

*Confessions of a Movement Consultant*

by Meade Andrews

Over the course of a 28-year career in theatre and dance performance in Washington, DC, I worked in both educational and professional venues, shifting back and forth through a variety of roles: performer, teacher, choreographer, director, Alexander Technique teacher, improvisation teacher, acting coach, and movement consultant. My favorite roles during these years in theatre production were in the realm of ensemble development and movement consulting.

The culmination of my career in Washington, DC, occurred at the Studio Theatre, one of the finest professional theatres in the area, where I taught, performed, and worked on productions for 12 years. The production was *Prometheus*, the Greek tragedy by Aeschylus. The Artistic Director of the Studio Theatre, Joy Zinoman, a consummate expert in the realm of Greek Theatre, was the director of the production. She chose to assemble a 16-woman chorus for the production, and created six choral sequences of stunning variety in form. I was engaged as movement coach and Alexander Technique teacher.

The main focus of my work on *Prometheus* was to rehearse and refine the choral choreography created by the director, and to prepare the actresses to master the physical requirements for each of the choral odes. The chorus was composed of 16 highly diverse women, each uniquely beautiful in face and form. My task was to unify them, into one body, one Self, as perfect in poise as the Winged Victory, the Nike of Samothrace. I worked with them in three specific areas: building a warm-up sequence tailored to the needs of the production, unifying the ensemble and focusing on precision work for each of the six choral odes, and using the Alexander Technique as the basis for all aspects of the work in rehearsal and performance.

Each rehearsal was divided into three sections. I began by introducing a series of warm-up sequences based on Alexander principles, focusing on the use of the whole, three-dimensional body, the part always in relation to the whole, and the dynamic use of directionality within the space of the body and the space of the room. I developed movement sequences based on the head/spine/pelvis connection to provide full support of the limbs, the hand-scapula connection to warm-up the arms, and the sit-bone/heel connection to warm-up the legs. I paid particular attention to the leg warm-



*The Chorus*

ups because the chorus was required to move through an array of floor patterns and movement combinations, requiring them to constantly alternate between standing, kneeling, sitting, falling, walking in circles, diagonals or straight lines, and ascending and descending a series of highly elevated steps. Their legs had to be both strong and supple to master these ever-changing patterns.

Following the warm-up, I introduced movement sequences designed to unify the ensemble and prepare them for the specific choreography for each choral ode. I began the ensemble work with a variety of walking patterns, using a drum to provide the rhythmic underpinning for the work. The explorations were designed to create a committed visual focus for the group, to assist them with unison movement, and to develop their skill in mastering constant directional changes in space. These skills were then specifically tailored to the unique choreography of the six contrasting choral odes. We worked extensively with each of the choral odes, polishing and burnishing the precise details of each theatrical moment.

The choral odes often required vibrant stillness in the head/torso connection, with precise articulation of the head, arms, and legs. At this point, I began to work more extensively with hands-on individual Alexander work for each actress. (Fortunately, many of them had previously experienced the Alexander Technique.) I particularly explored the dynamic poise of the head/torso connection, and assisted them with their understanding of the primary control and the anatomy of the atlanto-occipital joint.

The chorus was often asked to remain still yet alert in their bodies while looking up or down; they accomplished this task with aplomb and beauty due to the Alexander Technique. In essence, the Alexander Technique became a “through-line” for all of the choral work, positively influencing the artistic shaping of the most precise gestural movements, as well as the larger movements in space. Heightening their awareness through the Alexander process allowed the actresses to refine and master the intricate timing of each choral ode, and to gauge the appropriate amount of effort needed for each moment of movement. They became highly sensitive to each other, the set, and the rhythmic cues of the music; by opening night, we had accomplished our goal of total group unity, in mind, body, speech, movement, and spirit.

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Simultaneously, I was assisting each of the principle actors, exploring an amazing array of issues through which I could test the versatility of Alexander's discoveries. My first challenge was the character of Father Ocean, who walked on stilts. The actor had never attempted such a feat, and approached the extended height of his stature with some trepidation. I first worked with him without the stilts, introducing him to Alexander's sequence of directional thinking, especially in relation to walking. He understood quickly, and his legs became freer and more synergistically related to his whole coordination. Then he put on the stilts. At first, he tightened his whole body, and held his breath to sustain balance. Then I directed him toward poise again (I was on a ladder), and advised him to include the stilts as an extension of his legs. Suddenly, he



*Prometheus*

expression. Gradually, over several sessions focusing primarily on the Alexander Technique, he began to gain his full, three-dimensional stature, and his confidence soared. He began to allow the process of awareness, inhibition, and direction to connect with his own acting process. His pattern of interference lessened to such a degree that he began to allow vitality, energy, and sensation to course through his whole body. And that night in rehearsal he was "on fire" with inspiration, presence, and creative choice-making in the moment. He was able to continue on this path during

subsequent rehearsals, and in performance.

Working on *Prometheus* was truly an amazing and rewarding journey. I was thrilled to observe the depth and breadth of Alexander's principles and discoveries in action, as the performers threaded their way through extensive physical and mental challenges in their creative process. There were many issues to solve, and many specific details to be mastered before unity could be found, both for individual actors and for the chorus of 16 women. Three months of work in rehearsal and performance resulted in a production that was a masterful tribute to FM Alexander, and his great legacy as a pioneer in the heightened understanding of the exquisite use of the self.

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experienced the kinesthetic sensation of extremely long legs that connected to the floor via the bottom of the stilts (his "feet"). The touch of his new feet to the floor then activated an upward and outward flow direction through his whole body. Guided by the new-found clarity of his thinking, he quickly mastered the stilts in rehearsal and performance.

Next, I guided the actress playing Io, a character who had been cursed by Zeus and transformed into a cow. Small stilts with hooves were built for her to lean upon with her arms and hands, taking her into an almost horizontal position via folding her leg joints. She immediately noticed stress in her shoulder joints, neck, and whole back. As I introduced her to the Alexander Technique, she began to sense a more even distribution of weight throughout her entire body. From there, I taught her "monkey," and she realized that she did not have to put all of her weight onto her arms and the front of her body. Her neck, head, and back connection was integrated, rendering her arms lighter and freer, and she could guide her movement more easily through her center of gravity and into her legs via monkey. She created an elegant, yet grounded cow.

Finally, I worked with a young and relatively inexperienced actor on the role of Heracles, a type of superman, "save the day" character. The actor was tall and beautifully proportioned, yet he lacked confidence and experienced himself as small, awkward, and disconnected from his body. He had recently been accepted into the acting program at Juilliard, and was feeling both excited and fearful about his future. He was literally frozen between these two responses: wanting to succeed, yet afraid to try anything new or to risk allowing the necessary freedom in his instrument for full self-

*Meade Andrews first studied the Alexander Technique with Rachel Zahn in 1974, continued with Charlotte Coe and Marjorie Barstow, and trained with Martha and Bruce Fertman from 1982-86. In 1986, she left her position as Director of the Dance Program at American University in Washington, DC, to teach the Alexander Technique full-time. She subsequently studied with Rivka Cohen, Susan Martin Cohen, and Saura Bartner, and joined AmSAT in 1992. She completed Jessica Wolf's Art of Breathing course in 2003. Meade teaches in the Graduate Acting Program at Florida Atlantic University, and maintains a private practice in Boca Raton, Florida.*

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