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## Alexander Technique and Aerial Dance- A Workshop Blueprint

Dancing at its most basic level can be understood as the intentional, directed ebb and flow of muscular tension in the body. As dancers, we are at our best when our bodies are free from extraneous muscular tension and therefore able to adapt to the rigors of a moment, only to then let go of that effort and prepare for the next. So often, however, this is not the case, especially for those of us who have trained in one dance form for an extended period of time. Over time, our bodies hold onto tension and this tension becomes the new normal state from which our bodies operate. This habitual tension, as well as habitual ideas about how we occupy our bodies, move through space, and ideas about strength and weakness can all negatively impact our ability to gain a successful understanding of our physical selves, which is so important to safe, fun and beautiful work on the single point trapeze. This workshop will introduce participants to some fundamental principles of the Alexander Technique and apply those principles to elementary mounts, hangs and other vocabulary on the single point trapeze. The AT principles we will be looking at in a two-hour workshop are: Inhibition & Direction, and Primary/Secondary spirals in the body.

### **Welcome:**

Establish that the Alexander Technique is most often communicated through hands-on feedback. Ask for consent from the participants to be touched at the back of the neck, top of the head, the back, possibly the collar bones, and tops of the hip bones. Reassure students that it is okay to say “yes” or “no” to any or all touch and it is also alright for them to change their minds at any point in the workshop.

**Active Rest:** Active rest with a body scan to begin. Starting at the top of the head, moving down to the toes, inhibiting our habitual holdings and letting our body do less, bringing our nervous system into a more receptive state and noticing the affect this undoing has on the breath. Use the image of lying on a warm beach, feeling each body part contacting the warm sand (or surface of their choice if sand makes them itchy) and imagining the imprint left in the sand by their bodies. Then ask the participants to think about walking up to a trapeze and getting on with their mount of choice. Ask them to then notice if any tensions have returned to their bodies, or if they disrupted the natural flow of breath just by thinking about engaging with the apparatus. Ask them to undo any returned tension, and show them how to get up without disrupting this rested state.

Clarify that the point of this was two fold: To bring our nervous systems into a more relaxed and ready state, and to illustrate the strong psycho-physical connection which governs our unconscious actions and responses.

**Inhibition & Direction:** Stopping yourself doing the wrong things so that the right thing can do itself.

- Establishing the location and action of the AO joint. Small exploration of the AO joint as the initiator of movement. (Rolling down through the spine, initiation into walking)
- Checking in with freedom of the neck, which means allowing for the natural curve of the cervical spine in order to free the muscles of the neck.
- When the neck is free, the head can float up an slightly forward at the AO joint (a place to think forward and up can be where their front fontinel was when they were babies, and this place can be easily located on the skull). When the spinal column is relieved of the

full weight of the head, the spine can decompress and elongate through the middle of the body.

- Have participants approach the trapeze without touching it, paying attention to where they might feel tension or disruption in their bodies. Can they ask this tension to release? Help them get specific (Let go of the tension in my right shoulder, etc.) Practice inhibition when making first contact with the apparatus: are you making the same choice each time out of habit? Can you inhibit your first desire to make contact, pause, and make a different, intentional choice?
- Directing through Primary Control exploration: have participants partner up. One partner will have an improvised dance while their partner gently places a hand on their head (forward and up placement) as sensory feedback. Those dancing should be encouraged to move however they wish or feel compelled to move (i.e. not all movement has to be sequential with the head and tail initiating, nor should they keep their head upright) but should strive to maintain an awareness of directing through the head neck and spine wherever their improvisation takes them. After several minutes, ask the partners to remove their hand and have the improvisors keep dancing as though their partner's hand was still there. Switch partners.
- Now ask the participants to approach the trapeze and pull taffy with the same intention as the previous improvisation exercise. Apply the same principles to one arm planning, and hip hangs over the bar, getting participants used to the idea of directing in different planes and in different relationships to gravity.

## Primary and Secondary Curves

- On the floor, take participants through an exploration of Primary curves by having them kneel and begin by finding their neutral spine by checking in with their Primary Control relationship. First, have participants lead with their head into a fetal position, upper body folded over their knees. This puts the spine into a deep Primary curve. Primary curves are found by moving the body towards the navel. Encourage participants to find this sense of folding and enveloping not just from head to tail, but from around the sides and across the diagonals of the torso (from shoulder to opposite hip). Have them practice moving in and out of this deep primary by having them look towards their navel to feel how this increased curve initiates a rolling up in the spine.
- Next, have participants move into this deep Primary position and out of by moving through a Secondary curve (extension) of the spine. Have them lead with the eyes, looking out, up the nearest wall and to the ceiling. Have them do this slowly so that they can sense the effects of stretch and length on the spine. Once they feel their sits bones and pelvis reach a neutral place underneath them, have them think towards Primary, thus arriving back in their neutral spines, ready to begin the cycle again.
- Now from the deep primary curve, have participants explore how moving into secondary extension over one shoulder or another creates a spiral through the torso which can take the whole body into motion. Have students explore this slowly to feel how one diagonal in the body moves more deeply into Primary curve while the other diagonal moves into Secondary extensions. Once they have found this slowly, let them discover how this idea can take them into rolling easily across the floor.
- Have students explore the ideas of Primary and Secondary curves and spirals of the spine on the trapeze, now. Have them mount the trapeze and come to a hip hang. Have

them take moment to think into primary and feel how the stability of the position increases. Now utilizing the idea of secondary spirals, have the participants spiral to seated on the trapeze. Now have them spiral back to hip hang utilizing the idea of Primary curves/spirals. Have them try applying these principles to Russian Roll up, half hip hang, and other low flying vocabulary.

- On the ground, Have students consider how these ideas of Primary and Secondary curves and spirals apply to other parts of the body (arms and legs, but make sure to include the shoulder girdle when discovering arm spirals). Have students pay particular attention to how, when the arms and legs are allowed to spiral fully in one direction or another, that a place of stability is achieved without the need to engage extra-muscular effort.
- Now, have students come to seated on the trapeze and play with the ideas of arms and legs in primary and secondary spirals in seated vine (secondary spiral), knee hang in preparation for standing (primary), Archer (legs in Primary, arms in secondary) and others.

#### **Conclusion and discussion:**

- Conclude the session with some time for discussion and reflection. Ask students to reflect upon their experience of intentionally slowing down in order to better observe what their body was doing. Did they discover a discrepancy between what they *assumed* their bodies were doing and what their bodies were *actually* doing? This is a common occurrence in students who are new to AT and Alexander called this “faulty kinesthetic awareness”. What concepts did the participants find most helpful? Are there other areas in their individual lives where these principles might be applied to the betterment of their psycho-physical well-being? Invite any other observations.