

## Renewing Our Russian Connections

by Lisa First

In August 2008 eight international Alexander Technique teachers participated in the Eighth International Festival of Movement and Dance on the Volga in Yaroslavl, Russia. Lisa First organized the Alexander Technique component of the biennial Festival with the help of her longtime Russian counterparts through Link Vostok, East/West International Arts Exchange, the nonprofit organization she founded in 1993 (see AmSAT News No.66, Winter 2004).



Approximately 17 dancers and musicians from the United States, more than 160 from Russia, and 15 performing artists from Austria, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary participated in the festival. Link Vostok was responsible for raising the support for all United States and European artists. In addition, through her dual role as Executive Director of Link Vostok and International Director of the dance festival, Lisa raised funds to sponsor the eight certified Alexander Technique teachers: Glenn Swift from Australia (AuSTAT), Lis Klose from Denmark (DFLAT), Till Pohlmann of Germany (GLAT), Constance Clare Newman (AmSAT), Clare Maxwell (AmSAT), Lisa First (AmSAT), Virginia Garcia-Ramos of Spain and the Netherlands (NeVLAT), and Jamie McDowell, Great Britain (STAT).

Lisa writes:

This was my 22nd visit to Russia since 1989. Russia is a large country with little exposure to the work. I have wanted to introduce the Alexander Technique there since 1991, stemming from my personal appreciation of the Technique and my concern for my Russian friends and artists.

It took me some time to figure out how to do this. In 1993, through Link Vostok, I began introducing the Alexander Technique at the dance festival we founded in Yaroslavl. The positive response that I got from the participants was exciting and gratifying.

I often felt stymied by the size of my administrative role as festival director, which meant that I could not do as much teaching as I wanted to during my visits. Eventually, Link Vostok was able to sponsor an additional teacher to attend the festival with me. With only one or two Alexander instructors, the work understandably couldn't have much impact in the

context of such a large dance event. But in 2008 our eight teachers made a big difference!

The Alexander Technique teachers ran workshops and offered individual lessons to all professional participants at the festival. There was a teaching room in the Dobrynin Cultural Center for private lessons. Danish instructor Lis Klose (DFLAT) arranged for sign-up sheets in the main lobby with descriptions and photos of each teacher. Lis did a marvelous job of keeping the room secure and of convincing the cleaning women that we needed to move tables and chairs—without speaking the same language! This room became more and more popular as word got out about how wonderful the work was for the dancer's performance skills, not to mention personal well-being. Dance companies also were offered the opportunity to invite a teacher to rehearsals and performances.

Room conditions for the group classes were often challenging. For example, in our building there were two floors without walls, opening to the great outdoors! All teachers rose to the occasion. F.M. Alexander believed that "conditions needed to be right" to be most successful with the work. Kudos to all of our Alexander instructors for making do in unusual circumstances and creating good conditions for learning!

Before the festival, Australian instructor Glenn Swift and I were interviewed on the scenic banks of the Volga River. The footage, which appeared on local radio and television, introduced the Alexander Technique through a translator and included a description of the role of the Technique at the festival. Glenn gave a new "experience" to the camera man from the Yaroslavl news team which intrigued everyone involved, and I worked with the festival "press" secretary on the Volga river bank, as well.

Many of the 2008 Alexander teachers were performers themselves. For instance, Berlin-based Alexander teacher Till Pohlmann (GLAT) combined compelling performances of juggling and gymnastics and gave an exciting onstage demonstration of "getting into a chair" as an encore for an enthusiastic dance audience in the 1,000 seat Dobrynin Theater. We also connected Till with the Teatr Ognya (Yaroslavl Fire Theater) for shared outdoor public performances, including one the last evening in the pouring rain. It was useful to see the Technique "in action" for all students at the festival. Till demonstrated inspirational poise, presence, and balance in a challenging situation in the rain and onstage.

Jamie McDowell (STAT) taught several introductory master classes for the dancers at the festival. Near the end of the festival, some local non-dancers from the community joined the classes. They were very interested in learning new ideas for

living and working with less tension. There were usually at least five Alexander Technique teachers in his classes participating both as students and as teachers. The teachers were congenial and not competitive with one other.

This collegiality at the festival was a brilliant example of the ability of teachers to understand, adjust, and communicate in a

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new and oft-times challenging environment. I always wish for international artists to learn not only to agree, but also to comfortably “disagree,” learning and sharing in positive and sometimes surprising ways with one another.

Glenn Swift (AuSTAT) taught several popular, large introductory group classes. Many young ballerinas whom he and I had worked with before the festival showed up with their friends. The youngest appeared to be about eight years old. It was great having young people intermingled with more mature students. These were active and exploratory classes with much laughter, increasingly popular with the news media.

The Alexander instructors share impressions and experiences:

Clare Maxwell of Brooklyn, New York, commented that “teaching the Technique in Russia was an incredible experience. It was very exciting to introduce the Technique to dancers who would not have heard of it otherwise.” She noticed that the dance styles they seemed to prefer were both “technically difficult and vigorous—even the minimalist dances...seemed more athletic, energetic, even more emotionally resonant than what I’m familiar with in American dance.”

Clare wrote that “...the Alexander Technique is an ‘easy sell’ in this kind of situation because with such a high energy, over-efforting culture, all you have to do is make the slightest dent in that way of thinking.” She felt that this included “always trying one’s hardest, putting the maximum effort into every movement, seeking to make the greatest impact, etc. The effects of the Technique could be immediately visible.” She felt that the Technique clearly went against the “zeitgeist” and that for her a true dialogue about this was just begun by the end of the festival. She wondered, given the short-term teaching situation, whether the Technique could really help the dancers to extend themselves further in their work—not just to “relax” them or tone down the wonderful dynamic qualities that they value in dance, but to actually give them access to more subtle uses of energy, longer, more nuanced phrasing, and more dynamic variation.

Clare commented that she found it “challenging to work with a translator—but not as challenging as not having one at all!” She taught the first group class on the first day. After the class the last dancer she had been working with hugged her, thanked her, and remarked, “I’ve never felt like this before! What should I do now?” Clare answered, “There are eight teachers here. Have as many private lessons as you can. It’s an incredible opportunity!”

Clare noted that it was also a unique opportunity for her to observe and assist the other teachers in their group classes, to see how they solved the very difficult problems of introducing the Technique, especially in a foreign language. She felt that she got very helpful feedback from the other teachers in her group.

Constance Clare Newman of San Francisco, California wrote that “...teaching in Russia was fantastic. The dancers I worked with in private lessons were so open and eager for the

kind of subtle work that the Alexander Technique offers. Every one of them seemed to have a profound experience of inhabiting their bodies slightly differently and in a way that delighted them.”

Constance brought up the fact that they had only “...rudimentary spoken language in which to communicate and therefore had to turn to the universal language of touch, body language, and sounds.” Constance felt that she “found more space for quiet than in her usual lessons.” She noticed a “comfort with the quiet” in the Russian and European dancers and felt that they were very good at just “noticing,” which she also found different from many American dancers. She found that all of the students wished for more possibilities for Alexander work, and many asked for reading recommendations and ideas for how to continue on their own.

Italian dance participant Kathleen Delaney, in her third year of Alexander Technique training in the Netherlands, taught an Instant Dance Composition workshop for festival participants. Kathleen specifically mentioned the value for her of attending Clare Maxwell’s Alexander Technique workshop, a problem-solving laboratory for dancers. She appreciated the collaboration in classes among all of the Alexander Technique instructors and remarked that the atmosphere was beneficial and “lovely,” as each student had an Alexander Technique instructor for individual assistance!

Bringing eight Alexander instructors made all the difference in presenting a more resonant experience of the work. The teachers came from different countries and were of diverse ages, life, and professional experience. They formed a rich and unified group at the festival and greatly expanded the work begun in previous years. We are grateful to the pioneering teachers who taught at the festival in previous years. They offered invaluable input for 2008 based on their experiences. Pamela Blanc, Robert Britton, Luc Vanier, and Irmel Weber in particular helped to set the stage for the increased success that we experienced in 2008.

We are also deeply grateful to the foundations that supported the artists and Alexander Technique teachers participating in the program, in particular the Trust for Mutual Understanding (New York, New York) and the Rudolf Nureyev Foundation (Zurich, Switzerland). Fundraising is increasingly difficult in this economic climate, and we are so appreciative of organizations that believe in and continue to support the arts, making our projects possible.

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