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AN ACTOR PREPARES

David Hyde Pierce

Keynote Address · July 29, 2018

INTRODUCTION

THE STAGE GOES DARK and a clip from the television show *Frasier* begins to play from the episode “Three Valentines.” The character Niles Crane, played by David Hyde Pierce, is getting ready for a Valentine’s Day date at his brother’s apartment. In six minutes and forty-eight seconds, the action goes from a perfectly groomed Niles sitting on the sofa, noticing a slight crease discrepancy in his trousers, to Niles passed out and partly nude in the hallway, the apartment on fire, and Eddie, the Jack Russell terrier, happily eating the gourmet dinner Niles has prepared. The clip is a mini tour de force of physical comedy with no dialogue other than Eddie’s barking and the “Overture” to Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* “date music” lilting in the background as the smoke alarm blares.

There is wild applause, and David Hyde Pierce takes the stage. He looks tired and is sporting a blond, Wyatt Earp-style handlebar mustache for his current role as Horace Vandergelder in the Broadway revival of *Hello Dolly!* with Bette Midler. He bears no resemblance to the neurotic psychotherapist Niles Crane. His fatigue is due to his tremendous generosity: when he originally committed to speak, he was scheduled to be on hiatus. Instead, he is in the middle of an eight-show-a-week run in New York. He easily could have canceled, but rather, made the flight to Chicago and let his understudy take the Sunday matinée.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DAVID HYDE PIERCE

THANK YOU! HELLO ALEXANDRIANS! I am so, so glad and grateful to be here with you at the first night of your congress. A congress we can believe in... [Laughter and applause.]

I actually have very little to say, so I’m going to talk a long time. [Laughter.] No, really, I could say what I’m going to say to you in just a couple of words, but that didn’t seem to be in the spirit of a keynote address, so I’m going to talk on.

The clip you just saw was from the television show *Frasier*, and that was me, or that was my younger self, at least, in the suit. Moose the dog was playing Eddie the dog, and I played it for you because of the tragic reality that not everyone knows who I am. And because I am not an expert, I’m not an Alexander Technician; I’m not a scientist or a doctor. I’m here to talk to you as a performer, so I wanted you to know what I perform and how I do it. So, that was it, and I have to say, in re-watching it, I noticed that the character Niles, when the scene starts out, he’s a fairly upright sort of fellow and as the tension mounts, he gets more and more compacted.

Now, we shot that in 1998, long before I knew anything about the Alexander Technique, but obviously, some part of my tiny, actor brain understood about the mind-body connection and the flight-or-fight response. So, I guess all I needed was a teacher, and I found her, in 2013, and her name is Beret Arcaya. [Applause.]

I discovered Beret in the same way F.M. Alexander discovered

his Technique: I was acting onstage and I lost my voice. I was doing a play by Christopher Durang called *Vanya and Sonja and Masha and Spike* on Broadway, and the character I played, Vanya, was a very soft-spoken kind of docile guy. But then, at the very end of the play, he had this blistering, five-minute, crazy, emotional, screaming rant, and every night I would do that speech, and I would lose my voice by the end of it. My voice would be in tatters, but I never thought about it, because first of all, I thought it made some kind of sense

given the trajectory of the role, and also, my voice was always back for the next performance, so it didn’t seem to be an issue. Also, I figured the shredding of my voice meant that I was really “acting.” [Scattered laughter.]

So, I was having a voice lesson with my then-coach Victoria Clark—great, great Broadway actress and singer—and I was talking to her about this, and I said, “Yeah, I lose my voice during the show, and I do have a kind of lingering hoarseness now, and also, a pain in my neck.” She gave me a look as if I had said, “and also, I’m possessed by Satan,” and then she looked like she was possessed by Satan, and she said, “You have to see Beret.”

The deal was that Vicky had had a similar situation. She had been performing in the musical *Sister Act*, and for the first time in her career, she had lost her voice and had actually had to miss performances. She was playing a Mother Superior in a convent and with fantastical Alexandrian irony, she was undone by her habit... [Laughter and applause.]

[An aside.] Interesting how people divided on that; some people liked it, some didn’t.

So, her wimple weighed too much and bowed her head down and put her head and neck out of alignment leading to neck pain and loss of voice, and Vicky’s Alexander teacher had saved her—so now, it was my turn.

And, full disclosure, I’m in love with Beret Arcaya.

Aside from collaborating for five years now in Alexander, she is a dear friend and a trusted advisor. She is my experience of the Alexander Technique, and she is also—for those of you who know her—she is one of a kind. Though we are all one of a kind, she is “one of a kinder.”

Our first meetings I remember very vividly. She was kind and gracious and she knew my work, and she spoke of it, and of course, I had the laying-on of hands, which, if you’ve had that from a great Alexander teacher, you never forget. And she said something that stopped me cold.

She said, “You know, as an actor, you’re doing too much.”

At this point, I was about 54 years old, hopefully in the middle of a career that had started in my mid-twenties, and by then I had become known. And I certainly prided myself on being a minimalist as an actor. My idols were Buster Keaton and Alec Guinness. Even in my film career, I felt, at that point, I had the gift of taking a small role and making it smaller... [Laughter.]

So, the idea that I was doing too much threw me for a loop. But



it also opened up a world of possibility that I had never considered, as did her subsequent explanation of how life and fear and gravity and habit conspire to cloud our perceptions and our proprioceptions of the world and of ourselves.

You know all the exercises we did—crazy, inane, mundane things like sitting down, lying down, standing up, monkeying around... [Laughter.] Each of these seemingly simple activities booby trapped with opportunities to do too much and filled with opportunities to not.

And Beret would, paradoxically, reassure me by saying, “You don’t know.” That’s helpful advice. [Laughter.] “You don’t know.” Or, she would toss me between the Scylla and Charybdis of “not this” and “not that.” [Laughter.]

I will say this: we did, to paraphrase Polonius, “through indirects, find directions out.”

You can guess the outcome. I was able to do the speech, but the surprise to me and to my castmates was the effortless flow of emotion and spontaneity and connection that came into my acting, not just in that speech, but throughout the play, and not just onstage, but in my life. It has been said that the eyes are the window of the soul, but I’m not so sure. I think it might just be the neck. [Applause.]

Speaking of which, Beret is not only a fine Alexander teacher; she is also a beautiful singer and a great voice coach... Can I just stop and say, by the way, that to speak in front of a roomful of Alexander teachers...

Beret’s partner Michael asked me, “Do you ever get nervous speaking in front of groups?”

Not usually.

But when I know I’m going to have the paper down here [gestures down to podium] and I’m going to have to... [He cranes his head up to look at the audience.] Excuse me... [He goes into a very nice monkey.] [Laughter and applause.]

So, I went from doing plays and into this current revival of *Hello Dolly!* on Broadway, and we began to apply the lessons that I had learned, and the somatic awareness I had developed, to the famously elusive inner workings of the game of singing. And once again, in a microcosm of the discoveries I had made before, there was a whole tiny world of tension and release and misplaced energy and unexpected freedom in the whole singing area.

And, of course, I want to emphasize as I pull out these sections about the voice and talk about them that Beret always worked on the entire mammal. It is all connected, and the number of times I have found that something in here [gestures to his throat] wasn’t doing something because of another part that rhymes with lungs... [Laughter.]

So, I never want to ignore that, and I just want to give you one concrete example: Occasionally when I was vocalizing in a lesson, Beret would cite singing teacher Garcia’s [Manuel Garcia, Jr. 1805–1906] suggestion of allowing a slight hint of an internal smile to happen, and it somehow, ineffably, enhances the voice. And I have been able to play with that allowing of a smile in my lessons and in the laboratory of doing a musical eight times a week for a year, and I am finally now coming to experience that direction—how the thought of a smile generates the muscular energy that allows the jaw to fall free and the voice to bloom.

I mentioned before, with Buster Keaton and Alec Guinness, that deadpan is my main expression, but because this is an internal smile, it didn’t dislodge my deadpan! [Laughter.] It just changed it to more of what I would call an “alivepan.” [Laughter.] And beyond its effect

on my singing and beyond its effects onstage, that thought of a smile is a signifier of how Alexander has changed my relationship to myself, to my profession, and to life itself.

When I play the piano now, my accuracy improves when I free my neck and head. When I practice yoga, I think the smile and the whole practice flows. And by the way, my very excellent yoga teacher is now studying with Beret, as are many of my former castmates.

I find it impossible to tell people about the Alexander Technique, but they see the example, they see what happened, and they have to know—and that’s probably the best way of all.

And, of course, the great paradox of Alexander is that all this focus on myself has given me a greater appreciation and awareness of the people and the world around me.

This has led to some very odd things happening, like last winter, when I was walking home from a lesson. It was cold, it was snowing, and there was an elderly man walking next to me, and he hit a patch of ice, and his legs went out from under him. But he didn’t fall—because I’d caught him, without thinking or even [taking] the time for thought. I steadied him. We went on our way.

Two weeks ago, I was coming out of the subway at Times Square, and a young woman caught her heel on the stairs going past me, and she stumbled, but she didn’t fall. She said, “Thank you,” and I looked down and realized I’d caught her, without thinking.

So, Alexander is making me into some kind of pedestrian ninja. [Laughter.] Crazy, crazy, crazy!

An unseen smile, sitting in a chair, thinking a thought—that such small things can have such power is the great lesson that Beret and this Technique continue to teach me. The Alexander Technique, to me, makes the ineffable, effable. Which is why I sometimes call it “that effing Alexander Technique...” [Laughter.]

This work is changing me in a fundamental way. One of the things I have noticed is that I now hear voices. In a situation like this, I hear Beret’s voice saying, “You don’t know.” I sometimes will be singing onstage, and I will hear my larynx voice say, “You don’t know, but I do: Drop your chin!”

As I said at the beginning of this talk, I could really say what I want to say to you in a couple of words. In fact, there are two words since I have begun this practice that have started to float into my consciousness periodically, and the longer I’ve been doing it, the more often they appear. They’ve become an inner monologue, or a mantra; they arise frequently and spontaneously, when I am alone, or with people; sometimes I speak them, sometimes I don’t, but they are always felt, and I will say them now to Beret and to FM and to all of you tonight: Thank you.

PRESENTATION

MODERATOR: David Hyde Pierce is a long-time supporter of the Alzheimer’s Association. On behalf of the International Congress, he is presented with a donation in his honor.

DAVID HYDE PIERCE: When dealing with someone who has dementia, the important thing is to meet them where they are. That is what Beret and all of you do. Thank you.

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—Transcribed by Genoa Davidson
& approved by David Hyde Pierce

GENOA DAVIDSON (Alexander Technique Center of Albuquerque, 2018) trained with Karen DeWig and is an actor, writer, and teacher. She lives in Norman, Oklahoma, with her partner, Joe Alberti.



Photograph of David Hyde Pierce by Joan Marcus