

## INTERVIEW WITH ALAN QUESTEL

*By Tommie St. Cyr*

**Tommie St. Cyr is an Assistant Professor of Movement, Voice and Acting. She has taught Feldenkrais movement to the students in the University of Utah's Actor Training Program for the past 3 years. She also teaches Feldenkrais to the general student body, including athletes.**

**Alan Questel teaches world-wide in *Feldenkrais Professional Training Program*. An actor before becoming interested in Feldenkrais work, Alan worked and toured with Jerzy Grotowski and Paul Sills. He taught Feldenkrais for Actors for several years at the New Actors Workshop in New York, run by Mike Nichols, George Morrison and Paul Sills. Alan's specialty is applying the Feldenkrais work to actor training and has taught numerous workshops for actors at major universities and around the world. Alan is the directors of the upcoming *Feldenkrais Professional Training Program* beginning in September 2008, in Malmö, Sweden.**

*Reprinted from ATME: ASSOCIATION OF THEATRE MOVEMENT EDUCATORS*

A Publication of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators  
January, 1995-Volume 3, Number 1  
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**St. Cyr:** I've always loved a particular quote of Dr. Feldenkrais, "If you know what you are doing, you can do what you want".

**Alan:** He said it often and it is one of the underlying tenets of our work. It may sound like an obvious and simple statement but if we pose it as questions "Do you know what you want?" and "Do you know what you are doing?" we find that they are not so easily answered. This statement, or questions, are the source of the inquiry that Moshe spent his whole life developing.

**St. Cyr:** So what is the Feldenkrais Method and how did it evolve?

**Alan:** Moshe Feldenkrais was a physicist with degrees in engineering and one of the first Westerners to earn a black belt in Judo. Due to his own infirmities he began a lifelong investigation as to how to improve our ability to function. He incorporated anything that he felt would enhance our human potential to improve. He was interested in learning and how through learning we could become more of who we imagined ourselves to be. He looked at the processes that occur in us as human beings. He saw that four things were always going on - thinking, feeling (on the emotional level), sensing (taking in and processing information), and moving. He believed that a shift in anyone of these aspects had the potential to produce a shift in the whole self, thereby bringing about change. We know that to change how we think is very complicated, as is to change how we feel or sense. At best it's a lengthy process. He chose movement as the medium for this process because it is

the most immediate and concrete. When we change how we move we carry it with us right away and it puts us in the present. This is one of the most essential things about the F.M., that through movement and the use of our attention we can bring about dramatic shifts in how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived. This is done via two modalities, *Awareness Through Movement*® (ATM) and *Functional Integration*®(FI).

ATM are series of movement sequences that people are led through verbally. They affect changes in breathing, posture, flexibility, range of motion, shifts in self-image, reduction of pain, increased vitality and overall brings one's attention back to the process of what we are actually doing. FI is a hands on technique, it is like a tailor made ATM lesson, where the practitioner uses their hands to guide you to a new sense and use of yourself.

**St. Cyr:** How does this relate to the actor?

Alan: In many ways. On the most basic level we are tuning the actor's instrument, that is their body and voice. Every time one does a Feldenkrais lesson they have the chance to broaden how they experience themselves. This is a felt experience that is represented in how one moves. Internally the actor feels different and is often perceived as looking different from the world.

**St. Cyr:** How does this actually happen?

**Alan:** Well you're sitting right now. If I ask you "What are you aware of in sitting?" You may say "My back against the chair or my buttocks on the seat or my feet on the floor." But if I ask you "What is the back of your neck doing? Or your chest? or your shins? Your attention goes to these places and you either say "It's doing this" or "I have no idea what it is doing."

But the fact is these parts are always involved in everything you do; your whole self is involved in everything you do, but we only sense certain parts of ourselves in our actions and its generally the same parts. By using our attention through systematic movement sequences we can learn to expand our perception of ourselves. Now if we bring this idea into movement and actions it allows for different kinds of communications to take place. If you got out of your chair to get a drink, it would be different than if you got out of the chair because you realized you sat in something, which would be different than how you would get up if you saw a child about to hurt themselves.

**St. Cyr:** So you are creating different motivations for the actor?

**Alan:** Yes, but this example I just gave you is just a small piece of the pie, just one aspect of our approach. We are creating a different experience for the actor so that they may choose how to respond depending on the many factors that define the context they are in and relative to what they or the director want communicated. Not only is the motivation or intention changed but along with that there is a change in how the action is initiated and this says something different to an audience. And this is most important, because an audience wants to be surprised. They know its Tom Cruise or Meryl Streep or their friend or daughter up there acting, but they wait for that moment when they can forget the actor's name and are taken into the story. At that moment as an audience we give up some sense our ourselves and we are literally transported into another experience of ourselves. But if the actor always gets out of a chair the same way we are always reminded of who they are

and who we are.

**St. Cyr:** This is already quite a bit more than tuning the instrument.

**Alan:** I said that was the most basic application of this work. Any actor could go to any *Feldenkrais Practitioner* in the world and benefit from this point of view. But that is just the tip of the iceberg, in addition to increasing one's sensitivity and awareness there are Feldenkrais lessons that teach actions as complex as shoulder rolls or standing on your head.

**St. Cyr:** So if you had a to learn a particular ability for a role this might be one of the means to learn it faster?

**Alan:** Absolutely, but there is more. To my mind the real value of teaching any subject is that the student leaves with some sense as to how to carry on their own. So then our job as teachers is to guide the student towards their own means to carry on in the world. In today's world many vocations require certain amounts of information or a particular level of skill in order to be proficient. But much more is required in the arts. In the arts we must be able to sustain our creativity. To teach others how to do this is quite a task. The structure of a Feldenkrais lesson parallels the creative process in that I am going somewhere but I don't know how I am going to get there. For example, when I was a young actor I would get a part in a play and I would know just how this character should be played. I would already have some image of who this character should be and I would spend a great deal of the rehearsal process trying to leap into the image I held in my head. What I learned, and it took a long time, was that I needed to go through a process that would allow for this character to develop. As this happened I was able to portray my characters with all of the depth and fullness that I first imagined, but it was never as I had initially imagined.

What I had no frame of reference for, when I began, was the process. And this is implicit in our culture and our educational system. So our students try their best to be creative, and many are, but they often have no means to replicate what they do in other contexts because they don't know how they did it and do not have a safe place to practice this. This is what is offered in a Feldenkrais lesson. Most often the outcome of the lesson is unknown to the participants so their attention is maintained in the process and in the present, I might add. I know of very few systems that allows for this kind of experience. Here we are actually practicing living in the unknown, which is what is required to create something new. This is not what most of us want. We want to know, we are brought up to know and we want to be right.

In fact our whole educational system is based on "knowing " something. We spend much of our life trying to know, planning and predicting. But this is only because culturally we do not have the means to sustain the feelings of not knowing, of staying within a process with our attention primarily on the process rather than the result. We literally need to practice this. In Awareness Through Movement, the student does just that, i.e., he or she practices creating comfort and new levels of awareness and action in a context of not knowing what is going to happen next.

**St. Cyr:** So how do emotions fit into all of this?

**Alan:** This is one of the most common questions asked by student actors. I often see their attention is fixed on the idea of feelings. Now I don't want to discourage their interests but I do want to broaden their perspective. If we go back to what Feldenkrais explored as to what goes on in a human being, we can see that emotions or feelings have a prominent place. But when we ask the question, what are emotions? We enter a labyrinth of discourse and research that takes us further from our initial intent. So I ask a different question. How do you know when you are having an emotion? What is it that tells you that you are feeling something?

**St. Cyr:** That's a funny question. How do people answer it?

**Alan:** In all kinds of ways, but rarely do they come to a simple explanation.

**St. Cyr:** Which is?

**Alan:** We know what we are feeling through sensations. When we are in love or when we are angry or when we are hurt or when we feel happy, this is all recognizable through sensations. Now the funny thing about sensations is that not only can we have them differentiated from emotions, but sensations can also describe other states such as tired, comfortable, readiness, etc.

If we develop our ability to sense and make sense out of our sensations, we have a better chance of recognizing what we are feeling and expressing it more accurately. I have seen this kind of development, both personally and in others, through the *Feldenkrais Method*. As adults we have had to inhibit our ability to feel ourselves. This began at an early age when we were told to sit still or not get our clothes dirty. Then we began to restrict our use and attention of ourselves relative to some image we picked for ourselves and what we ended up with is a fairly limited repertoire of sensation. But luckily the ability to perceive and express a wide palette of sensations is dormant and waiting to be awakened in us. But not awakened with a loud clap of thunder or someone telling us what we should be feeling. But rather through a gentle arousal of the many possibilities of what we can feel.

**St. Cyr:** So through an immersion in sensation our emotions are better communicated.

**Alan:** I think that WE are better communicated through an immersion in sensory process. That is the whole person, their thoughts, feelings, sensations and movements. What you bring up is at the center of what an actor must be able to do and that is communicate. So if that is the end we go towards then the question must be how do we become better communicators.

Our movements, gestures, postures tell more of the truth than our words. To have the facility to be congruent (or intentionally incongruent) with our words and movements presents a better chance of being understood and communicating what we want. You know Feldenkrais worked for several years with Peter Brook and company in Paris, Brook said about Moshe "The very base of the work of every actor is his own body-and nothing is more concrete...In him (Feldenkrais) at long last I have met someone with a scientific formation who possesses a global mastery of his subject. He has studied the body in movement with a precision that I found nowhere else."

**St. Cyr:** So many actors and teachers work with the Alexander Technique. What do you

think of its value for actors today?

**Alan:** I am often asked to explain the difference between Feldenkrais and Alexander and of course I have a strong bias. I think they serve different purposes and speak to different people. One thing that Alexander affords the actor is a way of moving that communicates high status. It is extremely useful for any kind of period piece and can help eliminate some of the movement habits that some actors have. Some students prefer it as it tends to be more specific about what the outcome should look and feel like. What can sometimes happen, through studying Alexander, is a student may take on a posture that fulfills certain criteria, but then they tend to look and move the same in all of the roles they play. And as I said earlier I think there is tremendous value in not knowing an outcome and discovering something new and unknown about ourselves.

**St Cyr:** Have you found many applications of the *Feldenkrais Method* in relation to voice training.

**Alan:** I've thought about this a lot. Of course any training with the body has an affect on the voice. But we seem to be able to change (and maintain the change) in how we move, more easily than making a sustainable change in our vocal apparatus. I think the more common approach to our movement and voice is through exercise. It works for some people some of the time, but it doesn't really teach a whole lot about how we do something. We repeat the exercises until, hopefully, something changes. More often we simply take on or superimpose new habits that eventually are just as limiting as our original vocal habits. Now what I like to think about is "What is this thing we call a voice? What is it used for? How do I come to understand it more fully?" You know the koan, if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? Well I am not going to presume to answer this, but to me it evokes the question of listening. After all, our voice is used to communicate, and to communicate it needs to be heard, which means there needs to be a listener. Where most communications fall short is in the lack of clarity in the intention behind it. Which means we can train and exercise our voice forever but unless we connect what we say to what we intend to mean, and connect that to the world around us, then we are only having a conversation with ourselves.

**St. Cyr:** So how does the Feldenkrais Method help us with this?

**Alan:** Throughout the whole method is the idea that we can more and more clearly and accurately fulfill our intentions in actions. With our body, our voice, our whole self, we can interact with the world in ways that lead to new actions. But to do this we need to learn to listen more effectively.

What we do with our voice needs to be listened to, so to me it is obvious that as we train our voice we also need to train how we listen. I experimented with this with a few groups and found that as the students became more capable of listening, both to themselves and others, their communications became clearer and the quality of their voices became more expressive and easier to hear and listen to .

**St. Cyr:** So what is the major focus of your interest right now in doing Feldenkrais with actors?

**Alan:** I'm fascinated with the idea of falling and all of its ramifications. I've actually been

interested with the relationship between falling and creativity for over 20 years. Falling says so much about our experiences: falling in love, falling apart, falling down, fear of falling, falling asleep, falling out of favor, falling all over yourself. I think it is a metaphor for many areas in our lives and as we explore our capacity to fall through the *Feldenkrais Method* we begin to understand something deeper about ourselves. Falling certainly brings to mind the idea of taking risks and this is an essential ingredient to being creative.

**St. Cyr:** But how do we over ride our fear of falling?

**Alan:** Good question! I think a story might explain it. Years ago Ben Gurion came to see Moshe. They were good friends in Israel. Ben Gurion said that he had always wanted to be able to stand on his head and asked Moshe to teach him. Moshe agreed and a week later Ben Gurion came to see Moshe and told him that everyone is saying he should not do such a thing, that he is 70 years old and could have a stroke and die. Moshe thought about for a while and said "So what are you worried about, you'll be dead, I'll be the man who killed Ben Gurion." They had a good laugh and proceeded to explore standing on the head. But here is the interesting part, What is it that prevents a person from standing on their head?

**St. Cyr:** Their fear of falling?

**Alan:** Right, so what Moshe did was to teach Ben Gurion all of the possible ways of falling before he let him come onto his head. Once Ben Gurion knew how to fall, the action of standing on his head became obvious. By slowly and gently learning to engage in an area that provokes both physical and emotional risk, we can learn to more effectively take risks, move ourselves forward towards new challenges and recover more quickly from the ones that didn't work out so well. So this brings us back to your favorite quote from Moshe, "If you know what you are doing, you can do what you want."