’s Disease (*The Poise Project*). AT is considered an educational modality, often referred to as *psychophysical re-education*¹—a restoration of the physical expansiveness, openness, and present moment awareness that we possessed as children. Unlike other movement modalities, it isn’t a set of exercises, but a process of negation and of undoing, a method by which to experience the art of letting go. For the actor, AT provides a process to strip away what isn’t necessary so that they may rediscover what is more authentic.

Stanislavski understood that excessive and unnecessary tension interferes with creating the spiritual life of the character in performance...[Actors] may not be aware of excessive or unnecessary tensions, or they may sense it but not understand how to change what is going on...Actors and non-actors have the capacity to self-direct themselves and change habits of misuse to improve their performance. Through self-direction the actor

creates new ways of performing so as to not impede actions... What is unique about the practice of the Alexander work is that it offers the actor the opportunity to assess what is happening during the performance and improve it. Understanding how you do what you are doing in an Alexander way is what Stanislavski spent his life's work exploring. (Vasiliades)

Most exceptionally, Alexander Technique is an ideal tool to address the common experience of contraction and fear in the face of presentation and performance:

If your response [to an audience] is to shrink and become smaller, you block off parts of yourself, both muscularly and energetically. Then these parts cannot participate in the performance, either mentally or physically. If you can inhibit your response to close down, and instead stay open to your expanded self, you may be pleasantly surprised by what you find or finds you. (Polatin 235)

Cultivating practices that celebrate missteps, are supportive of process over product, and encourage actors to remain easy and mindful in performance not only boost wellness, resilience, and honor personal boundaries, but also often opens creative pathways and enriches the performative experience for both actor and audience. AT can be a means of maintaining and reclaiming spontaneity in a performance. "Mistakes and slip-ups, which can lead to happily playful performances, are not flaws but rather opportunities to discover the present moment where surprising artistic insights can emerge. Audiences relish moments when they can watch performers regain their balance, remember a line they lost, or find the notes they forgot," offers Alexander Technique teacher, director, and teaching artist Kathleen Juhl (212). By employing elements of AT in the rehearsal process, directors can help support actors and build an environment of authenticity and brave creativity.

I offer here some of the AT principles in action through a partial sequence of rehearsal games and exercises repurposed to encourage risk, foster resilience, and examine the interfering patterns performers have around the experience of being in front of an audience. The offerings below are grounded in only some of the operational ideas of AT (several are left out for brevity); they also pull from other fields of study that can inform and drive the work of artists and directors forward.

RESILIENCE: GROUP ACTIVE REST

Active rest is an opportunity for the performer's system to be at rest, but with conscious attention placed on self and surroundings simultaneously.² Alexander Technique practitioners call this the *unified field of attention*.³ Using this concept, actors engage in the act of un-doing, of putting their attention on the whole self, and then actively releasing unnecessary tension while being in relation to three-dimensional space. Active rest is best practiced to answer the questions "what do I notice?" and "where can I do less?" both physically and mentally. Through this activity, we introduce the first principle of the AT: *Awareness*. When actors become aware of previously unconscious habits—excess tensions, negative thinking patterns, or limiting beliefs—they have the opportunity to choose to let them go. This impacts not only their performance experience, but also their artistic journey, and the ways in which they live their lives and connect to the people around them. As Thich Nhat Hanh states, "Awareness is like the sun. When it shines on things, they are transformed" (qtd. in Aitken 95). Without awareness, nothing can change.

There is flexibility in when and how a director might lead an active rest session, depending on the production or class, the makeup of the ensemble, or the goals of the rehearsal. Sessions can simply be

reflection time the actor takes for themselves to invite release and ease. They can be as short as ten minutes and still provide significant benefits. Some guided offerings are as follows:

What 'should be' vs. what is

Direct the ensemble to begin to notice first themselves, and then any sensations, thoughts, or feelings that arise. Ask them to see if they can release tension at the very top of the spine. This place is right between their ears—actually higher and deeper than most actors realize. Suggest they begin to include their whole neck in the invitation, gently asking for ease out to the tips of their shoulders, through their throat. When they think "freedom" at the top of their spine, what do they notice happening throughout their whole system?

Follow up by asking participants to become aware of any judgments attached to their observations. If actors find they are talking to themselves in "always" or "never" statements such as "I'm always a mess when I get off book" or "I never feel good at this point in the rehearsal process," they can note those and the director can offer the idea that perhaps this was true in the past, but will it be true now? Also something to notice is if the actor is using words like "should" and "shouldn't." In doing so they tend to subtly tighten their neck and contract their head down onto their spine. They are misusing⁴ themselves the moment they feel something *should be* other than what it *is*, and in this moment, they are cutting themselves off from the source of their creativity. When these thoughts arise, the director can suggest they consider pausing and reframing the observation: "Isn't that interesting? I'm thinking that again."

Exploration of the senses

In this offering, the director begins by asking the question, "What do you see?" When Lilly Cabot Perry reminisces about the French painter Claude Monet, she writes, "Monet's philosophy of painting was to paint what you really see, not what you want to see" (120). Also attributed to Monet, and perhaps gleaned from Perry's observations, is the statement, "To see, we must forget the name of the thing we are looking at" (Claude Monet Quotes). Thus, what might change if the actor lets go of the name of the thing they are looking at? What does a water stain on the ceiling become? Or light scattered across a blue wall? What is now actually in front of them if it remains unnamed and uncategorized? What do they hear? If they let go of the name of that thing—a car driving by or the heater turning on—what is the texture and the movement of the sound? Again, we are encouraging actors to ground themselves in the reality of what *is* to support coordination within the honesty of the present moment. Move through all the senses in this way. The final step in this offering is inviting the participants to see, hear, smell, taste, or feel with their skin in this new way *while simultaneously letting go of tension and accepting feelings that surface*. In this way, the participants can practice marrying physical release to their experiences of sensation, thoughts, and feelings that arise in the moment.

Active rest is a wonderful tool for promoting ensemble and fostering self-care. It offers a moment for pressure to be taken off the intervertebral discs of the spine and allows the discs time to re-hydrate, promoting decompression and physical resilience. Restorative in nature, it can be a gift after a tough rehearsal or during the first part of a daily warm up, providing the actor time to be present in the room before or after the demands of the creative work are upon them.

RISK: GROUP JUGGLING WITH "PERFECT!"⁵

Games foster ensemble. They create space for big "aha" moments due to their low stakes and playful nature. They can be used as a way to bring everyone into the same creative and energetic space, or for inspiration and breath when creative blocks or safe choices crop up.

This game begins with the director or teaching artist holding up a ball. The ball is typically a significant stimulus. The thought of a group throwing and catching game is enough to prompt many actors into a fight/flight/freeze response.

In support of creating what Juhl above refers to as “playful performance” (212), the object of the first round of the game is to *not* catch the ball. First, the director may ask actors to again invite some freedom and release, or even play with a little bit of silliness at the top of their spines in order to release, soften, and breathe. The beauty of silliness is that you can’t get it “right.” This invitation is a precursor to the Alexander Technique principle of *direction*, with the primary direction being to let the neck be free so that the head may move forward and up. *Direction* is a vital component in the work, but in lieu of a deeper exploration can be misleading or promote new habitual patterns. The director then asks one actor to throw the ball to another across the room. The receiving participant can do anything *except* catch the ball. When they take action, or conversely take no action and allow the ball to hit them, the whole circle yells, “Perfect!” This continues until everyone has had a chance to miss the ball. In the next round, participants have the option to catch the ball, not catch the ball, or do something else entirely. Actors in the circle continue to yell “perfect!” with every interaction. The game progresses so that many balls are thrown in patterns and/or objects are passed around the perimeter with actors yelling “perfect!” for themselves, the person next to them, or to someone in their peripheral vision, until the game is punctuated with the “perfection.” With each round of the game, we renew the silliness at the tops of our spines and our commitment to letting go of getting it “right,” as well as perhaps even adding the intention to expand our unified field of attention.

In her book, *The Upside of Stress*, Kelly McGonigal discusses psychologist Alia Crum’s work, stating that there is a “single idea that motivates all of [Crum’s] research: How you think about something can transform its effect on you” (4). If we can change the way we think about the ball and how we feel about the action of missing it, we can then begin to translate this experience into our creative work. For the rest of the rehearsal period, the director has the ball toss experience to refer to when encouraging the actor to let go of a memorized or safe acting choice.

RISK AND RESILIENCE: “YES”

In the moments of not knowing and in the breath between choices, fear arises. Yet poised in this moment of uncertainty is where the magic of our creative work lives. Actors can learn to lean into that stretch of the unknown with the mantra: *I have time*. In AT, we call this principle *inhibition*, or the creation of space between stimulus and response. We often habitually react to uncertainty by freezing and tightening our necks, which in turn pulls our heads back and down onto our spine. But what if instead of *reacting* in our habitual way, we learn to *respond* in a new way? Reaction is knee-jerk. It offers a foothold for the safe and customary choice to repeatedly manifest. Response is flexible, inspired, nuanced, often surprising. It comes when actors give themselves space, time, or freedom psychophysically. Tommy Thompson, Alexander Technique teacher, director, and teacher trainer, speaks about the principle of inhibition in this way:

The joy of support, then, lies waiting to be recognized, listened to, acknowledged. Its presentation is elusive, existing in the space between things known and not known: at the still point of being—being in relationship where all is potential, not yet defined—within moments like those just before sunrise and sunset, within the time between inhalation and exhalation. The joy lies potent in the space created by withholding the accustomed and habitual reaction to life: between the stimulus and the response.

“Yes” is a popular theatre game repurposed here to explore the principle of inhibition. To begin: Player A makes eye contact with someone (B) in the circle. This eye contact is the “ask,” and what player A is asking is, “May I have your spot in the circle?” Player B has one line, and that is, “Yes.” Once player B says “yes,” player A crosses to B and takes their spot in the circle. However, A must wait for B to vacate their spot. Before B can move, B must secure a new spot. To secure a new spot, B makes eye contact with someone else in the circle and “asks” another participant (C) if they may have their spot. Player B cannot move until C has yielded their spot to player B. The game continues in this way.

At the heart of this game lies moments of uncertainty. The actor must ask something of another, which is a very vulnerable place to be—even when the outcome is all but certain. Declan Donnellan describes this quandary as one of the “uncomfortable choices” the actor must make (29). “An obsession with certainty destroys faith. We cannot have certainty and faith; we can have either one or the other” (158). In this exercise, we are challenging our actors to ask: What if I release into the deep freedom that is waiting for me and allow my whole self to live in that moment of *I don’t know*? What doors to new parts of myself open when I have faith I will find a place to land? As the game progresses, I ask actors to remain in the unknown for longer than what is comfortable. Silences stretch, the room begins to crackle with energy.

For round two, actors can now say “no.” In fact, actors can respond to eye contact in any way they want. They can say “sure” or “later.” They can sit down, opt out, spin around, or steal another spot at any point and in any manner. I ask actors to surprise themselves in this moment—to trust that if they don’t preplan a response then they might find the gift of the present moment, trusting that something will occur. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, trauma research author Bessel van der Kolk writes: “Children and adults alike need to experience how rewarding it is to work at the edge of their abilities. Resilience is the product of agency: knowing that what you do can make a difference” (357). The beauty of this experience is how much agency it affords the performer. They choose to say yes or no; they choose if and how they will move and how long it will take.

One student actor wrote about their experience of the game and its effect on their work in this way:

I realized while we were playing this game that I really just didn’t want to be in other people’s way once I had given them permission to take my spot. Once I made this realization, it really struck me emotionally. It was as if I had realized something about the way I interact with people in real life that limits what I am able to attain...And this could include failing, because failure can be a surprise, but I think it puts it in a positive light that makes me feel excited about trying new things. (*Intermediate Acting*, Pomona College)

Another reflected on their new relationship to the statement “I have time” by observing “suddenly I feel like I have control over the things I usually let control me. It gives me a chance to breathe and recognize that I have freedom, it stops me from making assumptions and rash decisions. This sentence alone has helped me find a stronger peace in my daily routine” (*Advanced Voice and Movement*, Cal State San Bernardino).

The principle of inhibition is the heart of AT practice. In it lies the moment of stillness performers must nurture and protect. When actors are able to put a space between themselves and automatic, habitual reactions, they open themselves to questioning long held beliefs and assumptions. They have the opportunity to free themselves



FIG. 1 Schulz (left) utilizing “hands-on” work as an actor explores text. PHOTO Brett Hershey

from old ideas, patterns, and fixations. By carving out time for moments of play, the director has the power to encourage inhibition, to embolden their actors to work on the edge of their abilities, and to embrace moments of uncertainty when they arise.

BEING SEEN: THE INTRODUCTION

For this exercise, the ensemble gathers in the front of the rehearsal space as audience. One actor enters the space, walks to the center of the room, says, “Hi my name is _____,” and then walks back out the way they came in. I find it helpful to let the actor know beforehand that I will be asking the question “what did you notice?” and that they will have to repeat the experience at least one more time.

This exercise incites the fight/flight/freeze response in nearly all performers. The easy, smiling, coordinated artist exits, and in their place enters another slightly more rigid and less vibrant version of themselves. In experienced actors, the new version that emerges is often poised, glossy, confident, but this shine appears more of an overlay, rather than authenticity.

This moment offers an effective opportunity for actors to recognize that excitement and performance anxiety are chemically quite similar. In fact, it’s how we view the revving up of our system that determines if we are able to utilize this burst of stress hormones, or allow it to derail us. Alia Crum notes, “Viewing stress as enhancing made it so—not in some subjective self-reported way, but in the ratio of stress hormones produced by the participants’ adrenal glands. Viewing stress as helpful created a different biological reality” (McGonigal 10). Changing actors’ perceptions of their stress can create changes in the growth index, the ratio of DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) to cortisol, which according to McGonigal is considered a measure of resilience.

What did you notice? In response to this question, some actors will admit how surprised they were that they were nervous. Sometimes they report specific moments that occurred or thoughts that went through their head. Often actors report that they really don’t know—it

seemed to have gone fine, but they can’t remember anything specific. A common experience is that they felt they didn’t know what to do with their hands, a direct effect of the tightening throughout their head/neck/back that leads to misuse throughout the whole system.

Actors have been conditioned to tell themselves in this moment that they need to relax; however, “associating the word ‘relax’ with high performance is disturbing. Performers, who are expected to execute all of their skills for their art and for communication, are asked to do a second, wholly incompatible task. Perform and relax. Relax and perform. Highly skilled excitation and relaxation together are not possible” (Madden 73). What AT can afford the actor is a more effective tool: *release*. Release is dynamic, energized, and expansive. We need excitation in our systems to propel us into the “service of the extraordinary” (74). However, we need excitation without excess tension. We need release.

Before the actor’s second attempt, I exit with the actor and sometimes do some “hands-on” work,⁶ which often leads to

dynamic release and more coordinated movement overall. Although incredibly useful, hands-on work is not recommended without proper training and certification. I find each actor needs something different depending on what has happened in the first round and what I have learned about them as individuals. Communicating “I have time,” reminding them to reconnect to their senses in the moment before walking in, or inviting them to think about letting their necks soften are useful verbal cues. Ultimately, by reminding them of and building on the skills acquired in the previous offerings, this moment allows the actor to tune into themselves and to feel themselves in space, which often leads to an immediate experience of grounding and support.

A dialogue with the company to find out what they observed during the second attempt is paramount for the performer. I often hear “I saw more of you,” or “you looked like you weren’t nervous at all.” One actor reflected on the experience profoundly: he felt like he was a radio station and the dial got tuned perfectly to himself—all the static was gone. When we strip away unnecessary tension, we tune back into our whole selves so that more of us can show up for the creative work. We are cultivating tools for managing excitation and infusing them directly into the work of being seen.

This exercise can also be useful as an early character exploration. The actor enters and introduces themselves as the character. This experience helps to uncover where their habitual emotional/vocal/physical responses might differ from the character’s. What does actor-as-character notice? What can the actor-as-character let go of? How does the actor-as-character deal with the experience of being seen?

CONCLUSION

Each actor has a different relationship to performance anxiety, being in front of an audience, their desire to be “good” or “right,” and their kinesthetic sense of self in space. In these unprecedented times, the need for awareness of self and others, an invitation to have time, and hold space for meaningful connection is more important than ever.

One student actor explained how they used this work to navigate uncertainty at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic:

When I was evicted from the college and moved to the other side of the country in two days with my partner, I was exhausted and sad, confused and livid, heartbroken and somehow apathetic. But somehow I was able to access all the tools that we had built in both A.T. and acting...I attribute so much of my wellness during those first few weeks of COVID-19 to the moments of vulnerability, truth, and wondering that we created in class. My focus then was not what I needed to produce, or how I should have felt— what sustained my wellbeing then, was my commitment to being as human and kind as possible. I did not want to lose my humanity, my empathy. (*Intermediate Acting*, Pomona College)

Opportunities that directors can take to foster bravery within a safe and nurturing space while honoring the ways in which the performers in the room understand themselves is essential. Freedom to hold space for each performer, to encourage exploration while being seen, and allow for time to get it “wrong,” can help actors feel freer to take artistic risk and nurture resilience. Carving out space to cultivate self-care and deep freedom promotes vision and innovation. Using the principles and exercises of AT can help directors create brave, creative, resilient, and vibrant rehearsal spaces, offering an impactful way to impart and support the work of artistic creation.

NOTES

1. F. M. Alexander, the founder of the technique, frequently used the term ‘psychophysical’ to describe his work. “F. M. Alexander believed the relationship of mind and body was such that they act as one unit, so that the human organism functions and responds to situations as a whole. He believed that we ‘translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension’ and, as Alexander developed his eponymous Technique, he saw it as a form of psychophysical re-education” (King).

2. In active rest practice, eyes remain open. For most bodies, having a few soft-covered books behind the head is recommended. Directing knees to float toward the ceiling while feet remain flat on the floor will encourage ease through the lower back. However, honoring where the actor’s system is in the moment is vital. Standing, stretching, sitting, fetal position are all welcome.

3. This term was first coined by AT teacher Frank Pierce Jones, a professor of classics and pupil of F. M. Alexander.

4. Alexander adopted the word *use* in order to describe how we exist in the world. When we are balanced, easy, coordinated we use ourselves well. When we are pulling head down on top of spine, creating excess tension, or engaging in unhelpful thinking patterns we *misuse* ourselves. “Good use allows us to use ourselves in empowering ways that open and expand channels of expression, so that each movement and gesture becomes a conscious manifestation of full spirit, mind, and body. Misuse blocks, constricts, and confuses expression” (Polatin 17).

5. This exercise is a combination of various ball toss games commonly practiced in actor training with the addition of “perfect!” which I learned in a Michael Chekhov workshop presented by Lisa Dalton during the 2020 KCACTF Region 8, California State University Fullerton.

6. Alexander Technique teachers are trained in a specialized way to use their hands to facilitate changes within the student’s nervous system.

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