

Before the Curtain Opens

**Alexander Technique
in the Actor's Life**

An extract

Kate Kelly

Before



Long before the curtain opens on your performance, the creative impulse is nestling in the everyday awaiting its opportunity to surprise you.

However, at the same time as going about your daily life you are unwittingly under the sway of the very habits and attitudes that will compromise your individual creative expression.

This book addresses the conundrum and how you can be conscious, alert and ready – “The readiness is all” being one of F.M. Alexander’s favourite Shakespeare quotes – so that, when inspiration strikes, you can carry it through, without impediment, into your characterisation and performance.

If morning rituals involve unnoticed muscle tightening

and breath holding, a small snowball of unnecessary tensions starts to roll down the snowy slope of the day faster and faster arriving at the bottom of the hill (performance time) as a much larger snowball. You can easily find yourself having to deal with all that accumulated stress at the same time as you are coping with any nervousness about stepping into the spotlight.

True to its title this book is all about 'Before'. Everything that happens before the curtain rises. Before you bend over to tie up your shoe laces, before you read out loud, even before that impulse which mysteriously propels you to arrive at the characterisation for your acting role. 'Before' doesn't remain neatly in a tidy past; it is a potent force which spills over into the present and future.

It is also the springboard for your creative trajectory, your starting point: how you are in the everyday, your attitudes, how you respond to all that is around and within you. Without the 'springiness', inspiration falls flat fast, the bubbles can't fizz. There isn't anything to sustain any momentary imaginative leap.

The more you learn to pay attention to your experiences, decision-making and approach to life, the greater depth and potential you lend to your talent and skills as a performer. This may be what makes the difference between the flash-in-the-pan creative and having an enduring and renewing quality of artistry.

Happily, 'Before' features quite strongly in the teaching of the Alexander technique, enabling your foundation or starting point to be sturdy so your constructs have integrity and can be sustained without strain. This establishes a reliable underpinning for your vision and inspiration.

As with preparing to play a violin, with the Alexander technique you learn to fine-tune your own instrument (yourself) checking on nuances in your thought patterns and responses and their influence on the choices you make. In a very practical way you discover how to use your intention to

affect physicality, breathing, emotions, voice and attitude and to prevent unhelpful, unnoticed habits of tension from stymying your expression.

As a young actor, I had the opportunity to work with an international theatre research company in Europe. Members of the company were given a lot of responsibility to create and devise. The way we worked with our director was, I believe, similar to how her dancers did with Pina Bausch: suggesting projects/enacted ideas that could be developed for a themed production. I created striking, extravagant images including descending from the Flies in a full-sized bath tub to illustrate a scene in Dante's Divine Comedy. It is not surprising to me that I failed in my attempts to incorporate text into my creation. I hadn't connected with what was needed to sustain my expression beyond the excitement of manifesting my imagination in this way. Looking back on it, I had little awareness of how the 'Before' of my everyday life was impacting on my creative choices. I didn't have sufficient breadth of experience or understanding to go beyond the initial 'flash'.

Whether or not you are responsible for creating your own scripts or scenes, experience shows that the only person you the actor can rely upon is yourself. Not the director, nor fellow players. Sometimes not even the playwright or script writer and certainly not the harassed assistant stage manager who sets out your props on stage... or doesn't. If you can learn to inhabit the full stature of yourself in all areas of your life, you will have an infinite source of capability to rely upon.

'Before' encompasses everything that goes on in your life, noticed and unnoticed. The following chapters are a resource of notes and reflections to draw on as you build your personal foundation of self-reliance and awareness to ensure the bubbles keep bubbling in life and performance.