

An Alexander Teacher's Reflections on Russia

by Lisa First

I became an international arts organizer almost by accident; my main interest early on was in finding opportunities to return to the Soviet Union. In the context of my work as an arts administrator, I intentionally created opportunities for sharing the Alexander Technique in a culture where there hasn't been much contact with the West.

When I first visited the Soviet Union in 1990, I had just completed a graduate program in dance and movement studies at Wesleyan University and had entered an Alexander Technique training course in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

My 1990 trip to Russia resulted from my role as a U.S. citizen diplomat with the Soviet Peace Committee, the Irish Peace Committee and the Center for Soviet American Dialogue. The peace delegations met in Shannon, Ireland, and Moscow, Russia, in January 1990. Gorbachev was still in power and, although Westerners seemed enamored with him, that view was not widely held among Russians. This was a remarkable period of political and social upheaval in Russia, characterized by tremendous uncertainty and economic instability, as well as curiosity about the rest of the world after decades of political, social and economic isolation.

I remember this time with nostalgia. In the early nineties Russia was an exciting place for me as an American. There was great openness and curiosity—almost euphoria—among Westerners and Russians after so many years distance during the Cold War. I was drawn to this special moment in world history and the challenges that it presented to those who struggled to integrate enormous change into their daily lives. I came away from my first experience in Russia determined to explore the window of opportunity that existed to bring new cross-cultural experiences and energy to the arts and, in particular, to dance.

Making Connections

Historically, Russia has had a tendency to turn in on itself, away from the West. However, I entered the culture during Glasnost, when Westerners were of great interest. I was impressed by the energy of the young people I met, but the average person on the Russian street seldom smiled and rarely expressed emotions publicly. This was one result of lives led under a punitive political system and the danger that both strangers and friends might turn out to be informers. Because I was a Westerner, people were curious and interested to meet me. I made friends and forged relationships that enabled me to work effectively since 1990. Among the people who befriended me were teenagers, communists, former KGB agents, underground artists, children and the elderly. So many unforgettable individuals stand out in my memory—for example, Uri and his mother, Natasha.



Lisa First works with students at the St Petersburg Conservatory affiliated with the Maryinsky Theater.

I met Uri and his friends in Moscow's Red Square when our bus broke down one day in 1990. He, in turn, introduced me to his mother. I was often invited to stay in their home as a guest. I noticed that Natasha took great care with her appearance before leaving for work early each morning. I was surprised when Uri told me that she was a construction worker.

Uri and Natasha's apartment had two bedrooms and was located on the northern outskirts of Moscow. Western magazine advertisements

of nature scenes and beautiful women papered the apartment walls, beneath framed photographs of family members. Russians are generous hosts and always give the best room to the guest. At that time I was nearing completion of my Alexander teacher training and eager to improve myself. I recall closing the door in anticipation of doing "hands on the back of the chair;" however, I barely had enough time to touch the chair before Uri and Natasha burst excitedly through the door. They asked me what I was doing. I struggled to answer but remembered that there was no word for privacy in the Russian language. Individuality and privacy were not highly valued within the communist system; Uri and Natasha simply needed to know what was happening behind the closed door. After that, I always left the door open.

Uri and Natasha were a very low-income family confronted with predictable hardships. Hot water was rare and unreliable; the electricity sometimes went off for hours; and clothing was laundered with a wooden washboard in the bathtub. When we shopped, many stores calculated currency with an abacus. Shop shelves were frequently empty and there were always long lines for tobacco. I recall black cardboard cigarette boxes, part of an Iraqi/Virginia joint venture.

But in the midst of the economic chaos, there were wonderful moments. The birch forest surrounding the city was a constant source of pleasure. We took long walks there alongside many other Russians seeking relaxation. Natasha astonished me one day by suddenly breaking into a series of cartwheels and handstands. It turned out that she had been a circus performer earlier in her life.

Uri avoided the army and eventually began to work for the Mafia, selling tickets at the Moscow circus and the Bolshoi Theater. He often provided me and my friends with tickets for front row seats at the Bolshoi I especially remember attending a Rachmaninoff retrospective. Time passed and eventually Natasha, Uri, and I grew apart. However, these early friendships were a powerful part of my initial adaptation to the culture and I still hope to reconnect with them someday, although their apartment building has been razed.

Link Vostok

I returned to Moscow often and joined an organization called International Arts for Peace, working in Yaroslavl, on the “Golden Ring,” a ring of ancient towns surrounding Moscow. My command of the Russian language improved as the result of independent study arranged through an MIT work-related staff development program and my periodic immersion in the language. While in Yaroslavl I met and taught the Alexander Technique to several artists who would later work with me in a series of collaborative dance and Alexander Technique projects. I developed a strong commitment to return and continue to work with these students, since their exposure to the Alexander Technique was so minimal. Since 1992 I have taught the Alexander Technique during each visit to Russia, always within the context of ongoing projects.

In 1993, I founded Link Vostok, a non-profit networking and information resource for arts groups and individuals seeking to identify and connect with international partners. Link Vostok's mission is to promote open and stable relationships between international arts communities, previously separated by the Cold War, by fostering creative cross-cultural exchanges. Since 1993, Link Vostok has co-organized the biennial International Festivals of Movement and Dance on the Volga, in Yaroslavl (see *Dance Magazine*, February 2003) Link Vostok has raised substantial amounts of funding from individuals and organizations in the United States and Europe and enabled almost 400 professional artists to participate in events abroad.

In 2003, Link Vostok brought 17 Russian dancers to Minneapolis and New York to teach and perform. Among them was my longtime Alexander student and performer Oleg Soulimenko from Moscow. We stayed about two blocks from The Matthews School for the Alexander Technique while in New York. Oleg and I spent an invaluable morning on the training course as guests. It was a wonderful opportunity for Oleg to see how other teachers and students worked together in the United States. His performance at Movement Research in New York had a very different quality after visiting the course. He wryly commented afterwards that the performance went so smoothly that it almost felt that it wasn't necessary to do it.

In August 2004, I made my 19th trip to Russia, as international director of our sixth dance festival. Through Link Vostok, this year's festival included 33 American and 25 European participants. In 2005 Link Vostok will bring a Central European Dance Exchange to America for performances and workshops.

The Alexander Students

Over the years I have worked increasingly with Russians with backgrounds and interests similar to mine: dancers, educators, writers and the elderly. Many have endured hardships; some survived childhood during the 900-day blockade of Leningrad during WWII when glue from chairs was often the only available food for children. When I first taught the Alexander Technique in Yaroslavl in 1992, I was surprised by some of the middle-aged students who explained that they did not want to be conscious of their world or environment. Because life was so difficult, it was easier for them to live without awareness. I admired the courage and resourcefulness of so many of the people that I met, yet felt sorrow at the hardships they had endured. These people—and their life stories—have helped intensify a personal commitment to help improve the lives of those disadvantaged by war, politics and history.

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I include the stories of two remarkable individuals to illuminate this narrative. I taught the Alexander Technique for years to Maria Ivanova, a beautiful woman with severe osteoporosis. I was told that her condition developed in childhood due to malnourishment during the war. Initially, I was able to help her improve her stature. She was always grateful, but doubted her ability to change without me. Due to her age and the infrequent lessons, she deteriorated between each of my return visits. Years went by in this way until her final years when the osteoporosis progressed rapidly. Near the end of her life, doctors warned those near to her “be very careful with Maria, her bones are fragile like an antique vase.” However, in the end, she died unexpectedly of undiagnosed cancer, a common occurrence in Russia due to the lack of preventive medicine.

Another remarkable individual I worked with was Nikolai Kovmir. He had been a ballet dancer at the Kirov, a talented peer of Mikhail Baryshnikov prior to Baryshnikov's defection. Kovmir danced with Rudolph Nureyev upon his return to St. Petersburg. Upon the fall of the Soviet Union, Kovmir and many other artists formerly supported by the government lost all of their financial support. Kovmir suffered from a progressive and crippling case of multiple sclerosis, a degenerative neuro-muscular disease that often attacks healthy people early in life. He had no nurse; his wife toured with the Kirov and he was left alone every day, on a mattress in his room unable even to turn himself, suffering from extremely painful bedsores.

In 1997 Link Vostok helped raise money to improve Kovmir's situation. However, he soon died, alone in the hospital while his wife was on tour. The last funds that we provided were used for his funeral expenses. I recall putting “Alexander” hands on Nikolai Kovmir as one of the more powerful experiences of my life. Despite his immobility, altered speech and blindness, I experienced his indescribable energy, contained by the perimeters of his illness and yet, surprisingly, still quite accessible.

Through Kovmir, I met and worked with a scientist and friend of Rudolf Nureyev's who later put in a good word for Link Vostok's dance activities with the European office of the Rudolf Nureyev Foundation. The generous support of the Rudolf Nureyev Foundation has been key to the successful growth and development of Link Vostok's Russian dance projects.

St. Petersburg

By the late 1990's, the focus of much of my work had shifted to St. Petersburg. In 1998, I taught the Alexander Technique to a large group class at the Conservatory, as the opening event for a dance festival held at the Moussorgosky theater. The students at the Conservatory were eager and interested, although sometimes skeptical. The notion of learning to move with less tension challenged them to change habits consciously ingrained through years of dance training, and therefore went against many of their strongly held beliefs. I recognized that the limited time period we had together probably would not inspire enough confidence to result in lasting change.

The St. Petersburg festival drew strong interest from the Russian media. A press conference was held prior to the event, journalists observed the Alexander class, and a newspaper article resulted. I was impressed by the degree to which Russian journalists asked intelligent questions and earnestly worked to interpret the event.

One of my favorite activities in St. Petersburg is working with the Russian State Art Museum in St. Petersburg. One of my close friends and work partners is Valentina Believa, a curator in the Division of Contemporary Art at the Russian State Art Museum. She has worked tirelessly to help us present dance at the Marble Palace (the most recent acquisition of the Russian Museum, and one of their five historic and beautiful museums in St. Petersburg). I love getting to spend time behind the public spaces of the museums. At the Hermitage, I was once given a personal tour of the private theater of Catherine the Great. While the museum aspects of my work do not involve teaching the Alexander Technique, I have spent some of my happiest moments behind the scenes, engaged in a variety of activities that presented opportunities to meet talented visual artists, occasionally serving as a translator for Valentina Believa, so that she can share her vast knowledge about art with our artists.

As I have continued to work in St. Petersburg to present and organize dance projects, I have persisted in offering classes in the Alexander Technique, usually at the Kannon Dance Company and School. At one of these classes, we had an observer who was introduced as an opera star from the Maryinsky production of *War and Peace*. She was warmly expressive and supportive of the work we did in the class. To my joy, some of my students from the earlier class at the Conservatory were present. It was great to see that their interest had lasted and that they had returned to learn more. The enthusiastic comments I received erased some of my doubts about the value of the sporadic group classes in the Alexander Technique that I taught. Still, I have found it challenging to introduce the work and then have so few opportunities to follow up with students over the years.

The Future

To my knowledge, there is now one certified Alexander instructor in Moscow but no training courses in Russia. I have often been asked to stay and organize a training course, but the prospect of three years of residence in Russia seems overwhelming, due to both the continued political and economic uncertainty there, and to the needs of my own family in the United States. This year there was renewed interest in a training course being developed in Moscow.

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In 1998, Pamela Blanc accompanied us to Russia and taught classes in the Alexander Technique at the festival. She was most generously received, due to the warmth of her personality and all that she shared. Six years later, in 2004, U.S. instructor Bob Britton and



Lisa First teaching at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

German instructor Irmel Weber taught the Alexander Technique at the festival.

Irmel Weber taught three classes on *How to Use Inhibition and Direction in Improvisation*. Bob Britton taught three classes introducing the Alexander Technique that included a class on the foot and walking. I offered an Alexander Technique laboratory for students with previous experience at the festival. I was surprised at the

laboratory to encounter several students from Moscow whom I hadn't seen in over six years. After the passage of so much time it was impressive that they still possessed such an interest and eagerness for the work. Having three Alexander teachers present in each class to provide and assist with hands-on experience made a strong and resonant impact in all of the classes.

In the future, I would like to bring more Alexander Technique teachers to Russia to participate in the festival and in other projects, particularly in St. Petersburg. However, that will depend upon how the future unfolds politically and financially.

This year in the span of a week there were four major terrorist attacks in Russia, three of them in Moscow. Our departure from the festival coincided with the elections in Chechnya. We flew home before security changes were instilled after two planes went down due to explosives. It was an unsettling departure for many of the participants.

In closing, I would like to note that I have always been an intentional volunteer in Russia. I have never felt that my worth as a professional depended upon being paid. Instead, working without pay has opened many windows of opportunity for me and put me on more equal footing with Russian students and professionals. I am grateful for the hundreds of Americans, Europeans and Russians who have also willingly participated as volunteers. The Russian economic situation remains unpredictable and, for many, there is still great hardship. Sharing a level playing field with my Russian partners seems to me to be particularly important at a time when U.S. "prestige" is dwindling abroad. I value inclusiveness and do not want money to be a barrier that excludes participation of people who are both eager for and interested in the work that I love.

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Photographs by Vladimir Lupovsky.

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