

Is a Tasmanian self-help legend behind one of the greatest comedians of all time's success?

John Cleese is known the world over for his funny walks, and physical antics that made millions laugh during Monty Python's rise to become the premiere comedy act on the planet. But perhaps this didn't happen by accident. Could Frederick Matthias Alexander's Technique, a self-help method used to retrain 'ordinary' life activities, be responsible for Cleese's a hugely successful career? Perhaps Wynyard, tucked in the north west of Tasmania, played a large part in one of the world's most endearing comedic performers perfecting his unique physical style of entertaining.

In Cleese's own words: "I find The Alexander Technique very helpful in my work. Things happen without you trying. They get to be light and relaxed. You must get an Alexander teacher to show it to you."

While Harmonic Motion Teacher Course Head Penny McDonald doesn't think her cherished Alexander Technique can take all the credit, she'd be surprised if it hadn't helped Cleese master his unique comedic style.

"John Cleese is a world-class actor and there's no doubt his natural talent led the way," Ms McDonald said. "But the easy and casual nature of his funny walks, humorous mannerisms, and accentuated movements may well have been enhanced by the Technique."

'FM', as he's known, came from humble beginnings and convict heritage, born on 20 January 1869 at Table Cape in Van Diemen's Land. A small settlement, it was a community with a strong sense of togetherness. This upbringing, large family and significant influences fuelled his rise to become a leading figure in London society as the discoverer of the Alexander Technique.

After arriving in London, through his Technique, FM mixed with a cross section of people, including politicians, aristocrats, royalty, actors, musician and performers, as well as many others whose beginnings had more in common with his early years.

Ms McDonald said the discovery of the Technique was a classic case of necessity for a happier and healthier life being the mother of all invention.

"FM was an actor who was affected by vocal and breathing problems," Ms McDonald said. "Seeking a cure, he watched himself in the mirror, reciting Shakespearean sonnets, and found the answer appeared to lie in his posture. He had to re-educate both body and mind, to change his habits and learn new behaviour."

Aussie stage-and-screen icon Hugh Jackman is another who benefitted, saying in an interview how the Technique gave him incredibly good posture with incredible relaxation, while Paul Newman has credited the Technique for giving him a good night's sleep after years of tossing and turning.

Despite his gift reaching the literal global stage, knowledge of FM's talent hasn't spread across his country of birth. Even being recognised as one of the top 200 Australians to make Australia great in book to mark the 1988 centennial did not let to a surge in publicity for this unique self-help master in the backyard of his formative years.

"It is such a shame that most Tasmanians do not know about this wonderful technique," Ms McDonald said. "This amazing man developed a self-help method in their backyard that has given actors, musicians, singers and dancers a freedom in their art."

FM died in 1955 but his legacy continues. In 31 countries, about 4000 teachers continue to teach the Technique, and the many testimonials from people who have benefitted from lessons in the Technique are evidence of the value of FM's discovery.

High praise for the Alexander Technique

"The Alexander Technique will benefit anyone whether they are an elite athlete or whether they just wish to live life without the aches and pains that many people suffer and accept as part of life. It is a pity that these techniques are not shown to us all at an early age for I have no doubt that this would alleviate many of the causes of ill health in our communities."

Greg Chappell Australian test cricketer

"The Alexander Technique works... I recommend it enthusiastically to anyone who has neck pains or back pain."

Roald Dahl, writer

"Alexander established not only the beginnings of a far reaching science of the apparently involuntary movements that we call reflexes, but a technique of correction and self-control which forms a substantial addition to our very slender resources in personal education."

George Bernard Shaw, writer, Nobel Prize winner for literature

"I love the Alexander Technique. It has corrected my posture, improved my health and changed my life."

Alec McCowen CBE, actor

"The Alexander Technique has played an important and beneficial part in my life."

John Houseman, Actor, Producer and Director

"The Alexander Technique has helped me to undo knots, unblock energy and deal with almost paralysing stage fright."

William Hurt, Actor

"The Alexander Technique makes a real difference to my often tense and busy life. Its thoughtful approach has made me calmer, improved my concentration and given me a clearer sense of my own well-being. I am grateful for it."

Joan Bakewell, TV Presenter and Journalist

"The Alexander Technique helped a long standing back problem, and to get a good night's sleep after many years of tossing and turning."

Paul Newman, Actor

"I can definitely say without hesitation that I wouldn't have had the rowing success that I have had the luxury of experiencing in my short time on the water, without finding the AT and the great teachers that I have had the privilege to work with."

Valerie Thompson-Williams, rowing Masters gold medallist

"In the hands of a good teacher The Technique is invaluable to anyone who seeks to maintain health physical posture and alignment."

Ralph Fiennes, Actor

"With the best intentions, the job of acting can become a display of accumulated bad habits, trapped instincts and blocked energies. Working with the Alexander Technique has given me sightings of another way... Mind and body, work and life together. Real imaginative freedom..."

Alan Rickman, Actor

"Alexander Technique really helped my posture and focus during my stint as Othello... Imagine how excited I was when arrived at the National Theatre for Comedy of Errors and found I could have Alexander taught to me once a week, I was chuffed to little meatballs."

Lenny Henry, Comedian and Actor

"Question: Which book changed your life?"

Answer: The one the teacher put under my head during the Alexander Technique sessions at RADA. I grew an inch and a half."

Q&A: Jonathan Pryce, Actor, The Guardian, May 7, 2015

On 20 January 2019 teachers of the Technique, family, friends, the interested and the curious will gather in Wynyard to celebrate the man, his life and his legacy. An open invitation is extended to all to take the opportunities to have an experience of the Technique with a teacher, and learn more about the man, his legacy, and his family history.

Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (AUSTAT)

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