

Buried Alive: Finding Movement in Immobility

Alexander Technique Teacher Jessica Wolf recounts her experience coaching Dianne Wiest for Yale Repertory Theatre's *Happy Days*

by Jessica Wolf

Anyone who has ever seen or read Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* knows that its central character, Winnie, is a role only the most daring actresses attempt to play. This spring, two-time Academy Award winner Dianne Wiest starred as Winnie in the Yale Repertory Theatre production, directed by James Bundy. In his *New York Times* review, theatre critic Charles Isherwood said, "Any actress undertaking this challenging role deserves a medal for valor, and Ms. Wiest's entrancingly funny, ultimately harrowing performance certainly deserves one. Ms. Wiest has called it, with justification, "the 'Hamlet' for women."

During the six-week rehearsal process, I worked with Dianne both privately and in rehearsal. As the work evolved, so did our understanding of the multiple, nuanced demands we had to address so that Dianne could sustain her performance.

The challenges of this show are unique. Winnie is on stage and speaking the entire play, only interrupted by brief appearances and six lines of dialogue from her husband, Willie. In the first act, Winnie is buried to her waist in a mound of earth. In the second act, she is buried to her neck; only her head is visible to the audience. As Catherine Sheehy, the production's dramaturg, noted, Winnie's cheery disposition despite her immobility demonstrates "the triumph of [her] temperament over topography." While Winnie's confinement on stage did not allow for a single step of movement, Dianne had to maintain an active inner life to propel the story forward. I was hired as Dianne's "movement coach," an ironic title for this particular project.

In the beginning, our primary concern was that Winnie's inability to move or change positions would eventually cause Dianne pain. Human beings are not designed to hold postures. Part of my work involved finding creative and practical solutions in the set design to provide Dianne greater ease and comfort. I asked both James and Dianne to read Galen Cranz's *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design*, a book about the synergy between body-conscious design and human activity. Cranz asserts that the dynamic "perch position"—halfway between sitting and standing—is most efficient for maintaining good use. I suggested Dianne perch on a high, backless stool in the second act when only her head is visible to the audience. The seat tilted forward to encourage length along her spine. Additionally, I asked the set designer to build a bar inside the mound on which Dianne could rest her hands, like Alexander's procedure "Hands on the Back of the Chair." This helped her find opposition and widen her back. Despite limited space, Dianne had full access to her three-dimensional torso, and her

breath moved freely. She was like an open vessel and formed a relationship to the world around her.

In each lesson, I determined which Alexander Technique principles would most benefit Dianne at every stage of her process. We experimented with having Dianne sit for the first act of the play, but found this posture was not active enough. Instead, Dianne switched to standing, and discovered that this offered her a variety of new movement choices. People who are required to stand for extended periods of time often unconsciously lock their knees. To avoid this potential problem, we continually investigated *monkey*, which is known as a "position of mechanical advantage" in the Alexander Technique. I taught Dianne how to fold at her hip, knee, and ankle joints so that her torso could be free to move forward over her legs. We explored releasing her weight down to enliven her legs and gain support from the ground. This balance expanded her torso, and freed her breath and voice. Bringing awareness to her lower body was very important, because we were concerned that her legs might go numb after standing for several

hours during rehearsals. We also found it helpful for Dianne to wear comfortable shoes and stand on a cushioned mat.

Beckett's script specifies physical actions for his actors to perform. In the first act, for instance, Beckett instructs Winnie to hold her parasol above her head to shield herself from the glaring sun for an extended length of time. Whenever anyone holds an arm up, there is a tendency to tighten the shoulders. Even Winnie acknowledges this strain: "Holding up wearies the arm." Despite Winnie's discomfort, Dianne and I had to find a way for Dianne to feel comfortable holding her arms up for several minutes. I helped her eliminate the possibility of tension by teaching her to support her arms with the big muscles of her

back and allow her shoulder girdle to float on top of her ribs. The shoulder girdle is a flexible structure and its mobility is largely determined by the support from the torso. As we

breathe, our lungs subtly change shape, making it important not to stiffen the upper back. To avoid tension from forcing her shoulders back and down, Dianne allowed the natural curves along her spine to lengthen. Her shoulder girdle glided effortlessly, and she sustained the weight of the parasol with ease.

Dianne wanted to achieve flexibility and stamina throughout the run of the show. This was going to be particularly challenging in the second act when she is buried up to her neck, leaving just her head visible to the audience. Only her face could move. Dianne wanted to learn how to avoid developing jaw tension and headaches. Procedures from the



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Alexander Technique were particularly helpful in addressing these concerns. We identified Dianne's head-neck relationship by locating her atlanto-occipital joint. She learned to release her sub-occipital muscles and find her head poised on top of her spine. Even in her stillest moments on stage when only her eyes were moving, she was able to renew the thought of freeing her neck. I was tickled every time I watched Dianne on stage smile, pout her lips, stick out her tongue, and shrug her eyebrows. Dianne's freedom made her portrayal of Winnie utterly singular.

For me, one of the most arresting moments of Dianne's performance occurs right after the curtain rises to begin the play. Winnie is asleep in the blazing heat with her upper body extended over the mound. After a loud bell, she awakes and she exclaims, "Another heavenly day."

Dianne initiated this movement from her head: turning toward the sky, opening her arms and spiraling upward. She used the subtle swivel of her ankle and hip joints to achieve a full extension of arms and an open chest, as though she were embracing the entire world. Director James Bundy wanted to see minimal movement here so that the story would be told in "simple physical action with complicated characters and their fragile memories." Dianne articulated even the smallest of gestures with freedom.

Part of what made my work with Dianne especially exciting was the opportunity to integrate into our lessons principles from multiple disciplines. In addition to being an Alexander Technique teacher, I am a Certified Laban Movement Analyst. As rehearsals for *Happy Days* progressed, our exploration of space and body led me to introduce Bartenieff Fundamentals (movement sequences based on developmental coordination patterns that were created by Irmgard Bartenieff, who taught Laban Movement Analysis in the United States). In addition to daily Alexander lie-downs, Dianne practiced sequences such as heel-rocks, roll-downs, pelvic forward-shifts, arm-circles, fingertip/shoulder movements, weight-shifts, and body spirals. The expressive quality and expansion of Dianne's movements enhanced her spatial orientation in Winnie's small kinesphere.

For Dianne to attain the highest level of performance night after night, our breathwork proved invaluable. Breath can supply essential support from the inside out. To this end, I

introduced Dianne to principles and procedures from my technique, *The Art of Breathing*. Dianne was intrigued to discover that her lungs were housed high inside her ribs, and she

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visualized the support they provide her upper back and shoulder girdle. She enjoyed the perpetual motion of her breath and practiced long, sustained exhalations. Because the respiratory system is the balance

wheel of the body, the vitality she found in her breath allowed her to transform into character and have an intimate connection with the audience. Her Winnie became the vessel and mirror for the human condition.

In many ways, these lessons with Dianne epitomized for me the benefits of the work to which I have dedicated my life.

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While our work with the Alexander Technique provided the anchor, integrating other techniques known to help performers enhanced Dianne's process. Ultimately, her actor toolbox included principles from the Alexander Technique, *The Art of Breathing*, and Laban Movement Analysis. These, in conjunction with her own fortitude and extraordinary talent, allowed Dianne to find harmony of breath and body so she could fully live

out Winnie's story performance after performance. In summing up her experience of our work, Dianne said, "I am not walking behind myself. I am inside myself."

Dianne Wiest's acting career spans theater, film, and television. She is the recipient of an Obie and Theatre World Award for her stage work, two Oscars for her film work, and two Emmys for her television work.

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Jessica Wolf's Art of Breathing. In 2013, she created the first three-dimensional animation of the respiratory system and published a collection of her articles. Jessica travels extensively, both nationally and internationally, teaching workshops and presenting at conferences. She maintains a private practice in New York City.

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Dianne Wiest as Winnie in Happy Days