

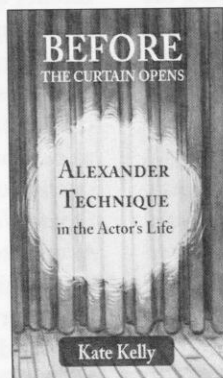
BEFORE the CURTAIN OPENS

Kate Kelly

Before The Curtain Opens: Alexander Technique in the Actor's Life, by Kate Kelly. Triarchy Press, 2018.

IN RECENT YEARS, more and more books have been written about the Alexander Technique in relation to many topics, such as pain relief, living a more mindful and connected life, and artistic practices such as dance, music, and singing.

Kate Kelly has added her unique voice to the mix with her book *Before the Curtain Opens: Alexander Technique in the Actor's Life*. She writes about the Technique in a very engaging and accessible way, explaining abstract concepts in a down-to-earth style that is practical and insightful. While she has geared the book towards applying the Technique to the actor's process, the book is useful for anyone who finds themselves standing in front of an audience, as well as teachers of voice, movement, and the Alexander Technique who are looking for new inspiration and instruction on applying the Technique to working with actors. Kate is always referring back to "the creative impulse" that lives inside us all and tells us how the Alexander Technique helps the performer hone and channel that impulse.



Early in the book, Kate shares powerful, transformational experiences she had as a young actress that brought out new energies in her and her acting work. While these energies pushed aside her habits, the habits remained, primarily because she had never gotten to know them or interact with them directly. The Technique gave her the training to get to know her habits. As she applied her new awareness to other tools and techniques of the actor's craft, she found a new life and freedom in her work. In this way, Kate illustrates how the Technique can help actors bring all the various aspects of their training together into a coordinated whole. She explains that the Technique does not have to be practiced in isolation or in place of other methods. Truly interdisciplinary and collaborative, it can be integrated into any activity or methodology to enhance the benefits for the performer.

How does the Technique accomplish this? The secret ingredient, Kate tells us, is that you aren't learning anything new (surprise!). Rather, you are awakening "inherent knowledge in the senses and sinews of the self." Learning about the inherent structure and support of the body provides the foundation for everything else. She takes us through F.M. Alexander's discovery that if he could stop his own habit by "refusing to cooperate with the (habitual) impulse" and then subtly bring about a reorganization of his head, neck, and back muscles, his voice improved. The Technique teaches actors a process through which they can learn to do less and get more.

Key to this concept is how we perceive and understand support. In the chapter entitled "The Thinking Spine," Kate discusses how thought and feeling have an impact on the spine because impulses

run up and down the spinal cord. Paying attention to your spine can "feed your impulse to bring forward something completely different in [a] role, understanding or life."

I have sometimes found that acting teachers get confused or hung up on some of the terms used in the Technique, for example "inhibition," which can sound contradictory to the actor's process. Generally speaking, actors are trying to shed their inhibitions so they can follow impulses to live more spontaneous lives onstage. To stop an impulse might seem counter-productive to the actor's process, but Kate tells us emphatically not to mistake inhibition for suppression. "The energy of the impulse still remains and is not repressed. There is simply time created for a choice to be made as to how that energy is to be used." Kate calls this space and time "Starbursts of Stopping" and tells us our energetic system can be just as enlivened in a moment of stillness as that of a hummingbird's, which flaps its wings 50 times a second to stay still enough in the air to drink nectar from a flower. Stopping and listening carry a lot of inherent energy and can help connect actors to the present moment—if they are willing to listen and harness their energy.

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There are many practical applications presented, examined, and illustrated in this text. Walking, breathing, and using the voice are all topics covered in books on the Technique, yet Kate brings her own fresh voice and vast experience to unpacking these familiar activities. She shares her training in Roy Hart voice work and collaborations with singing teachers. She also gives abundant tips on how to use the Technique

to break habitual patterns around lifting, sitting, climbing stairs, and crossing arms and legs. For actors and acting teachers, there are tips for learning lines, being in the audition room, and for ways to navigate 21st century activities such as texting, gaming, and working at the computer. It is in all these activities of our daily lives that we are truly attending to our preparation "before the curtain opens" if we approach them with an Alexander Technique awareness. As Kate says, "When you focus on 'before' and apply Alexander principles to your thinking and approach, these activities will no longer be a source of unnoticed tension for you." — GEORDIE MACMINN

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