Onstage Synergy: Integrative Alexander Technique Practice for Performing Artists.
By Cathy Madden.

This text is unique among the myriad of publications on the Alexander Technique and mind-body connection in the performing arts. Author Cathy Madden, an actor herself, combines her many years of teaching AT with her vast experience in coaching performing artists of all disciplines in developing a new and truly integrative practice that she names on stage synergy. In this book, she provides a thoughtful, step-by-step approach to achieving this synergy, in order to engage one's audience while caring for oneself.

The book is divided into three sections. Part one introduces performing artists to Alexander Technique. It focuses on the head-neck-spine relationship that is the hallmark of the method, but using some different language than some teachers—and Alexander himself—chose. Terms such as inhibition, mechanical advantage, and more are not to be found here. Rather, Madden states, “to COORDINATE is to consciously ask yourself to cooperate with the organizing movement—the relationship between head and spine in movement—in service of what you want to do” (p27). The rest of the section focuses on the development of this skill.

The second part is devoted to development of performance practices that promote psychophysical unity, melding the Alexander Technique with performance skills. Madden focuses here on the performer’s awareness of everything in his or her environment, as well as the desire to perform and the goal of doing so. She emphasizes the importance of choice to continue or change almost anything about what the performer is doing at any point in the process, as a “kindness to oneself.” Her unique approach to stage fright is also part of this section.

Part three deals with the integration of the Alexander Technique with performance skills to create Onstage Synergy, which Madden describes as a holistic combination of the former two that is more powerful than either alone. She gives several templates for doing this, encouraging the reader to experiment with many, or create one of his or her own.

Throughout, Madden illuminates her text with quotes from her students on their use of Alexander Technique in a variety of performance situations. Near the end of each chapter, she provides a summary of key learnings and questions for the reader to consider. She ends with a progressive “AT rehearsal” of a simple and specific everyday task not related to the arts. This exercise threads its way through the entire text, with the addition of a step each chapter, so that by the end, the reader may complete the task with Onstage Synergy.

This text is much more thoughtful and scholarly than most “how-to” books. Though not strictly evidence-based, Madden builds her approach on rich experience and empirical observation. She supports her work with that of many scholars, including Antonio Damasio, John Dewey, and Mikhail Cziksentmihalyi. The book is elegantly written and interesting, and the process is so well delineated that it is of practical use for performing artists of all disciplines. Throughout, Madden encourages a refreshingly inquisitive, almost playful approach to the work. Although I am already quite familiar with Alexander Technique, the book has caused me to rethink many aspects of my own violin teaching.

There are no illustrations in the book; Madden believes that they may create “static misimpressions” (p4). However, Alexander Technique is normally taught hands-on, especially near the beginning of study, for students to truly experience what the teacher is talking about. It may be difficult for readers who are new to the approach to grasp the concept of “COORDINATE” in a meaningful and helpful way without visual aids of some kind (Madden does provide a list of these).

As Madden states in her introduction, this book would be very helpful to “anyone who skillfully engages with an audience” (p3) as well as teachers of both the arts and Alexander Technique. It certainly earns a high ranking on my class and workshop resource list.

JUDY PALAC, DMA
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI
palac@msu.edu

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