

A Conversation with Paris Ballet Master Wayne Byars

by Clara Gibson Maxwell

Clara Gibson Marshall wrote about going home to teach in West Virginia in the February 2006 ExChange (vol.14, no.1). Now living in Paris, she finds that her ballet teacher, Wayne Byars, loves the Alexander Technique, while she loves ballet. Celebrating her ten years as an ATI-certified teacher, Clara interviews Wayne about their shared enthusiasms.

Slaying the Dragon

Clara Gibson Maxwell: How did you come across the Alexander Technique and how do you feel it makes you a better ballet teacher?

Wayne Byars: Like many dance teachers, I often find myself feeling like the hero in the story where he is trying to slay the many-headed dragon. You cut off one head triumphantly only to discover another one quickly growing in its place. This just goes on and on. Finally, you realize the only way you are actually going to kill the dragon is to put a dagger straight through the dragon's heart.

It would be the same story when I was teaching ballet. I'd correct one thing; and then something else would go—the hand, the foot. And I'd always get frustrated with that, looking for that. What *is* that? Where is the heart? How can I find a way to get to the essence of what becomes a whole body experience, and not just putting one little body part on top of another?

Of course, I'd heard of the Alexander Technique for many, many years. And I would ask people about it. "Well, what is it?" I'd ask. And they would answer, "Well, you know, you go, and you sit in a chair and you stand up." And I would say, "Well, you *pay* for that? I can do that at home!" I spent many years looking at the parallel techniques. I got deep into Iyengar yoga. I studied Pilates, Gyrotonics, meditation, and Feldenkrais technique. All of them were interesting. All of them were fascinating. But I always felt something was missing. Always, I'd joke with my friends how what my students needed was not a dance teacher but a psychiatrist.

Even though it was just a joke, in a way it was nevertheless pointing at the truth. Many of these techniques do not address the mental aspect going on in the body. Many of these techniques do not point directly at this.

Serendipity and Synchronicity

Then something very serendipitous occurred. Maybe it was synchronicity. One of my students became an Alexander Technique instructor. I had not seen her for years. We met on the bus. And I'd say, "I'll give it a try." And I went for an appointment. Yet I, who had always been working so hard on my body, had regularly been doing two hours of yoga daily, was talking about realignment and about relaxation, and using the body correctly, was in a lot of pain. I was stiff.

After my first lesson, the pain was all gone. And I thought, "Something really interesting is happening here." Then I found a wonderful DVD by an Alexander teacher at the Juilliard School named Jane Kosminsky. She had done a lot of work applying Alexander Technique to dance; all forms of dance. I had an opportunity to speak and work with her in New York City. I was determined to work this into my classes.

The big question is that I am *not* a certified Alexander Technique teacher. I am a practitioner. I cannot stop my ballet teaching to do a three-year certification program. I called teachers and discussed this dilemma at length with them. I asked, practically speaking, what is possible for me to do?

I cannot do *hands-on* work. This takes years of training. But what I was encouraged to do was to share the

Alexander Technique principles. I can teach applying the principles of inhibition, direction, and primary control in my ballet classes. This I started doing, and continue to do so. The results were immediate, extraordinary. I have been teaching for twenty-five years. I have taught over 20,000 ballet classes. And I have never seen my students — be they beginners or professionals — make so much progress in so little time.

So, I have become the standard-bearer, in the Parisian dance community, for the Alexander Technique. And I cry it from the rooftops to get the information out there to dancers who need the Alexander Technique so much.

Clara: Among the reasons this interview thrills me is that this year is the tenth anniversary of my certification in the Alexander Technique. The question for me is always the same. How can I continue to live the Alexander Technique principles? This is a big looming question for me.

While I was a philosophy student at Harvard University, I got the call to be a dancer. It was really just that, and I wanted to move to New York City to embark on my vocation as a dancer before my 21st birthday. Both my parents and my Harvard dance teacher thought I was cracking up. They thought I was having a nervous breakdown. They all strongly felt that you do not drop out of school and you do not walk away from a Harvard education. But I was interested in a different caliber of education. As a means of finding a compromise, I agreed to consult a therapist, but only if the course was psychophysical. I knew a little bit about Alexander Technique at the time, and I'd gotten the idea in my head that what Frederick Mathias Alexander had fallen into was precisely the reality of psychophysical unity. My teacher in Cambridge who started me off in Alexander Technique was Tommy Thompson.

Tommy educated me about Alexander and John Dewey. Thanks to Tommy Thompson, I read John Dewey about education, aesthetics, and the primacy of experience in the artistic act. Tommy raised my consciousness about all this; Dewey's books were all out of print at that time and the Harvard Philosophy Department found my interest in Dewey laughably antiquated and outmoded. Time has proved them wrong. Tommy Thompson also loaned me his copy of Tielhard de Chardin. This got me interested in what consisted of a spiritual life in a secular world. Eventually, in my 25th reunion class, I was profiled (alongside Caroline Kennedy) as one of the graduates who had realized the life they envisioned for the future while at Harvard, despite my having dropped out. But my real education in Cambridge was studying with Tommy Thompson.

I really enjoy your class in particular, because going through the rigmarole of certification, I discovered that being an actual certified Alexander teacher was very different from what I envisioned it would be. It was like an anniversary cake. I found out that being an Alexander teacher, well, it was kind of icing on the cake. But the cake was life. In retrospect, I had a misconception that studying to become an Alexander teacher was learning a vocation. I was wrong. Life is the vocation. Alexander Technique is a practice, irrespective of teaching officially, that brings meaning to . . .

Wayne: [*finishing Clara's thought for her*] . . . it enhances all different aspects of your life. This is what is so exciting about the Alexander Technique.

In Activity, and Sneaking in the Back Door

Clara: And so for me, coming to ballet class and looking forward to it was and is — well, when you're using the Technique applied to a specific task you are *in activity* — you have the principle of the Alexander work and then you apply it to *something*, a task. This is why, when you find a description of the Alexander Technique, for example, on the ATI website, it is described as a *pre-technique*. So, what was amazing to me when I took your ballet class — which is, after all, kind of secondary to my main purpose, which is being a contemporary choreographer — was an opportunity for me to practice what I always assumed would be happening only in a training course. But it was applied to something else. Suddenly, it seemed like “Oh, God! We are going to jump now and this is something *I cannot do.*” And Wayne, you did this very sneaky thing. Suddenly, by obliging me to

concentrate on something else, that stuff started to work — jumps, I mean, for example — not because we were working on it, but because we were talking about something else in ballet class.

Wayne: Yeah, I was kind of sneaky about it. I think your experience is a related one. I have seen a lot of people who have different issues with classical technique. I have succeeded not by talking about positions but about thinking about movement in a new way. All of a sudden, they are doing beautiful ballet work. I've gotten them to do it when usually I would have met with resistance. So, I've gotten the result I wanted through the back door — not only the heart of the dragon but the back door! But how was I to get people to understand this? For example, here you are using your Alexander Technique in my ballet class: you walk, you dance, there is no difference — there is no difference between your life and your dancing.

Always, you are using your body in the same way. The “directions” in Alexander are the same in life or in a dance studio, except, in the ballet studio, the stimuli are bigger. Our reactions are bigger., but our directions are the same. Whether we are eating at the dinner table or we are at the computer. So, what is really exciting is that I feel that I am not only helping my students with their dancing, I am helping them with everyday life.

Ballet and Alexander Technique

Clara: I would like you to talk about how Alexander Technique applies specifically to ballet.

Wayne: As far as I'm concerned, it is a perfect match.

Let me go back to the Alexander Technique teacher with whom I work, my student, Luiga Riva. She is a contemporary dancer-choreographer. Running into her while on the bus she was busy with her certification course in London. She'd say, “Wayne, you just would not believe it; it is incredible! It is *everything* you were supposed to do in ballet.” And I was, “Yeah, yeah. Maybe I should look into that some day.”

So, where do I start? Head moving forward and up, for example. Back lengthening and widening, legs and arms moving away from the torso. That is what ballet teachers have been trying to get across to their students for centuries. The particularity about using it in Alexander language is that it is so simple to understand. Perhaps the missing element I needed as a ballet teacher was the use of the mind to bring about change.

Of course, the one thing that all ballet teachers are up against is people's bad habits. We ballet teachers are always working against people's bad habits because ballet involves so much repetition over so many years. Bad habits accumulate over so many years. So, all of a sudden I found a cohesive system to help people recognize their bad habits and to correct them. And I have found nothing else — be it Pilates, Feldenkrais, yoga — I've tried them all. They are *all* interesting. But not one of them provides a technique to help people change bad habits.

What happens in a dance class is that the stimuli are just stronger. So, when using our bodies poorly in our daily life, the music and the dance and the people watching in a dance class, we have all these poor habits as in daily life but they become even bigger. Being able in these circumstances to use Alexander directions and the principle of inhibition, deep changes occur in the ballet student, provided, of course, they are willing to change!

Contemporary Dancers Taking Ballet

Clara: One of the joys of taking your ballet class is watching the contemporary choreographers. Perhaps, I am only speaking from my own experience. Yet I can read it in the faces. I am far more relaxed about being in a vulnerable place to allow myself to learn something new. They seem to be, too.

There is a prickly argument that a great deal of contemporary choreography is just somebody's eccentric bad habits. So much about being a choreographer is repeating certain gestures over and over, especially if you are teaching your repertory. Certain gestures mean something to you, so it behooves you to dance them. But what you also discover over time is, though their genesis is from a place of meaning, this place of emotion very often is the very stuff you have to express as a "reaction" in the negative sense!

Wayne: I certainly have no problem with that, so long as it is consciously done. I am OK with it just so long as it is not a bad habit unconsciously done. If it is somebody realizing that this quality of emotion provokes your body into doing this or that, well, I do think it is a shame that so many dancers remain unaware and unconscious.

Now, I agree with your observation about contemporary dancers allowing themselves to be in a vulnerable place in my ballet class. That is because ballet dancers come from a different conditioning. What happens with ballet dancers is that, very young, they learn to protect themselves. They are often subject to aggressive treatment by poor teachers. Their ballet teachers can be violent. Ballet dancers have been insulted sometimes, or as students they are belittled. They are driven to hate their bodies. This sort of stiffness is not inherent to ballet. It comes from poor training — that is all. It is poor ballet. It is not ballet.

There is not a problem with ballet. Good ballet actually implies all of the principles of Alexander Technique. Without a doubt, classical dancing postulates all the rules of Alexander. That is not a revolution. Good usage of the body is not a revolution.

Alexander Technique is simply an incredible discovery for me. Because I know that in so many contemporary-dance companies and professional dance schools Alexander Technique is incorporated as a matter of course. But, Alexander is a far rarer occurrence in the world of ballet. Where there is that beautiful sense of working on verticality — and all ballet technique works around the principle of verticality — I think too that this is something unique, indeed, in the application of Alexander Technique principles.

Clara: My experience with Alexander and now after a decade of teaching it, I find it might be an exaggeration to claim that Alexander can rid you of your neuroses. But in my case I'm in touch with my neuroses on a level I would not attain without the assumption of my own fundamental *a priori* psychophysical unity.

Wayne: [*nodding his head*]: I agree. The Alexander Technique allows you to become so much more aware. Maybe the one most difficult aspect of it all is that there is no turning around once you have started down that path. There is no turning back. When you start becoming aware, then you start seeing other people and yourself differently. I have benefited enormously from my Alexander work. And not just as a tool for ballet technique or enhancing my skills as a classical dance teacher.

For example, to be in my back inside myself gives me a much better perception of what is going on in the room. I am more aware of everything. Instead of [*Wayne exaggeratedly presses his chin into Clara's face in a caricature mode*] jutting my head forward and my spine forward, dispersing all my energy, I can center myself. Being in my back makes me more centered and more focused. And I had to let go of a few neuroses to do that.

Clara: Particularly in the last eight to ten months, your class has taught me how to stand at a *barre*. You are standing in professional class in Paris like sardines in a can. Everybody is stacked and, generally speaking, highly strung. Ballet class in Paris is a watering hole for high-maintenance personalities. There is something special about the way you have integrated Alexander Technique in your teaching and in your classes. I can find a comfortable place in myself in them. I am somewhat at a loss as to how to describe this. I feel you create an atmosphere through your presence that allows me to create a space inside of me. When this occurs, it makes it possible for other people to approach me.

This was not necessarily the case in the past. Always before, at the beginning of ballet class at the *barre*, I

would think to myself, “Oh God! Am I positioning myself to avoid hitting the person in front of me when I’ll do *battements*? Lately, standing there became another form of sensitivity training, standing there. I’ve been sensitized to accommodate other people without having to directly address the issue.

Wayne: When you are working on your Alexander directions and you are inside them comfortably, [*Wayne’s exhalation seems to radiate an aura of good humor*] you create a space that makes meeting others equitable. [*Clara giggles and smiles in response*]

What happens, even as performers? [*Wayne pushes his face into Clara’s*] I’ll tell the students that they are jutting forward and, in their desire to give it their all, the audience members are, of course, sort of cringing back into their seats. So, from the show-business point of view, you sort of pull back. You give the audience the opportunity to join you some place. Or in your case, standing at the *barre*, the other dancers can come to you. We sort of meet each other. Instead of me forcing my presence on you, something else is actually permitted to happen. Words that struck me as trite in the past, for example, “Dance is the way you live,” well, these words are actually true. That is in fact what is so beautiful about it all. In truth, the way I walk into ballet class *is* the way I’m going to dance. The way I am going to go home and eat dinner is the same dance. There is really no separation between these activities. It is just that the stimuli are different.

Clara: I feel stupid talking about space. I am not sure what I mean. Is it a physical place, a space for my psyche, a meeting point for joining up with someone else’s psychological makeup? I am not sure. One feeling I know for sure, though. The fact that neither of us strikes me as a particularly dogmatic person about dance, classical ballet, contemporary choreography, or even Alexander Technique — the path of Alexander has given both of us an opportunity to synthesize both our thoughts and our gestures, because thoughts and gestures are very often the same thing!

Wayne: Exactly. I do not remember if I said this before. There is no disconnection between body and mind: they are the same thing.

Clara: For example, how natural it is that you would be an acknowledged master in all this, for the simple reason that you work diligently, and love deeply what you do. Now, that might come across as an obvious and silly thing to say, but it is not.

Wayne: It is not silly in the sense that a good teacher never stops learning. So, I consider each class a sort of laboratory for myself. I am always trying to find out how I can help my students and how I can help the people who come to see me, how I can set them in the right direction. Ever since I was introduced to Alexander Technique, there is no doubt in my mind that this really is the most globally encompassing system that enhances all aspects of my students’ dance work and also their lives.

Clara: Alexander Technique has taught me how not to shoot myself in the foot. It keeps me from getting self-destructive, which is, you know full well, the hazard of being creative. You want your neuroses to be fodder for your own self-knowledge in a conscious, constructive way, like what Freud meant when he said this was the stuff of which art and civilization are made ...

Wayne: [*nods his head as he finishes Clara’s thought*] ...because it is gentle.

Clara: [*laughing*] Chaos, too! But good things come out of it. In this respect, a study of Alexander Technique is comparable, or even preferable, to years on a psychoanalyst’s couch.

Wayne: [*exclaiming*] Oh, yes! I have had people testify to the fact that Alexander lessons were far superior to their ten years of psychoanalysis. Absolutely! I feel this myself: just my weekly lessons have so helped me to become more settled in myself and listen better to other people.

Clara: Alexander Technique helps me live the contradiction of belonging, of being in it, and feeling that I have a bird's-eye view, a perspective, as well.

Wayne: Absolutely! That's beautiful.

Biography: *Wayne Byers has been teaching professional /advanced ballet in Paris for over 20 years. On a typical day in Wayne's open classes one can spot dancers from the world's leading ballet and contemporary companies, musical theatre, cabaret and television. Wayne has been using "alternative methods" to explain the dynamics of ballet technique over the years, but once he was introduced to AT, he completely revised and centered his teaching of ballet technique around Alexander principles, such that he is now convinced of the necessity of utilizing AT as a core for all professional dance training.*

Contact: wayneb@wanadoo.fr

Biography: *American dancer-choreographer Clara Gibson Maxwell is Artistic Director of Mon Oncle d'Amerique (www.kaloskaisophos.org), a Paris-based arts organization that catalyzes site-responsive, multi-arts collaborations, often in architectural environments. She was certified by ATI in 1998, having studied with Tommy Thompson and Gilles Estran. Her current interests revolve around experimental film and movement from a cinematic point of view. She continues her private AT practice at her Paris studio home.*

Contact: modafrance@compuserve.com

Learning How to Stop by Robert Rickover

A Story:

A man enjoys life. But it isn't perfect. He sometimes experiences pain, frustration, and suffering. For a while he gets along okay. But the suffering builds over time, over a number of years. The suffering becomes a major intrusion in his life. He exclaims, "Something has got to change!"

He goes to the wise man and explains that, although he was okay with life for a while, more, and more it has been growing on his mind that he's not happy with the way things are, and that he's really quite sure now that something must change. "Could you help me to change?" he asks.

The wise man says, "Thank you for coming to me. You did the right thing in coming here. And now I will give you my advice: change nothing."

The End

When I first read this, a part of me thought to myself, "Well, being a wise man seems pretty simple. Maybe I'll take up the profession myself. All I'll have to do is tell people seeking my wisdom: "Change nothing," and my exalted place in society will be assured. I might be able to make more money too!

But as a teacher of the Alexander Technique I had to admit that the wise man's advice was pretty profound. In my field I often work with people who have come to believe that the solution to problems with their physical functioning lies in trying to do something different – to just change something.

Take posture, for example. Some people believe, or have been told, that their posture is poor. Sometime's they've been warned that they face serious health risks – perhaps due to the restricted breathing that often goes along with poor posture. Or, for older students, the greater likelihood they'll lose their balance and fall with