

Rosslyn McLeod's Contributions to ATed Research

Dust jacket copy of *The Philosopher's Stone*, a collection of personal accounts of having lessons with Alexander edited by JMO Fischer (1998), states:

F. Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) started to develop the Alexander Technique in the early 1890s in Australia. He discovered the profound influence which the relationship of the head, neck and back has on the use of the self. He showed how this relationship can be employed in order to develop conscious control of one's use in daily life.

He began to teach his technique in Australia in 1894, and then moved to London where he taught from 1904.

The blurb implies that Alexander had substantially overcome his vocal problems by 1894. Doing so, Alexander recollected in the "Evolution of a Technique" Chapter of *The Use of the Self* (1932), led to the development of the education method known as the Alexander Technique (AT). The 1894 date is actually a new time-line to account for when Alexander came to the insights upon AT is based. In her account training with Alexander in the 1930s, for example, Lulie Westfeldt (1964) stated that Alexander's "search lasted nine years," sustained by his strong "urge...to be a great actor" (p. 56). Westfeldt's account was widely accepted by AT teachers.

A crack in the previous timeline assumption occurred when Australian AT teacher and musician Rosslyn McLeod (1987) first reported on her digs through Australian libraries for primary historical records pertaining to Alexander's years in Australia. She found a trove of newspaper articles, reviews, advertisements, and pamphlets on Alexander's 1890s and early 1900s performing and teaching practice. Those archives confirm that Alexander's career began most favorably. As early as 1890, reviews lauded his amateur performances (McLeod, 1987 p. 7). By 1892, he had sufficiently mastered his craft to win the Victorian Amateur [Elocution] Competitions Association competition (McLeod, 1995 p. 40). By 1894, he embarked on a career as professional elocutionist and elocution teacher (ibid). Concerning the AT method, however, the archives suggest a development history that differs in important ways from what Alexander narrated in *The Use of the Self* (1932).

McLeod (1995) revealed that Alexander studied elocution with Fred W. Hill, son of Thomas Padmore Hill, Australia's leading elocution teacher (p. 40), suggesting the

relationship between Hill and Alexander resembled an apprenticeship. In *The Use of the Self*, however, Alexander failed to acknowledge Hill as his teacher, instead claiming that he had lessons in "dramatic expression and interpretation" from "the late Mr James Cathcart [who was] at one time a member of Mr Charles Kean's Company" (p. 33). Cathcart, Alexander wrote, was "not...pleased with [his] way of standing and walking [and] would say to [him] from time to time, 'take hold of the floor with your feet'" (ibid). However much he tried, Alexander reported, he was unable to follow Cathcart's instruction; his vocal condition worsened, leading him solve the problem without outside help.

It is possible that Alexander's confused Cathcart with Hill in 1932; memory easily distorts details. No research, for instance, has confirmed that Cathcart was a member of Edmund Kean's company as Alexander recalled. Since Alexander warmly praised Hill's instruction in the mid-1890s, however, it seems unlikely that Hill's instruction worsened his condition. Alexander could have studied with Cathcart when performing in Melbourne as an amateur actor circa 1890. McLeod (1995) notes that Cathcart "had been performing in Australia since the 1860s [and] was giving Dramatic Interpretation and Elocution lessons in Melbourne" in the 1890s (p. 55). Her reports, however, cite no interaction between Alexander and Cathcart until 1898 when the highly regarded Cathcart performed on the same bill as Alexander (ibid). If Alexander studied with Cathcart during or after the period in which they performed together, it suggests that the interchange with Cathcart recorded in *The Use of the Self* was subsequent to 1898.

McLeod doesn't try to resolve this issue. A feature of her reportage is that when research data contradicts AT historical canon, she neither withholds it nor attempts to explain it away. Though admiring Alexander and AT, she lets the information speak for itself.

In *Frederick Matthias Alexander: A Family History*, Jackie Evans (2001), great, great, granddaughter of Matthias Alexander (Alexander's grandfather), confirms details that McLeod first brought out. Evans failed to cite McLeod but does confirm her insight that Alexander was essentially an apprentice to Hill. Based on unpublished paper of Alexander, Evans reports that Alexander "went to live with his elocution teacher Fred Hill and his family" in 1892 and that "Fred Hill proved to be a most able teacher, friend and supporter" (p. 96).

In spite of her access to private letters and unpublished articles, however, Evans relies only on *The Use of the Self* to tell the story of the development of AT. For instance, in the paragraph on Alexander's instruction with Hill, she writes:

However, throughout this period, his horaseness continued to be a problem for him and he discussed the matter with Dr. Bage regularly. By now FM was certain that he, himself, must be doing something that was exacerbating his condition. He considered that by study and observation he could find the source of his difficulty, and a detailed appraisal of this early work is given in his third book *The Use of the Self*. After months of self analysis of his own use, he thought, he had had solved his problem and he decided that he could pursue a career as a reciter. (Evans, 2001 p. 96).

While questions about AT development are unresolved, McLeod's path-breaking 1987 *Alexander Review* article provides us with picture of Alexander's performing — lets us better see Alexander, a real person, interacting with audiences and reviewers. In *Up From Down Under* (1995), she shows that fellow performers like Robert Young and Edith Tasca-Page greatly admired him too and that he energetically and effectively promoted the teaching practices of his family, fellow actors, and his own. What he advertised teaching then, however, seems to barely resemble modern AT. In 1902, for instance, he announced founding the "Sydney Dramatic and Operatic Conservatorium [with] Mr. F.M. Alexander, Director" (p. 84). Here, McLeod notes, Alexander promoted himself as teaching the "Delsarte system as applied to dramatic expression expression, deportment, gestures, and vocalisation" (p. 85), continuing to advertise Delsarte classes through 1903 (p. 86), though ceasing to promote the Conservatorium after 1902.

ATeducationresearch.com is happy to publish an online version of this important 1987 paper — and look forward to more works from her. -- E.B., July 9, 2003

Sources

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F .M. - Critiques, "Consumption," Commentaries*

ALEXANDER has written in the *Use of the Self* a full and fascinating account of the evolution of his technique, of his difficulties and the remarkable way in which he overcame them. He tells us little about his life during this period but there are many records still in existence and readers may find the following both entertaining and interesting.

Alexander never lost his love of the theatre. As his teaching practice grew in Sydney and Melbourne, he was still giving some stage performances, both plays and solo recitations.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of July 19th, 1900 gives a few lines to "Elocutionary Recital."

At the instance of a few friends who are specially interested in the cultivation and development of the human voice as taught by Mr. F.M. Alexander, that gentleman yesterday gave an entertaining exhibition at the Equitable Hall.

Amongst the specialities were his elocutionary rendering of Sydney Carton, The Poor Sister at the Guillotine, Kissing Cup and Race and Death of Poor Jo.

Three months later on September 3rd 1900, the *Sydney Morning Herald* gave larger space to another F.M. recitation. Obviously by his choice of poems, F.M. had a special liking for certain pieces in his repertoire.

Mr. F.M. Alexander's Recital

The large audience which assembled at the Centenary Hall on Saturday night was treated to a refined and exhilarating entertainment embracing concert platform and drawing-room pianoforte and vocal items. For more than two and a half hours five performers, exclusive of Mr. Ernest Truman, the accompanist, maintained the interest and continually evoked the applause of the company. The chief interest perhaps centered round Mr. F.M. Alexander, who is already well known in this city as an elocutionist of ability. His introductory number was the recital of Shiel's celebrated defense of the Irish people, a piece of glowing oratory which for its fine language and emotional effect is a favorite recitation of those not only who have reached a conspicuous place amongst elocutionists, but who are entering the ranks with ambitions. His hearers regis-

*. McLeod, R. (1987). F.M. [Alexander]: Critiques, "consumption," commentaries. *The Alexander Review*, 2(3), 7-11

tered their approval of Mr. Alexander's delivery of the piece by encoring him, whereupon he imparted a lot of interest and infused with much good humor an old piece "The Country Squire." The second recitation selected was Dickens' saddening description of Sydney Carton and the poor seamstress at the guillotine. Mr. Alexander evidenced a keen appreciation of the gloomy situation, but his talents are better suited to pieces either more declamatory or more vivacious. For instance, in his succeeding appearance he told the humorous story of "The Clock Mystery" in a distinctly clever way, and later in the evening further demonstrated his knowledge of the whole art of elocution and the lights and shades necessary to dramatic effect when he recited "Kissing Cup's Race." His fervid narration of the nerve-straining struggle for the winning post between Kissing Cup and the only horse she had to fear was admirable, and when, with the conclusion of the story, the tension on the audience was relaxed, Mr. Alexander was rewarded with a fully won outburst of applause.

The following year F.M. staged performances of the Merchant of Venice. *The Sydney Morning Herald* of June 28th, 1901 reported:

The Merchant of Venice

It is no light task to undertake an amateur representation of *The Merchant of Venice* under any circumstances, but the responsibility becomes weightier than ever upon the great stage of a playhouse like Theatre Royal, to which, moreover, the associations of the best professional work cling closely. Mr. F.M. Alexander may, however, be fairly congratulated upon the measure of success attendant upon his first staging of the Shakespearean comedy last night. The performance went more smoothly than had been anticipated, and under Mr. D'Orsay Ogden's competent stage direction a most commendable despatch was the order of the evening. The inclusion of the little comedy plot with the ring, which is frequently omitted, had been announced, and therefore old playgoers were quite prepared to find that some other portion of the play had been sacrificed to make room for it. Some such course is necessary to meet the conditions of modern time — limits, and Mr. Alexander accordingly cut down the casket scene to the point where Bassanio makes his fateful but fortunate choice. On highly important good quality distinguished the representation, inasmuch as all the amateurs who appeared were easily audible, and they all knew their lines. The enjoyment of the audience was largely due to this fact, for it has sometimes happened in the past that in both respects fault-finding has been necessary. Mr. Alexander had evidently insisted that all concerned should feel their responsibility in the direction indicated, and as rich and picturesque costumes had been secured, whilst the general staging was in every way suitable, the cordiality with which the whole was received by the large audience can easily be understood.

Interest centered naturally in Mr. F.M. Alexander's appearance as Shylock. The well-known elocutionist threw a good deal of individuality into the part, dispensing with the crutched stick that traditionally belongs to it, giving the user a less venerable aspect than is now customary, and approximating the character more nearly to the Ghetto Jew than to the noble Oriental figure upon which many artists mold their conceptions. Mr. Alexander was especially successful in the fawning manner and wheezy, chuckling laugh, alternation with furious outbursts of rage, in the scene with Antonio and Bassanio. Last night

the actor unfortunately started the Tubal scene through nervousness in too high a key, so that the final frenzy became much too melodramatic; but his scholarly elocution carried him through the trial scene, where, it may be added, all concerned were at their best. Miss Edith Tasca-Page here looked remarkably well in the picturesque scarlet robes of the young counselor, and an excellent delivery of the "mercy speech" and the final judgment won her hearty applause. Mr. Alexander also had many recalls during the evening.

Apart from drama activities and his teaching practice, Alexander had, over a period of time, established valuable links with leading members of the medical profession. Foremost of these in Sydney was his association with Dr. Stewart McKay.

William John Stewart McKay graduated from Sydney University B. Sc. in 1889 and M.B., M.Ch., in 1891, in which year he registered as a medical practitioner. He undertook further studies in Paris and Berlin. He worked as assistant to the great Lawson Tait in London and was his biographer (*Lawson Tait, His Life and Work*: Balliere, Tindall and Cox, 1922). Dr. McKay was a House Surgeon at the Soho Hospital for Women and corresponded for many years with Professor George Grey Turner of Hammersmith Hospital after he returned to Australia where he joined the staff of the Sydney and Lewisham Hospitals. Thus when Alexander went to London in 1904 armed with his letters of reference those from Dr. McKay would have carried considerable weight.

The two men met when they were both in their early thirties, and they shared not only an interest in the study of human beings but also a passionate interest in horses and the racecourse. Dr. McKay was an owner, and among the books he wrote are *Racehorses of Australia* (with Lang and Austin 1922) and *The Evolution of the Endurance, Speed and Staying Power of the Racehorse*, (1932).

It is a tragedy that many of Dr. McKay's books and much of his correspondence and papers were lost in the 1940's as a result of a flood in northern New South Wales.

On December 12th, 1903, the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* newspaper published an article by F.M. on "The Prevention and Cure of Consumption." To take such a step as to seek this type of public prominence for his methods meant that F.M. had developed some confidence in his work. In those days tuberculosis was known as consumption and was a much feared disease. A report in the *Melbourne Age* of March 2nd, 1887 (just before F.M. arrived in that city) states:

A meeting is to be held next Tuesday evening in the Town Hall to take into consideration the advisability of erecting a Consumptive Hospital. The proposal to establish such an institution received an invitation at the last general meeting of governors of the Melbourne Hospital, when it was contended that a separate hospital for consumptive patients was not only desirable from a medical point of view, but that the withdrawal of this class of patients would render a number of beds available for general patients whose ailments were of a less prolonged character.

After F.M. had written his article on Consumption he showed it to his friend Dr. McKay for consideration. Dr. McKay recommended it be published in a daily newspaper so the manuscript was sent to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and duly published a week later. This incident illustrated the high regard Dr. McKay obviously had for F.M.'s work.

In 1904 F.M. went to London. Though he never returned to Australia, he kept up correspondence with various people, and newspapers here did not entirely forget him. A letter written in New York City on 7th February 1924 by F.M. to Dr Leeper of Melbourne includes the following:

I have instructed Methuen's in London to send you a copy of my book *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, which was published there on the 30th of January. Please honor me by accepting it.

No doubt Alexander remembered with appreciation Dr. Leeper's efforts to have the Technique accepted in the Victorian education system. (See Dr. Leeper article for details).

On February 1st 1949, the *Melbourne Sun* published a photo of F.M. and Sir Stafford Cripps with a short article about F.M.'s 80th birthday party. On February 16th, the *Bulletin*, a well-known Australian weekly, printed a paragraph about F.M. under the section personal items, and lamented the fact that he was better known abroad than in the land of his birth. (The fact that even in 1949 there were still no teachers of the Technique in Australia would not have helped matter.) The *Bulletin* paragraph makes somewhat amusing reading:

Who's Who in Australia contains no mention of Frederick Matthias Alexander, though this Australian is famous in more high places than dozens of celebrities included in the volume. The teacher of a doctrine peculiarly his own, his pupils run into thousands, with some of the most eminent Englishmen among them. Sir Henry Irving thanked Alexander for his stage deportment, and Stafford

Cripps gives him the credit for his platform manner. Born in Melbourne in 1869, Alexander started with a mining company in the Apple Island, graduated to a secretaryship in Melbourne and then became an elocutionist. In the meantime he had been working out a technique for co-ordinating thought with action which he took first to Sydney, and then to England and U.S. His methods engineered a deal of philosophy, and books have been written about them. Early disciples are sometimes met with who are as fanatical towards him as if he were an Indian yogi, though actually there is nothing mystical about his teaching. Former pupils recently gave him a party on his 80th birthday.

Here is a final newspaper reference, from the *London New Chronicle* of February 26th 1953. In the section People Worth Meeting, there is a drawing of F.M. and interview with him by Ronald Searle and Kaye Webb. Erika Whittaker was interested to see this drawing as it shows the furniture in F.M.'s room exactly as she remembers it.

The interview summarizes F.M.'s upbringing, early acting career, vocal problems and their solution, and his subsequent teaching life. The essence of F.M.'s gift to mankind is contained in the following words, quoted from the *News Chronicle* article:



When Alexander set out to teach the world his methods sixty years ago, he could offer no instructions in ten easy lessons..."although now I pass on in four weeks what it took me ten years to discover," but he was ablaze with enthusiasm and the conviction that the greatest thing that could be given to humanity was that their use of themselves should be changed.