

# Nicolette Lee. Arts Council Great Britain

Report on 40 lessons in the Alexander technique, and related workshops, and an account of the application of the Alexander principle to a course of acting lessons.

Part I Personal experience of the Technique

Part II Personal experience of the Technique in improvisation workshops

Part III Application of the Technique to classwork

## Part I

When I began my lessons with Ms. Lushington, I was under the impression that my needs were primarily psychological. I seemed to be becoming less rather than more able to realise my creative intentions as an actor. However, Ms. Lushington made me aware that I had various physical shortcomings that had arisen through consistent misuse - amongst other things, an exaggerated lumbar curve and a 'domed' chest. She also said that I tended to 'over-use' my arms in particular, and that in general my mechanism showed signs of being worked more than was necessary. It is worth noting that one of the criticisms that has been made of my work is that I 'work too hard.' Ms. Lushington summed up my general state well, I think, by saying that as a result of the personal and professional tensions (anxieties, worries and frustrations) of the last few years I had become physically 'screwed up' and needed 'unscrewing and putting back together again.' Obviously then, what I had only been aware of as a psychological condition had an exact physical counterpart. Through my lessons in the Alexander Technique both the physical and the psychological state have been greatly improved.

### A. Physical change

As far as my awareness of having undergone physical change is concerned I would note the following:

1. I tire far less easily. Before I used to feel wrecked if I had less than eight hours sleep - now I am far less affected and have overall a higher level of physical endurance. I normally do fifteen minutes practice in the middle of the day, which greatly increases my capacity to sustain effort.
2. My balance, both in general movement and in dance movement, has improved.
3. I can now carry my heavy two-year old daughter downstairs with ease - before I was continually pulling the muscles in my knee.
4. Recently I had to do a singing audition. I have not had singing lessons for over five years, but I found that my overall tone had improved, and that even after this long gap I was able to reach the top note of my range without too much difficulty.

### B. Psychological change

Ms. Lushington's early instructions, 'Don't do anything, just tell your head to point up.....' came as a revelation. It had never occurred to me that your body will obey you if you just issue a mental instruction and that it is unnecessary to reinforce the message. This simple truth seems to me to have enormous repercussions for the wider aspects of acting and for life. I realise suddenly that action is a far simpler

process than we make it - that worries, fears, doubts and anxieties are quite simply irrelevant. These mental attitudes arise out of fear; they are in no way related to the realisation of our intentions but they can drastically interfere with our ability to achieve our ends. Any action consists of the intention, the message and the act, and that is all. Anxiety, or fear, can only come between the message and the act and hamper the execution.

From this, I have learnt two things:

1. With practice (I cannot stress the importance to practice enough - and the practice needs to be in life as well as in theatre), the Alexander reaction can be substituted for the anxiety reaction.
2. That doing consists of 'allowing the action to happen.'

Expansion of points 1 and 2

1) Substitution of Alexander for anxiety

In order to allow the Alexander technique to help me, I had to break an initial, severe barrier. I had to recognize and totally accept that I was given to over-anxiety, which caused hyper-tension, and - most difficult of all - to accept that this over-anxiety was not a 'real' reaction, but a 'neurotic' or 'irrelevant' one. This initial recognition is, in my opinion, essential. One has to set aside any defensiveness (this in itself is born of fear) that one may feel about one's shortcomings, and say, 'This is how I am.' Only when I really accepted this could I begin to work for self-improvement.

In the past my thinking had tended to be ... 'Yes, I am terribly nervous, but you see, I am afraid that I will:

- forget my lines
- not have chosen the right audition piece
- say the wrong thing
- make a mess of scene 2

and so on. In other words, I was excessively preoccupied with achieving my ends, and therefore the anxiety appeared to me quite natural in view of the importance that the situation had for me. Only if the desired end was achieved, it seemed to me, could the anxiety be relieved.

Now I accept absolutely that in order to achieve one's ends, and do one's best, one must set aside the anxiety. One must foresee that certain situations are likely to be anxiety provoking and remove the effect, recognising that anxiety is not an inevitable means to the end.

In the past I have been more conscious of experiencing this anxiety mentally than physically. I have tried to solve it mentally - by attempting to 'rationalise' my fears, or by doing traditional relaxation exercises, which have been useless. The result of trying to deal with a mental situation by mental means has often been to increase the degree of physical tension which again increases the mental tensions, and so a vicious circle is created. With the Alexander technique, I find I can deal with anxiety from outside the mind, that is to say, physically. So, in times of stress, I can 'tell my neck not to do anything.'

At first it seems oddly irrelevant, when one is worried about what one can or can't do with a scene, to start talking to your neck - but then worry is itself irrelevant. I now feel totally convinced that worry is never relevant to action.

## 2) Tension and over-working

What is tension? When I have thought about bodily tension in the past, I have had a mental image that was primarily static, an impression of rigidity. I have never really thought about, or envisaged tension in terms of motion. I suppose if asked how I thought of tension in movement, I would have said, 'stiff, robot-like.' I have, however, observed that if I am in a state of uncertainty my reaction is normally to feel, 'I must do something.' If, in a professional situation I feel fear, I have tended to grit my teeth and say, 'I'll do it or bust!' In both cases, these mental attitudes can result in the end being achieved, but with far more effort than is necessary. I now understand that 'overworking' is tension in action which is produced as a reaction to fear or uncertainty. I still need a lot more practice at not doing anything, but I am now confident that I can go a long way to eliminate this kind of tension.

It seems to me that the kind of energy that is often dissipated in anxiety should be restrained and held at one centre, through use of the Alexander technique, to be discharged in a controlled manner through performance, and that the power of that performance will be determined by the reserve of energy that we manage to hold, and by the degree of economy with which it is used.

## II. Experience of the Alexander Technique in Improvisation classes

While taking lessons from Ms. Lushington, I also attended improvisation classes run by Ms. Lushington and Barbara Goodwin. The purpose of these classes was to explore and examine the application of the Alexander technique to an acting situation. In the course of these classes, certain things became clear. Before each class the group did twenty minutes of Alexander. Then followed a movement warm up. The most noticeable effect of the Alexander technique in these warm up sessions was that I found it possible to do the exercises with far greater ease than before, and with less expenditure of energy. Consequently, the warm up was not, as is so often the case, exhausting, but rather as it was meant to be, invigorating.

After the initial warm up, we went on to doing improvisation, with a strong physical emphasis, using no speech, and making considerable use of masks. From Barbara Goodwin's work in these eight sessions, two important basic principles emerged:

1. That the power of the imagination is the prime force in acting, and the scope and freedom of that imagination can and must be developed in each of us.
2. That when we are genuinely 'free' as actors, and functioning correctly the imagination will completely take over, and transform us mentally and physically into its images.

### The power of the imagination - Stanislavsky and Alexander

At this point I should like to note that over the course of the classes, the relationship between Alexander and Stanislavsky became increasingly clear. Stanislavsky set out to analyse the nature of acting when all is functioning correctly. He recognised that the acting process demands the interaction of relaxation, concentration and imagination. He observed that the actor, when 'relaxed', was able to concentrate on the messages of his imagination, which were then unselfconsciously expressed as acting. The Alexander Technique makes the interrelation of these three forces much more precise, and gives us the actual means to achieving it. Up till now,

for example relaxation is usually taught by means of purely physical exercises. Through Alexander, we learn that relaxation must be both mental and physical, and that as with tension (see above, previous section) we must think in terms of an active, not a passive state. We must eliminate active tension, and put ourselves in a state of active relaxation. It is not enough to achieve a state of physical release for ten minutes before you actually do anything, only to fall back into the same old tense way of acting and moving. Relaxation must be seen as an attitude and approach which informs the entire working process.

If we accept that the imagination is the prime mover of the actor, and that our objective is to act under the force of that imagination, then the development of technique must be directed towards an understanding of the factors that 'inhibit' the flow of the imagination. Actors tend to feel that they 'must do something,' and try to reinforce their imagination, by 'putting on a voice,' for example, or by playing for laughs, or simply by performing totally arbitrary actions which may be quite irrelevant to the dramatic situation. (These kind of reactions are particularly noticeable when actors improvise.) All these examples are forms of excessive activity, and they actually stop the imagination from working, and become themselves a cheap, false substitute for the true imagination. The imagination has, quite simply, not had time to work, the actor has been in such a premature panic to 'produce the goods.' Alexander can give us the discipline of stopping and waiting and those ten or twenty seconds can give the imagination time to work. But again, it should be emphasised that it takes discipline and practice.

Again, through experience and practice one can acquire the sensation of trusting one's imagination. Gradually, through the lessons and the classes, I am acquiring the sensation of action as emerging, rather than being imposed. Again, the old habit of 'feeling better if one is doing something' is hard to break, but through Alexander one can experience the sensation of standing back from one's active self, which always wants to be doing, and actually following, and being taken over by, the imagination.

However, in order for the imagination to be able to lead us, the physical body must be in a state where it can be taken over: it must be receptive to the mental message. The Alexander technique helps the body to achieve that receptive, pliable state.

To sum up, in these classes, the following truths became clear:

- 1) The imagination, when flowing freely, does not need to be reinforced by the actor.
- 2) Reinforcement can become a substitute for imaginative truth.
- 3) The Alexander technique can physically liberate the imagination.
- 4) The Alexander technique can put the body in the proper condition to receive the messages of the liberated imagination.

Part III Application of the Technique to classwork

Recently, I gave a course of twelve lessons to a group of amateurs. The course was designed to examine the business of acting through improvisation, and was structured as follows:

4 lessons devoted to acting/improvisation using no words.

" " " " " " using speech.

" " " " " " as applied to texts.

In the past when I have taught improvisational techniques, I have always had the feeling that somewhere along the road certain fundamental steps have been missed. Students seem to experience particular difficulty in passing from simple situation to more complex ones, and I have always felt that this showed an insufficient grasp of fundamentals. I now realise that in fact I have never before been fundamental enough, that I have never quite realised what the very bottom layers of technique were, and the need to give students continual practice in them. For example, when asked to involve speech in improvisation for the first time the problem 'I can't think what to say,' has come up. The obvious answer to that problem is that it is a wrong approach to improvisation, but it is easy to find oneself telling a student what he should be doing instead of how to achieve it. Barbara Goodwin lays almost total emphasis, in the instructions she gives, on means rather than on results. Too often directors and teachers base their criticism of a student's work on a pre-conceived notion of what the result should be. But before any result can be achieved, the student must be seen to be applying methods likely to lead to that result, and until he is trained and experienced in these means, results are unlikely.

My objectives in the course were as follows:

1. To stress the imagination as the total source of acting, and to give the students the experience of acting under the influence of the imagination.
2. To make them aware of the factors which work against the free flow of the imagination and help them to counteract them.
3. In working with a group who had no knowledge or experience of the Alexander technique, to use the Alexander approach to achieve the ends above.

I adopted various lines of approach. Instead of giving purely physical relaxation exercises, I tried a 'psycho physical approach'. They were asked to lie on the ground with their head supported, knees bent up. Then I asked the class to allow me to suggest certain ideas to them, and while they were lying still I talked to the class calmly and quietly.... e.g. 'At this moment, now, you don't have to do anything, so I would like you, please, to come to a complete stop. I would like you to set aside from your mind the activities of the day - forget what you've been doing, if you've had a hard day, if you have worries, and exist only in this moment, now. At this moment, you don't have to do anything.'

Instead of asking them to tense and relax certain muscles, I asked the class to envisage certain things happening - I asked them to imagine that their knees were held up by string, like a puppet - that they weren't holding them up, someone else was doing it.

After relaxation, there was some kind of physical or vocal warm up, in which I tried to involve the imagination in the physical processes. Then I would suggest certain moods, scenes or sensations to their imaginations.

In the early stages, I would repeat often, 'don't do anything ... don't do anything,' as the common tendency was to 'show' or 'present' rather than imagine, the states suggested. I reminded the class that they were not trying to show me anything, and called their attention to the temptation to do things, to 'work hard'. I pointed out that many of us are educated to believe that we should be seen to be trying. The first thing I had to break down was the temptation to be active.

I also stressed on all occasions that we were not in a success/failure situation, but in a creative, exploratory one. That fear of failure made one try to achieve in a wrong way. I kept reminding the students that nothing was always going to work, and they shouldn't expect it of me, themselves or each other. If they couldn't do something that week, then maybe they could the next - most important was first to recognise when they were working correctly, and when not. A 'total' emotional approach to success and failure is utterly destructive to the learning process. Sonia Lushington once pointed out that when a child learns to walk it doesn't brace itself for a colossal effort and then have an emotional collapse when it falls down, it gets up, it falls down, it gets up, it falls down, and eventually it walks.

So, in early improvisation I would say:

'It doesn't have to be long, don't go on any longer than you can, or than you want to.'

'If you are asked to choose an emotion to focus on, don't choose an emotion that you are afraid of, or would be embarrassed to reveal (e.g. unbridled lust!).'

I tried to get them to experience that acting and involvement requires an act of will, and that the will must not be forced or strained. I tried to make the whole mental process one of free choice and unpressured decision. When the students worked with partners, and then with groups for the first time, I stressed the need to avoid the feeling, 'I must do something or say something.' I pointed out that if they set aside the premature panic to produce, and waited and watched and listened to their partner, their need to 'do' would be fulfilled by having something to which to respond. I gave a lot of practice in this sensation of watching, waiting and listening.

From this stage, we led on naturally to the lesson that one's job in a scene is to play one's role, and that you can only make the contribution that that role demands. Improvisation is often wrecked by everyone trying - often with good intentions, or often with no intentions at all - to make theirs the main part. That is to say, I taught the students not to become so absorbed in their own doing that they did not watch the scene. 'If you are told that your character is poor, alcoholic and has sixteen children, there is no need to sat about proving it, just bear it in mind and follow the scene.'

In other words, having tried in the early stages to bring them to a greater awareness of their imaginative selves, I went on to show how self-awareness can become perverted into a sort of self-defensive egoism, if the same fundamental principles are not retained in a group situation. Having

learnt freedom on their own, I tried to teach the students that that freedom must know when to give way when it encounters the freedom of others.

### Positive results

1. Massive reduction in transition problems from stage to stage and virtually no speech problems at all. Students said, by the end of lesson four, they 'really wanted to speak now,' or 'it didn't bother me whether I spoke or not, it didn't seem to matter.' In other words, they had acquired a proper attitude to the business of speech on the stage.
2. When I asked them around lesson six to 'perform' for the rest of the group for the first time, I told them not to allow the fact that they were being watched to affect what they were doing. If they felt 'fear' beginning to affect them, to just tell themselves not to be affected. The first students to perform did lengthy and fluent improvisations, with speech, of one end of a telephone conversation. At the end, they said, 'When I got nervous I did what you said, and it seemed to work.' What was interesting and gratifying was that at this point they could casually accept this instruction and put it into practice.
3. When we came to doing group improvisation with words, I pointed out the need to watch and listen to the scene as a whole - wait, listen and co-operate. Don't push for something to happen and don't fear silence. If they were told how the scene should end, I stressed the need to keep the end in mind but not to push after it obsessively. The degree of control achieved by the group by lesson eight was quite amazing. Although there was not a particularly high level of acting ability, their grasp of the techniques of improvisation and ability to apply them was certainly greater than any group I have worked with in the past.
4. When we came to work on texts, because they had a solid grasp of the fundamental principles of improvisation as the very stuff of acting itself, not as a thing apart, the group were able to grasp relatively quickly the application of improvisational exercises to texts and were able to do textual exercises, e.g. exploring the speech rhythms of a Beckett script - with surprising ease - because they knew how to improvise.

The Alexander technique has been sometimes described as a 'relaxation technique.' On this level, it is indeed remarkably effective, conveying as it does the sensation of tension and relaxation as active, not passive, states. However, the wider implications of Alexander, with its emphasis on the recognition of means as the only proper way to ends, are much more radical and far-reaching than at first appears. The technique can be of immense help in withstanding these tensions which we all experience - but if it is regarded as a thing apart, as a means to a kind of 'instant relaxation', then, like any other 'relaxation technique', it will be about as useful as an aspirin to a cancer patient. It is no use doing 20 minutes practice, and then going into a situation where the overall philosophy of the director is geared to 'end-going' - 'instant end-product' - who shows quite clearly that he trusts neither himself nor his actors, and therefore establishes an atmosphere of total insecurity and mutual suspicion. The responsibility lies with the director or teacher to create an atmosphere in which Alexander can function - where Alexander principles govern the entire working process. Then, I believe, the results could be overwhelming.