

TOUCHING LIVES

Sue Laurie



Memoirs of an Alexander Technique Teacher
working with the RSC and National Theatre

Touching Lives by Sue Laurie

Published by Hite £14.99p

Review - Judith Kleinman (Published by STAT news)

If you could dream up the perfect book cover for a book promoting the Alexander Technique in the theatre world, this would be it! A glossy picture of Britain's favorite Dame and National Treasure, Judy Dench, having an Alexander lesson with Sue Laurie, longstanding Alexander teacher of the Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre. Wow! What a gift to our world, what a seal of approval. Just having this book on your desk must impress and entice your pupils, but also for the public to see this book in the National Theatre bookshop, full of pictures and quotes of the great and the good, working with the technique, wonderful!

Sue Laurie's beautifully titled "Touching Lives" came out this year, after an impressive joint Hite and National Theatre launch (one of the happier events of 2016's year of political turmoil). This book is all about bringing our quiet dynamic work to the Theatre world. This is far from being a 'lurvee' fest, although like all the best theatre diaries or memoirs it is certainly full of delicious gossip and some of the intrigue, which often goes with the performing arts worlds, if that's your sort of thing. But it is also packed with interesting history of the RSC and the NT and wonderful memories of particular productions in Stratford and London locations. There is lots and lots of information about Alexander's work in the theatre context; you really could learn about the ideas of AT gently and digestibly in this book. It's certainly not just a 'how to do' or a 'what is the Alexander Technique' book.

However we do get FM's story nicely retold, Sue's Alexander journey, and of particular interest for Alexander teacher readers, Sue's early lessons with Ann Battye, Sue training with the Barlows, her early teaching days and how she teaches now. Useful for us; there are lesson plans and ideas and the development of Sue's teaching over years at the heart of British theatre. How she recorded a tape for pupils to take away to work on themselves between lessons and how she thought it would be useful for her and her students to take a counseling course. We read how so many actors have been deeply appreciative of Sue's work. I for one, have been inspired to teach much more wall work since reading this book and have had another think about repertoire for teaching the whispered Ah!

For the layman with an interest in the theatre, I would think this might really whet the appetite for lessons, seeing how many eminent theatre folk have loved the work, from Alan Bennett to Benedict Cumberbatch, the Redgraves to Sir Ian MacKellen. We hear how the work is so important for people in pain through Sue's and some actors' stories but also how important it has been for people's creative process.

Sue's cri de coeur is how there needs to be more interaction between the worlds of Voice, Movement and Alexander. Let's hope that as some Drama schools have Alexander work this will gradually come to pass. We hear how Sue has worked alongside voice coaches, directors and producers, attends rehearsals, runs group workshops and generally is part of the production team of many plays. How the likes of Ian Rickson, (Director of 'Jerusalem') who has written a very powerful little forward to the book, see the work as invaluable, "beautifully paradoxical:

gentle, yet deep, almost imperceptible yet with palpable results”, I think we can all relate to that.

Sue has written about all the ups and downs of bringing the work to the two major British Theatre companies. She needed tenacity and drive to keep the work going when sometimes there was a difficult change of management or the odd character who might not quite understand the value of the work. Sue’s honest writing is a testament to “free your neck and carry on!” Like anyone working in Institutions, she also knew that the important people to get along with aren’t always the stars, but also the doormen, caretakers and management. Sue has also taught the musicians, secretaries and anyone interested in our work, reminding us all what a marvelous transferrable skill Alexander work is.

The book goes on to describe Sue’s work with puppeteers in War Horse, a fascinating section on application work and her travels with the National Theatre Company (who will be able to resist the picture of Sue with Land Rover the chimp!?). Woven all the way through are anecdotes about her family and friends, many of whom are theatre folk. There were, as in all our lives, ups and downs, some very major personal obstacles to overcome and through it all we see the light of Alexander’s work shining, helping, supporting as it does quietly. Sue’s funny and helpful thoughts also shine through. “Life is short so take it slowly”, “What we are really learning through using the technique is how to stop.” Sue also encourages pupils to learn to say “No” to stimulus, including our own mental chatter and anxieties, and we love hearing Alan Bennett calling out in the car park, “I am still saying No?” One of the most inspiring things about this book is Sue’s sense of humour (which as it is the theatre world has its bawdy moments). Sue has shared so much laughter with so many of her pupils; FM’s twinkle is definitely here.

There really is something for everyone in “Touching Lives” and the quotes from Sue’s pupils near the end are very moving and can only make us all think what wonderful work our Alexander work is and what a special teacher Sue is and how she was just the right person at just the right time!

Well done Sue and well done Hite for publishing another very special book, beautifully presented. We are lucky to have several fantastic specialist Alexander publishing houses, all with their different flavours and emphasis. Hite’s books are very approachable and sing out to the public as well as to the Alexander world.

If you didn’t get this book in your Christmas stocking, make sure you get it soon in 2017, if for nothing else than to leave casually lying on your desk for pupils to see the cover. However, there is so much more to it. It’s a snip at £14.99. Can you judge a book by its cover? In this case, Yes!

Judith Kleinman