

The Alexander Technique and Contemporary Dance

An Interview between Marsha and Robert Barsky

RB: Let me begin with some basic terminology, for readers who might not be familiar with the Alexander Technique, or issues facing you as a modern dancer, choreographer and, moreover, teacher. First, can you provide me with a definition of the Alexander Technique?

MB: The Alexander Technique (AT), based on the writings and teachings of F. M. Alexander (1869-1955), is a process of learning how to move with more ease, freedom, efficiency, support and balance. The technique encourages reliable integration and coordination of the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual spheres, by awakening and refining sensory awareness. It promotes a deep understanding to the means whereby we respond to stimuli, thus fostering a harmonious relationship to Self. The essence of the Alexander Technique is movement, and as the process of learning and understanding the technique unfolds, the potential for free and unfettered movement is experienced in the entire being.

RB: What specific value does this technique offer to dancers?

MB: Since the Alexander Technique encourages ease and efficiency of movement through awareness in activities, dancers can develop keen abilities to recognize ineffective movement pathways. Thus they are able to conscientiously redirect the use of the self into new, dynamically organized movements. Modern dancers in particular might be drawn to the technique since the very nature of modern dance, from its origins, deals with the freedom of self-expression in motion. Modern dancers are adept negotiators of the body, and in their work they explore a whole range of movements, and facets of moving. Through diligent exploration of finely sophisticated movement patterns, a dancer's kinesthetic sense is, through Alexander work, sharpened, refined and developed to permit the dancer to perceive and convey the subtlest movement shifts inside of larger movements of the body.

RB: So you have spent your life developing dance technique that you are now transmitting, as a teacher, to students. And now, alongside of this work, you are working towards a certification in this Technique. What does this process mean, to your dancing and your teaching of dance?

MB: The application of the Alexander Technique into my work as a dancer and a teacher has been a deeply profound experience. I have always been fascinated by the way my body operates and functions, but I was unclear about the relationship between my "body" and my "dancing body". I would work for countless hours on my dance technique in the studio, but once I left I was completely oblivious to how I moved in the world. The Alexander Technique has opened up an entirely new level of holistic awareness. I move all the time, in all activities, and to cordon dance off from my other movements during the day was creating an artificial boundary

between me as a dancer and me as a person outside of the studio. Once I made that discovery, my experience as a dancer transformed because I ceased to think of myself as a “dancer” or a “mover” in the studio, and someone else outside of it. In other words, my connection to movement qua movement doesn’t have to be limited to a particular time and place, just as there’s not just my body and how I’m thinking about it, but rather that I’m existing as a whole organism, constantly, in all circumstances.

RB: Is there a discussion of this specific process or approach in Alexander’s writings?

MB: Alexander actually refers to this idea as “Psycho-Physical Unity,” a concept that is an exciting one to pass on to students because it helps them to recognize their true potential. At the same time, though, it poses a danger for dancers because they need to realize that the point of the technique is not to become better dancers, per se, but rather that they become more aware of the process involved within their dance, which is how they connect to their movement through their thinking. However, how they think about their relationship to their entire organism needs to be clear. Since dancers are notorious overachievers, it’s important for them to truly understand a crucial concept: AT is really about how you live your life, the choices you make. But even though AT has the potential of helping people become better dancers, dancers shouldn’t study it in order to become better dancers. To study AT in order to improve proficiency in dance is itself an example of end-gaining, one of the attributes that we try to overcome as practitioners of AT.

RB: Before we go on, can you clarify this for me? What do you mean by end-gaining, and why is it typical of dancing?

MB: To start, I should articulate a key Alexander principle: Alexander discovered that there is an inherent dynamic relationship between the head, the neck, and torso. When the head is efficiently organized and composed at the top of the spine (the AO joint), our necks can release habitual tension and our backs lengthen, widen and deepen, which ultimately effects the use of our entire organism. Alexander called this the “primary control”. Once this dynamic relationship is balanced, the potential for free, unrestrained and unlimited movement is awakened for any activity. This is the basis of the technique, yet it is very difficult to experience it without the aid of an experienced AT teacher. When we hinder our primary control, it is most often through our habit of “end-gaining”. In the most simplistic terms, end-gaining is concentrating on what we have to do and not the way in which we do it. End gaining is our habitual response to movement. And, dancers have the tendency to sacrifice the integrity and natural organization of the movement in order to achieve a specific end result.

RB: So end-gaining focuses upon the presumed result, rather than the means by which that result is attained.

MB: Yes, and in fact Alexander called this the “means whereby”, the ability to observe each action in order to understand its cause and effect. Inefficient movement habits are learned patterns, and once we begin to observe these habits we can pause, redirect and recognize the “means whereby” we can accomplish our goal. Alexander refers to this “pause” as inhibition, which is another key component to understanding the work, and is a perplexing concept for most dancers to grasp. When we interfere our primary control via habitual responses to stimuli we impede our ability to embrace our potentialities; however, we can affect this interference through inhibition. Inhibition is a learned process, in which we develop the adroitness to stop a habitual response to a stimuli. It gives us a moments pause, so that we can consider if we want to respond to the original stimulus, or perform another action entirely.

RB: So as a dancer, who has been focused so directly upon particular end results, I would imagine that inhibition requires you to slow down, and assess each movement, and in a sense develop an understanding of that movement as movement, rather than as a means to get to the place you were headed in undertaking that movement?

MB: Absolutely. And in my dance training, this is akin to phrasing. It’s observing where movement is initiated, how movement is sequenced through the body, and how it’s recuperated. This is the means whereby, and its often accompanied by inhibiting a habitual reaction to the movement. However, there are times when a dance class does not necessarily facilitate this type of observation, on account of the pacing of the class, or the speed of a particular step or phrase. This is why individual lessons with an Alexander Technique teacher are paramount. When you work with an Alexander teacher, the teacher assists in your ability to think, observe and sense movement. So AT provides you with the ability to understand what the movement is, where it is initiated from, what its timing is, and so forth, which is very powerful, because in a dance setting you don’t always have the leisure to stop, think and assess.

RB: One characteristic, as I understand it, of modern dance is that it allows the dancer to move for the sake of moving, and for the viewer to experience the movement in its pure form, without having to look for a narrative or, to use the terms you’ve been using, without anticipating the end result. In this regard, modern dance is very different from, say, ballet. But the way that you are describing the Alexander Technique is through universals, that is, you seem to be suggesting that the technique is important for virtually any kind of movement technique.

MB: Yes, because the body is the body, no matter what the movement, and every body has a primary control. But I find the relationship between Alexander’s work and modern dance particularly harmonious not because one flows to or from the other, but because free and unfettered movement is also the very nature of modern dance. For me, therefore, it’s a fortuitous overlap.

RB: It's also curious that they are so complementary, because Alexander had no interest in, and possibly no knowledge of, modern dance, or any dance for that matter. So is the connection between them arbitrary, or, as you say, fortuitous?

MB: It's hard to know what his relation to dance was, since I've never read any discussion of Alexander's knowledge of dance forms, but one way or another it's not arbitrary, if only because of the epoch within which Alexander lived. Even though he was raised in Tasmania, he moved, in the very midst of the modern period, to England and America, at the very moment when modern dance was being developed. So it's probably not a coincidence that his work spoke to modern tendencies, since he was no doubt inspired by the spirit of the times, and he was himself an actor, and thus in tune with the cultural milieu.

RB: So you integrate his insights into how you think about modern dance, but it sounds like there remains a considerable challenge to bring your AT work into the dance studio itself. How do you try to bring these two facets of your work together, or do you?

MB: I believe that the Alexander Technique can be viewed as a pre-technique, or an underlying approach to dance, so yes, it has been challenging for me to find a method to seamlessly and thoroughly incorporate AT into the dance studio. One method that I've been exploring in my teaching is to uncover the relationship between common principles inherent in both modern dance and AT. I believe that the practice of a dance technique, like any other technique, needs to be informed by fundamental concepts that offer a sophisticated approach to our thinking, otherwise dance technique risks becoming just an activity. This isn't necessarily achieved through physical demonstration of a dance step alone, but also through verbal instruction. Therefore, it's imperative that I focus on the manner in which I convey the relating principles of AT and their supporting dance concepts to my students.

RB: Do you have a vocabulary of Alexander terms, in the way that you have one for dance? Is there a specific Alexander vocabulary?

MB: Alexander considers it a necessity in the teaching of the technique to use certain phrases to describe the use of the self, but AT does not have a set lexicon in the way that ballet, or even modern dance does.

RB: But you have a class full of dancers, expecting to dance. How do you convey to them, in words, the centrality of the Alexander Technique?

MB: I should clarify that the teaching is not limited to words alone, students have to develop awareness, so in that regard my role is to direct rather than convey and to ensure that students learn to take responsibility for their actions. I must also be able to physically demonstrate what it is I'm trying to express in my own body; otherwise the students will see something, but not understand what they are seeing, or they'll hear something, but be unable to execute it with their bodies.

RB: So I am assuming that your dance class, when informed by or relating to your interest in AT, has to be done differently. You are still trying to teach “technique”, but it sounds as though awareness of how this technique is being performed is as important as, say, a wonderful kick or an accurate movement.

MB: Indeed. By incorporating Alexander’s principles into my classes, I’m actually asking my students to delve deeper into their dancing work. I encourage them to shatter their expectations of what they can and can not do, while challenging them to take greater risk in their dancing. At the same time, I’m asking them to recognize when they are inefficiently executing movement, and inhibit their habitual response. So, if they’re asked to execute that wonderful kick, I’d like them to approach it through their primary control.

RB: Do you think that a dance technique that is informed by AT ceases in some respects to be dance?

MB: No.

RB: But there are actions intrinsic to dance practice that hinge upon end results, where the mover is headed, and it sounds as though AT challenges that progression because it is just that, a progression, which AT defies.

MB: Let’s go back to teaching; these actions aren’t intrinsic to dance, because movement is movement, it’s how you teach the movement that matters. And this conception of teaching is what hinges upon the end result, and I think that there needs to be a shift in how dance is taught. And this again comes back to the verbal, how we talk about movement in the body, in the whole organism

RB: You’ve come back to language, but given what you’ve said thus far, I could imagine some AT training occurring in complete silence. What needs to be said?

MB: Most Alexander training is one-one, and the majority of the lesson is taught through touch. Verbal communication complements the hands-on work. In a larger class of, say, 35 dancers, the principles of the Alexander technique have to be conveyed through a combination of verbal instruction and physical demonstration.

RB: Do the students provide feedback? Do students need to “check in”?

MB: Yes, and I need to allow time for students to “check in” to themselves and awaken their kinesthetic sense, or the way in which they feel movement. For example, I might give students a dance phrase, without any verbal instruction or Alexanderian references to perform. The next time the students perform the phrase, I’ll ask them to initiate the movement from a specific place in the body. This directs their attention to that area, and encourages them to recognize the means whereby, not the end result. After I’ve given them this instruction, I’ll ask that they compare

their experiences, to determine what they've noticed, so that then can make connections themselves. For this reason, I address them by asking questions, rather than providing instruction. This allows them to awaken and trust their kinesthetic sense, so they don't rely on their unreliable senses, or what Alexander referred to as "debauched kinesthesia."

RB: Wow, that's an incredible term!

MB: Basically, it means that we can't always rely on the sensations of our movements. If we've been moving in a particular way, for quite some time, our sensory experience of that movement is faulty. We need to retrain our perception of movement, so that we can feel when we are in a state of balance.

RB: I'd like to note with you that I had never heard of Alexander himself, his writings, or his technique, and I suspect that many other readers of a journal like *AmeriQuests* would say the same thing. How well-diffused are his writings, and in what context are they read?

MB: Alexander's work is widely diffused in the performing arts, and there are many colleges and conservatory programs in dance, theatre and music that offer Alexander Technique classes and encourage the reading of his texts or the books and journals that have sprung up to discuss his work.

RB: This journal is not only about the "Americas", but also America, this unachievable but desired end or, to put it in the terms you've used, about the journey towards a desired end. Any last thoughts on how Alexander fits into this quest?

MB: The Alexander Technique is the journey itself, the end being something that is postulated, as was the beginning. But, like this interview, it's really the process and the interaction that count, not the end. Through this journey, we quest for our own potential, our own America.