



Keynote Address for  
The Alexander Technique and Performing Arts Conference  
Cathy Madden, Keynote Speaker  
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Victorian College of the Arts  
The University of Melbourne  
Melbourne, Australia

(At the beginning of the talk, all the attendees received a Keynote supply kit that included a shiny metallic bow tie, a very tiny top hat and the slightly revised words to Top Hat, White Tie and Tails. Robert Schubert played a clarinet fanfare that included the melody to Top Hat White Tie and Tails. Madden entered wearing a fanciful Top Hat, Tails, and a multicolored bow tie.)

Thank you Tony Smith for inviting me to present and the whole ATPA committee --Carina Thomas, Robert Schubert, Fiona Bryant, Rinske Ginsberg for making it possible for all of us to be here tonight. I would also like to acknowledge the Victorian College of the Arts, and The University of Melbourne and all of our sponsors. And the many volunteers who are making this conference move so smoothly.

Please put on your bow ties—and keep those words to the song at hand--you'll need them later.

Sometimes when I am teaching the story of the Alexander Technique, I start out with,

“It’s all Shakespeare’s Fault that we are here”.

What is more true is

*We are here today because F.M. Alexander was a performer.*

If he hadn’t needed to use his voice in an extra-ordinary way, he would never have lost his voice. Even if he occasionally lost his voice in everyday life, he would probably not have been all that concerned. We are here because he had a need for the extra-ordinary.

We are all here tonight because we care about the extra-ordinary –some of us are performers ourselves; others of us teach, coach or direct performers. After I found out how much the Alexander Technique helped me *while* I was performing; after I found out how much more range of choice and creativity I had when I applied this work *directly in the moment of performance*, I decided to learn to teach it. My whole impulse to learn to teach it revolved around the performing arts –“Performers work so hard to be their best at something that they care about. They deserve to know this work!

In the western origins of theatre, the singer / dancer / actor was selected by the community to put on the “god mask” to represent something extra-ordinary that the community needed. When Tony Smith and I were talking about this conference, he said that the Alexander Technique has helped him come to understand the magnificence of being a human being. From our deepest origins, performing artists hold up our magnificence before us, in silly and sublime ways, moving us towards our highest potentials.

What a piece of work is a man!  
how noble in reason!  
how infinite in faculty!  
in form and moving how express and admirable!  
in action how like an angel!  
in apprehension how like a god!  
the beauty of the world!  
the paragon of animals!  
*(Hamlet, Act II, scene ii)*

F. M. Alexander. Performing Shakespeare. Solo.

Ben Kingsley, when discussing Shakespearean acting said: “ I find more and more when I am onstage that naturalistic acting, that is totally reported nature, is inappropriate. Because onstage one is in an environment that is by its very nature highly organized and concentrated.”<sup>1</sup> There are many magnificent ways to use the Alexander in what Kingsley is referring to as natural—that is, totally reported nature. Those of us in this room have a special interest in the environment that is highly organized and concentrated. And I would add, highly skilled.

We are the heralds, professional messengers to our communities, with the message:

**Teaching performers is about applying this work to highly skilled excitation in service of the extra-ordinary.**

And this technique is very good at it!

*Madden puts on her top hat and invites the group to do the same and everyone sings together--*

I'm puttin' on my top hat  
Tyin' up my bright tie  
Brushin' off my tails

The confusion we face –both within our profession and from those considering us from outside of it--is that this process we teach is a process. The process can be used effectively to many ends. Our profession will be more fully understood in the performance field when we clearly define how our process can be in service of the organized, temporally and spatially concentrated, highly skilled arena of the performing arts.

*The Alexander Technique functions to optimize excitation and execution congruent with the needs of the art form.*

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<sup>1</sup> Barton, John. *Playing Shakespeare: An Actor's Guide*. (Kindle Location 503)

Unfortunately, not everyone understands this. Some seem to equate the AT with calmness and even lack of muscle tone. All movements not strictly necessary are deemed “too much”.

One student at the University told me she was afraid to study the Alexander Technique because her friends told her it would turn her into a wet noodle.

At the Alexander Technique Congress in Brighton, I eagerly went to watch an actor talk about how he used the Alexander Technique in performing Shakespeare. He did a fantastic monologue. Then he said, now I’ll use the Alexander Technique. I expected more—what I got was less, so much less that it was unintelligible. Then he said, “Wasn’t that better?” It was one of the few times I have wanted to throw eggs at an actor onstage.

More recently, a singer who has been working for years to rediscover what I am going to call the “pep” factor in her live performance saw an old video of herself singing in high school. She said she was lively and moving and really involved in what she was doing. She was pulling down in some places, but she was lively. Sadly, she identified the “damping down” of her original performance energy with her first exposures to the Alexander Technique.

When my Alexander Technique teacher, a dancer herself, was teaching performers and they got less involved, less excited about what they were doing, she’d ask them to do it again and

“Put a little Pep into It”

*Madden again invites everyone to put their hats on and everyone sings. Madden also dances.*

I’m dudein up the AT,  
“Peppin up my student”  
Polishin’ her art

Polishing’ her art—building Skills!  
What a gold mine of information we have for performers who want to build skills.

If we can say to a violinist, that he is in great coordination until the moment he needs to use his little finger to stop a string, we have given him the information he needs to move to the next level of technical proficiency.

If we see that every time an actor makes a beat change, she tightens head/spine, then we know how to help her integrate AT into the heart of her performance.

If we can hear or see that a singer pulls his tongue back for a particular vowel sound, he will be so excited because now he has a way to approach that vowel differently.

If we can free a dancer from using her arms to widen, she will balance easily and her extensions extend exponentially.

Skill Development is so much more effective when a performer knows the Alexander Technique.

As heralds for the performer, we know that what I am going to call “general AT directions” are incomplete for the fine-tuning of specialized skills. Those of us who are specialists in performance, who have the skills to see and hear fine detail, and analyze performance needs, can integrate the Alexander Technique more deeply into the arts.

What doesn’t work so well is when some of those “general AT directions” actually get in the way of the performer—when the end seems to become Using the Alexander Technique to do the Alexander Technique rather than using the Alexander Technique to perform. If we get the word out to our profession that this distinction is important, maybe we can avoid some of what I call my AT “horror” stories—

The flamenco dancer who was told by her AT teacher not to raise her shoulders and had had back ache ever since –she has to raise her arms.

Or the dancer who was in tears in my studio because the way that someone taught her “monkey” had limited the range of movement of her legs and her career for years!

Or the fiddle player who had been taking Alexander lessons for a year but wasn’t allowed to play her fiddle in her lesson yet because she wasn’t good enough at the Alexander Technique.

What these bits of misinformation do is most unfortunate for the individual performer—but it also hurts our reputation in the larger world. When performers hear something that doesn’t make sense for their needs, they dismiss us. I have heard of institutions that won’t let an AT teacher “darken their door” because they have had an experience that the AT is inflexible or inaccurate.

And that is a shame because we have so much to offer. From A.R. Alexander—“The hallmarks of the Alexander Technique are creativity, spontaneity and adaptability to change.” Performing artists’ desire for all these very attributes brings a sparkle to their eyes! More than that, we have a value that I call the “gold” of the Alexander Technique—We teach something that can be initiated and renewed seamlessly while we are performing.

Look around—

This room of people  
This amazing gathering of people who responded to the invitation to spend a  
few days dedicated to understanding  
and meeting the needs of performers

is exciting  
and extra-ordinary  
and **necessary**.

*Madden again invites everyone to put top hats on and sing as she sings and dances.*

I'm steppin' out, my dear  
To breathe an atmosphere that simply reeks with class  
And I trust that you'll enjoy our star when we step on the gas

This Conference for Alexander Technique and the Performing Arts is a call to our profession –teaching performers is a specialized skill within our community. It is an exciting moment for this—the burgeoning field of neuroscience is giving us an opportunity to explain this work differently. That scientists are drawing attention to the mechanisms of neuroplasticity, the lifelong ability of the brain to reorganize neural pathways based on new experiences, has given all Alexander Technique teachers, indeed all educators, new ways to explain what we do.

We are being asked to become more skilled in how we describe our teaching. For those of you who were at the Congress in Lugano, this is something scientist Kevan Martin also expressed –we have an opportunity to further develop the way we present our work. I wonder if This Conference is the beginning of creating a new field--a recognition of a specialty in the field of the Alexander Technique—a specialty that requires the development of skills specific to being able to analyze the “conditions of use present” of the performing arts.

The discussions we have here, the experiences we create for each other are our moments for development. I wonder if, ultimately, what we do here will lead to specialized courses for training schools or post –graduate training that is specific to the performing arts.

We are Alexander Technique heralds for the extra-ordinary.

And, to celebrate performance- we have our own song and dance to learn—  
*Madden teaches a few steps for the song and dance and then everyone sings and dances together:*

I'm puttin' on my top hat  
Tyin' up my bright tie

Brushin' off my tails

I'm dudein' up my AT  
Peppin' up my student  
Polishin' her art

I'm steppin' out, my dear  
To breathe an atmosphere that simply reeks with class  
And I trust that you'll enjoy our star when we step on the gas

For I'll be there  
Puttin' on my top hat  
Tying' up my bright tie  
Dancin' in my tails

*(Irving Berlin, with slight alterations for the ATPA Conference)*