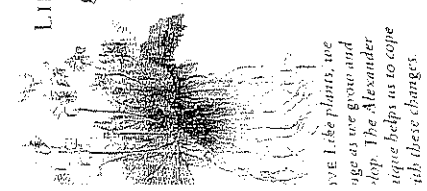


# Alexander Technique - Acting I

## The Use of the Self



**LIKE PLANTS** WE are living and growing, but unlike plants we are our own gardeners. By training our conscious will, we can begin to direct our growth. Alexander realized that how we maintain our upright posture represented a fundamental factor in the prevention of problems. There is no "correct" position to be held, for that which is right for you today cannot be the right one for tomorrow as you grow and develop. The Alexander Technique can help you cope with life changes. We know, in our minds, that growth and development only happen through change, and we need to make these changes in our bodies. There are no exercises in the Alexander Technique, but a persistent desire to cultivate and become more yourself.

### EFFECTS OF CUTTING

use most things for a limited amount of time, then stop to go on to something else. However, like tools and instruments our heads and bodies are in constant use of this. As you use a kitchen knife, you are conscious of the knife. What you are cutting. Does it need sharpening? Is the handle getting a bit loose? Is it clean? Is it near your fingers? You will be aware of the implement and its state. It is not working well enough, you immediately try and fix it.

Have you ever thought that you might need fixing? How are you holding the knife? Perhaps you are grip-



**LEFT** Young children display natural good use of the body as they have not formed any bad habits.

Our bodies are gardens to the which our wills are gardeners so that if we plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or maimed with industry.

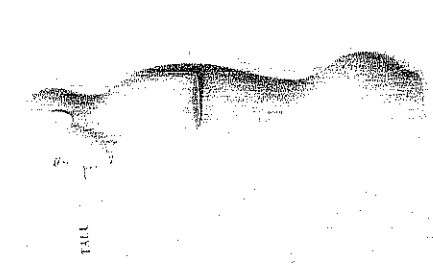
**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:**  
Othello

ping it too tightly, holding your breath as you chop, clenching your jaw, tensing your shoulders, bracing your knees? These reactions may affect your level of skill and efficiency or wear you out.

If we use ourselves in a better way, we function more efficiently. Tension in the back muscles will shorten the spine, which normally bends the spine forward. There is a very simple experiment that you

can try that makes it easy to see how the way you use something can increase or decrease its length. If you take a stick of a certain length and bend it, you will shorten the distance between both ends. If you bend yourself in such a way, you will shorten yourself by shortening and contracting your muscles. How your muscles operate affects your functioning. If you pull down, you will be restricting internal organs, stiffening your joints, limiting your breathing. All these may lead to problems and loss of vitality and enjoyment.

When you begin to pay attention to yourself, you can change how you use your mind and body, the way your posture and physiology will change. The functioning of the circulatory system is changed, and as a consequence blood pressure is stabilized. Over the years by doing things habitually we have become less conscious. We do not think about how we use ourselves. To change, we have to recognise habits limit us.



### SHORT VERSUS TALL

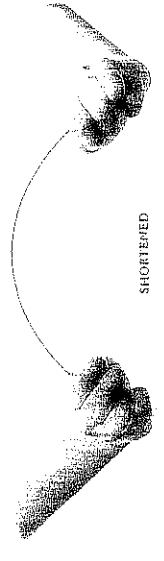
**Tall**  
When you are neither collapsed nor trying to stand up too straight, your muscles and bones have a chance to achieve their full potential length. Compare gently holding a stick at both ends; the distance between both ends is not shortened.



**Short**  
When the body is collapsed down in front and the head pulled down the bones and muscles cannot lengthen, and you shorten. Compare bending the stick, when the distance between the two ends become shortened.



**Short**  
When you pull your back in and push up your chest to try to stand straight, you actually make yourself shorter. Compare bending the stick the opposite way; the distance between the ends is still shortened.



We may turn left on a journey because that is what we always do, although today we needed to turn right. In this way, we become slaves to our habits, and it becomes more difficult to be open to changes in our lives. Then change becomes something difficult we have to do, instead of being exciting and inviting. In order to change a habit we have to go back to the time when we originally learned the skill. We have to change our response from being unconscious of what we are doing to being more aware and conscious. We need to think about what we are doing. Have you ever gone to lift an empty box which you expected to be heavy? Often we generate far more effort than we need, and this imposes too much muscular tension on the body. It can become a vicious circle. Each time we use a certain amount of effort in an activity, like speaking, we will use it again because the effort becomes so closely associated with the act of speaking. When a habit is ingrained,

it will feel as if we cannot speak unless we produce this effort. We need to have a way we can put this change into effect. The principles needed to break habits are conscious inhibition and conscious direction. We must ask ourselves first what do we want. In order to avoid habitual reactions, we need to stop briefly before proceeding.

#### BREAKING HABITS

If an attempt is to be made to change a person's habit, two things are essential. The first is an adequate desire, on the part of the subject, to make the change. The helper needs to use his ingenuity to build up a degree of motivation in the subject. In addition, the person with the habit has to be brought to a condition in which he is aware of the "feel" of this changing condition which will, if allowed to proceed, lead to the habitual improvement. Once this moment is recognized, he can interpose an alternative behavior pattern.

Of habits devil is angel yet in this,  
That aptly is put on. Refrain  
to-night;  
And that shall lend a kind  
of easiness  
To the next abstinence: the next  
more easy;  
For use almost can change the  
stamp of nature...

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:  
HAMLET

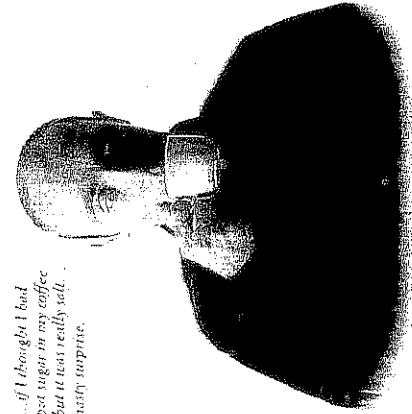
#### HABITS

Habits are formed by repeating actions until they become settled, regular activities that are often hard to give up. When we first learn to do something, whether it is a basic skill like walking or a more refined, complicated skill like playing an instrument or handling a tennis racket, we need to think about what we are doing. As we practice the skill, we still have to be conscious of what we are doing, but eventually it becomes automatic, a habit.

...if I expect the box  
to be heavy, I make  
more effort than is  
necessary.



...if I thought I had  
put sugar in my coffee  
but it was really salt,  
nausea surpise.



There is no evidence that inhibition is ever accompanied by the slightest damage to the tissue; on the contrary, it seems to predispose the tissue to a greater functional activity thereafter.

Sir CHARLES SHERRINGTON

#### CONSCIOUS INHIBITION

Inhibition is the practice of pausing before an action. It gives us the time that is needed to register "how" we are preparing for any activity and whether excessive muscular tension is present. The inhibitory process enables a release of the unnecessary contraction so that the lengthening and widening of the body musculature can be restored. Inhibition is a positive process, leading to release, efficient preparation, and optimum readiness. Why don't we think before we act? In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander said:

...I come to see at last that if I was ever to be able to change my habitual use and dominate my instinctive direction, it would be necessary for me to make the experience of receiving the stimulus to speak and refusing to do anything immediately in response.

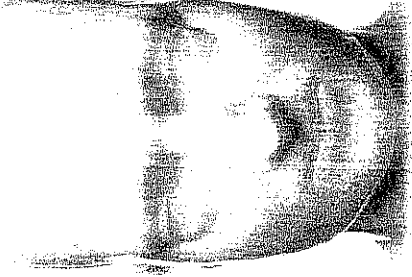
See a good habit  
makes a child a man  
Whereas a bad one  
makes a man a beast.

JOHN WEBSTER:  
THE WHITE DEVIL

By stopping our habitual reactions, we give ourselves a chance to prevent mistakes and to give ourselves time to make a choice about how we proceed. As our mental attitude changes, there is a chance to break out habits. Frank Pierce Jones said in *Freedom to Change*:

Inhibition is a positive, not a negative force. Some degree of inhibition is essential not only for a good life but for any life at all. Inhibition is a physiological process which does not need to be conscious in order to operate. Bringing it up to the conscious level not only establishes an indirect control over anti-gravity responses but facilitates the learning of new habits and the unlearning of those that are old and unwanted. When a stimulus is presented for the

BELOW: Pausing to think before taking an action enables us to avoid unnecessary muscular tension.



#### CHECKING HABITS

Try this experiment. Stand in front of a mirror and decide to speak. What do you do? Do you react and stiffen your neck, brace your legs, hold your breath? Take a second to say "No" to those habits that upset your poise and calmness. Free your neck, let your head go forward and up, let your back lengthen and widen, and breathe out before you speak. Do you notice any differences, especially in the sound of your voice?

Just time, many responses are avoidable, including not making a response at all. If one of these responses is selected and learned, it can be repeated without loss of choice as long as the process remains conscious. If it drops below the level of consciousness, a "set" will be established linking the stimulus with the response, which will then occur automatically whether it is appropriate or not. The result is a habit which operates unconsciously (like an innate reflex) and which is resistant to change. Inhibition raises the level of tonic activity in the nervous system, brings the operation of the habit to a conscious level and restores choice (including the choice of making the original response).

For the good that I would  
I do not.

But the evil which I would not  
that I do.

ROMANS 7:19

## CONSCIOUS DIRECTION

All the time in life, we are giving ourselves directions. We have conversations with ourselves about what we want to happen. "Smarten up, pull yourself together, get real, try hard, don't give up, get your act together, don't go wrong." We can give ourselves these instructions to find our way, as we follow directions on a map. As we map-read, we work out where we are and in which direction we need to go. Always we are going from here to there. When we are lost, we are grateful for any information that is clearly and confidently given - we need direction; our language is full of references to "being led." "Following our guiding star," "taking the right path," "being out of line," "on the wrong track." We often know when we are off course. Alexander

HEAD GOES FORWARD AND UP

NECK IS FREE

BACK COLLECTS LEAD & DEFEATS



JOCK: "You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax."

GIVERDOLBY: "Oh! I hope I am not that it would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions."

OSCAR WILDE:  
THE IMPORTANCE  
OF BEING EARNEST

observed that certain directions are not as helpful as others. We cannot see directions, but we can see the result of them in the posture and form of ourselves. Alexander formulated the directions "Let the neck be free so that the head can go forward and up and so that the back can lengthen and widen" to give himself a clear route to follow.

Conscious directions are instructions given to enable the body to release, lengthen, and widen. It is by giving conscious directions that we encourage our bodies to adopt their full stature. Direction does not involve a direct command; rather it is a process of giving suggestions that encourage a reflex process to happen and avoid interference with the natural poise of our upright posture.

There exists in these directions an implicit message that we have to give ourselves time for this to happen. These directions

LEFT Conscious directions enable the body to release, lengthen and widen, restoring the shape that nature intended.

can enable us to come back to the shape that nature intended. If we have no directions, or choose not to follow them, then we could get lost.

## END-GAINING AND MEANS-WHEREBY

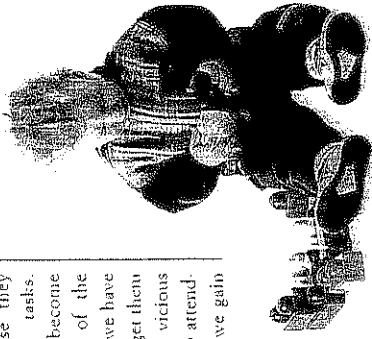
In the 1930s Aldous Huxley had lessons from Alexander from which he benefited tremendously. He believed that the Alexander Technique was unique in its ability to deal with the problem of "end-gaining." "End-gaining" describes the process in which a person is preoccupied with goals and disregards how the "means-whereby" the goals are attained. At worst, "end-gaining" advocates the end at any cost, an obsession with outcomes with no regard to the cost to the psycho-physical organism. Huxley (quoted in Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change*) said:

*One has to make the discovery for oneself, starting from scratch and to find what old F.M. Alexander called "the means-whereby," without which good intentions merely prove ball, and the idealist remains an ineffectual, self-destructive and other-destructive end-gainer.*

The Alexander Technique encourages you to observe and think about how you work to gain your end. The basic learning skills that any child develops rely on this way of learning. The child is told to think about what he is doing, to take his time, to take care, and not to rush. These instructions are the "means-whereby" the child gains his ends. When not enough attention is paid

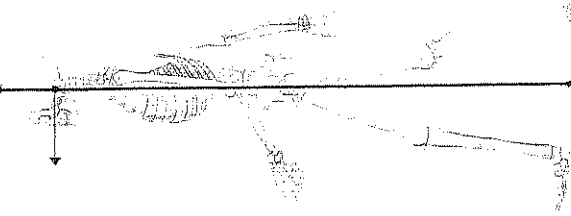
Often it seems to us that our day consists of a long list of activities, things we have to get done. We rush through these tasks as quickly as possible to get to the time when we can relax. We end up not enjoying our daily activities because they have become unpleasant tasks. Sometimes they have become painful activities because of the excessive muscular tension we have created as we rush to try to get them over and done with. It is a vicious circle that can be broken by attending to the means whereby we gain

SCOTT CHILDREN'S BOOK LEARNING SKILLS ARE THE "MEANS-WHEREBY" THEY ACHIEVE THEIR GOAL. ALEXANDER ENCOURAGED US TO PAY ATTENTION TO THIS PROCESS.



## DIRECTION

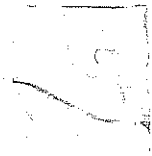
As an animal walks forward, the head is in a direct horizontal line with the spine. The movement of the head goes in the same direction as the movement of the body. The head acts as a balancer, regulating the weight carried by the front and hind legs



our ends. The Technique enables us to develop the sensitivity that gives us a more accurate perception of ourselves and how act. We strive to be "on time," and tend to forget that we also need to be "in time."

**SENSORY APPRECIATION:  
THE SEARCHLIGHT  
OF ATTENTION**

are familiar with our five senses: sight, touch, smell, hearing, taste. Sensory appreciation is our conscious evaluation of these senses. Perhaps you have never realized that you have a sixth sense, proprioception. This is the ability to understand and use the signals that your balance mechanism and movement receptors send to your brain.



SMELL



HEARING



SIGHT

RIGHT We see, we hear, we smell, we touch, we taste, but your sixth sense, our sensory appreciation, that lets us breathe the other five senses.

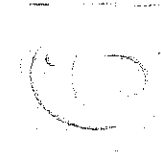
A lot of the time we are unaware that we have this sixth sense, yet we do not feel quite right. Like Hamlet we feel, "like sweet bells, jangled and out of tune." This is because we are unaware of ourselves. Have you ever looked at a photograph of yourself and been surprised by what you see - "I don't look like that! I didn't realize I was doing that!" Have you caught a reflection of yourself in a window and been surprised at how you are standing.



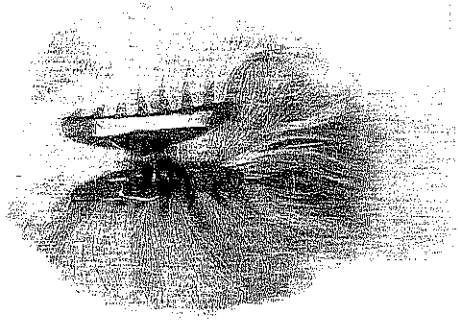
TOUCH



TASTE



SIXTH SENSE



Her pure and eloquent blood Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought That one might almost say, her body thought.

JOHN DONNE: OF THE PROGRESS OF THE SOUL (SECOND ANTHEM: 1612).

being, Dr. G.E. Coghill, in the *Appreciation for The Universal Constant in Living*, said:

*Alexander has further demonstrated the very important psychological principle that the proprioceptive system can be brought under conscious control and can be educated to carry to the motor centers the stimulus that is responsible for the muscular activity that brings about the manner of working (use) of the mechanism of correct posture.*

**THE ALEXANDER  
TECHNIQUE BRINGS  
YOU TO YOUR SENSES**

Alexander showed that it is possible to be unaware of what we are doing. It is generally assumed that feelings give us accurate information about our bodies. When this feedback is incorrect, our sensory appreciation becomes unreliable. In connection with unreliable sensory appreciation the following story was related by Alexander in his book *Constructive Conscious Control*:

*A little girl who had been unable to walk properly for some years was brought to the writer for a diagnosis of the defects in the use of the psychophysical mechanisms that were responsible for her more or less crippled state. When this had been done, a request was made that a demonstration should be given to those present of the manipulative side of the work so that certain readjustments and coordinations might be temporarily secured, thus showing, in keeping with the diagnosis, the possibilities of re-education on a general basis in a*

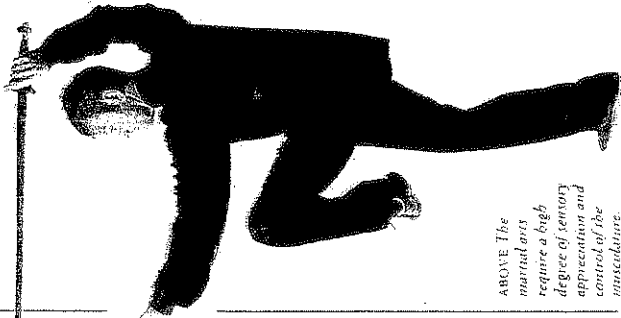
**PROPRIOCEPTION**

Proprioception is a term first used by the eminent neurophysiologist Sir Charles Sherrington. It is our sixth sense. It is the process through which human beings get information from their bodies, ascertain their position in space, and recognize whether too much muscular effort is being used. This instinctive and unconscious process has developed and acted as a trustworthy guide throughout the course of evolution, ensuring correct and efficient posture and ease in movement. Sensory appreciation allows us to consciously receive and evaluate this information and lets us know whether our body is functioning well. Refined sensory appreciation improves the feedback from all the senses.

*ABOVE It is all too easy to be unaware of your habitual stance and posture. A close examination in the mirror may reveal surprising bad habits.*

*case of this kind. The demonstration was successful from the point of view. For the time being, the child's body was comparatively straightened out - that is, without the extreme twists and distortions that had been so noticeable when she came into the room. When this was done, the little girl looked across at her mother and said to her in an indescrutable tone, "Oh, Mommy, he has pulled me all out of shape." Her deceptive feelings led this little girl to believe that she was standing straight, when she was all out of shape. We are often under the same misconception. What we do feel might be because it is our habitual way of acting, no matter how wrong and unsatisfactory it is in reality.*

Change involves carrying out an activity that goes against the habits of a lifetime. This is certainly one of the most challenging aspects of practicing the Alexander Technique, but the reward is a more finely-tuned sense of ourselves.



*ABOVE The marauders require a high degree of sensory appreciation and control of the musculature.*

## LYING DOWN (SEMI-SUPINE)

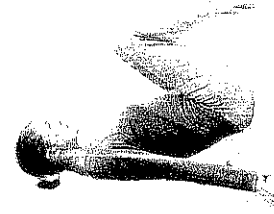
Lying down is one of the quickest and simplest ways of allowing our bodies to come back into shape. This procedure has beneficial effects. It allows the spine to de-rotate and lengthen, and brings the head into a more forward position

relative to the neck. In the supine position with knees bent, the pelvis can tilt backward and the lumbar curve flattens out. The spinal and abdominal muscles can release undue tensions, allowing gravity to have a beneficial effect on the diaphragm (see Breathing, page 40) and the ribcage to work more effi-

ciently. A deeper breathing pattern happens, and the whole system calms down.

Without the fear of falling, the inherent elasticity of the body has a chance to reassert itself. If you lie down for ten to fifteen minutes each day, you will find that it makes an appreciable difference.

## LYING DOWN



**1** Put a book or some other support under your head. This needs to be at least 2in/5cm high on the floor. Sit on the floor in front of the book or other support and breathe out.

**3** Bend your knees and bring your feet near to your buttocks. You need to have your knees bent but not strained, so your lower back is not arched but is in contact with the floor. Place your hands on your lower ribs, just above your waist.

**2** Allow your spine to roll down onto the floor until the back of your head is on the book. Be careful that your neck is free and your head is not jammed against the book. Too few books will reduce the natural curve of the neck, and too many could push your chin onto your chest and restrict breathing.

KNEES BENT

BACK IN CONTACT WITH FLOOR



FEET FLAT ON FLOOR

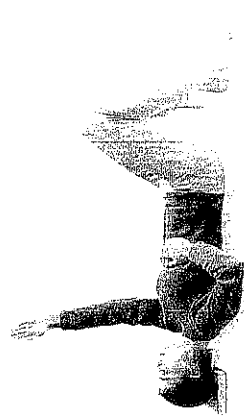
HEAD SUPPORTED

## BENEFITS OF LYING DOWN

- ▲ Releases muscles and joints.
- ▲ Takes pressure off spine.
- ▲ Releases diaphragm giving more rib movement.
- ▲ Allows for more regular breathing.
- ▲ Gives digestive release.
- ▲ Frees neck muscles.
- ▲ Takes pressure off eyes.
- ▲ Jaw releases.
- ▲ Undenches the hands.
- ▲ Gives time to think and become more conscious.



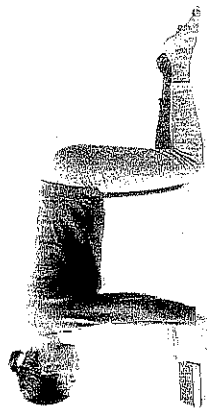
**4** As you lie in this semi-supine position, allow your whole back to be in contact with the floor. Be aware of the nape, weight-bearing parts of the back - the head, the shoulders, the elbows, the hips (pelvic crest), and the feet. If you stop tightening your muscles unnecessarily, the ribs move more freely to allow the air to come in and out.



**5** After about ten minutes, you will often find that your breathing has changed. When you begin to think about getting up, remember to take your time. Slowly raise one arm above your body so your fingers are pointing directly upward and then look to one side.



**6** Let your arm lead your body so that you roll over onto your side. Stop and breathe out and check that you have not stiffened your neck or begun to overcontract your stomach muscles.



**7** Move onto your hands. Rock forward and backward, allowing your head to lead your body forward. Say "No" to the idea of standing up. Bring one foot forward and put it in front of you. Allow your head to nod forward and your weight to move forward from the hips until you begin to move diagonally upward until you are standing.



## **CARING FOR YOUR VOICE**

For any human being who possesses the ability to speak and listen, voice is a key method for communication with other people.

The voice box (*larynx*) must be able to move easily and without tension. Posture and body awareness become crucial factors in helping or hindering its freedom to function. Equally the voice must never be strained. Straining and pushing the voice can create swelling or a change in shape to the vocal cords (*vocal folds*).

There is a lubricating substance (*mucus*) in and around the larynx, which plays a vital part in keeping the various moving parts working with ease and efficiency. This mucus may well be affected by changes in the air, general health, and certain foods. The result will be either a dry throat with irritation to the vocal folds, or an excessive build up of mucus that will need to be cleared. Sometimes damage from misuse, tension, poor air quality or substances that manipulate the mucus balance away from its optimum state may result in long-term or even permanent damage.

Voice only goes 'wrong' because either mis-use ('abuse') or bad health is the issue. A sore, tired, or husky voice is usually the result.

## **PHYSICAL POSTURE AND TENSION**

Avoid talking with chin up or down. Try instead to lengthen the back of the neck and look at the horizon.

Avoid shouting, yelling, or competing with other noise. Consider learning how to project your voice safely, or making use of artificial amplification (microphone/megaphone).

Avoid pushing your voice to grab attention. Perhaps using a whistle or other noisemaker is wiser in some situations.

Avoid drying out. Sip water throughout the day; 2 to 3 litres are the healthy and recommended amount.

Avoid tiring your voice and going beyond what your body wants to do. You should try resting where you can, getting others to talk, and consider using visual aids in a presentation (video, acetates etc.).

Avoid being physically placed at a disadvantage. Where possible arrange a space to improve the acoustics. Endeavour to keep free from unhelpful tension both physically and emotionally.

## **AIR QUALITY**

Avoid: smoking, smoky atmospheres, dust, air-conditioning and strong smelling fumes (paint, petrol, glue, marker-pens, and other chemicals). Try wearing a mask for DIY/maintenance work, open a window where there may be fumes, keep moisture in the air where there is air-conditioning (put water by a radiator and green plants in the room).

## **FOOD AND DRINK**

Dairy products tend to create excessive mucus.

Alcohol dries the mucus that is essential to ease of vocal operation.

Sugar may also affect the balance (sweets, candies, colas etc.).

Caffeine dries the mucus.

Sometimes hot spicy food may upset the voice.

Drinking two or three litres of water a day is recommended by E.N.T. and other medical specialists.

## **COLDS AND FLU**

Avoid any remedy that claims to dry up your cold as it will also dry the necessary lubricating mucus. Drink plenty of fluid (especially water).

Rest.

Throat lozenges strip the necessary lubricating mucus from the back of the throat. Try pastilles or chewing gum instead.

Inhale steam through the mouth (without the addition of any additional substance like menthol or other 'soothing' substances added in).

Avoid coughing where you can. Try swallowing hard or gently clearing the throat.

Never whisper when the voice is below par.

