The Actor Becomes

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In Western theatrical tradition, the actor prepares to become a character onstage. The process is an internalization of the personality profile of the character wherein the actor becomes those qualities in order to perform a character, tell a story, and enhance audience belief. Personality psychology suggests a potential for the actor to be vulnerable to diffuse states of self. Does becoming a character onstage change the personality of the actor offstage? How might that change impact his or her personality? This theoretical paper analyzes theories of Western theatrical culture and psychology to suggest vulnerability.

Keywords: Theatre; actors; performing; psychology; personality

The naturalism of performance originated at the Moscow Arts Theatre has become the stylistic basis adapted by actors in stories dramatized for theatre, television, and film in the United States of America. There have been many scholar-researchers in the performing arts to speak of the theoretical and practical relationships between actors and the characters they play. *How does an actor become a character? How does personality influence the art of acting?* Fundamental to the art of acting is not only *playing* a character, but *becoming* one. It will be considered whether playing a character in a theatrical format can change an actor's sense of self, and implications in an ensemble.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Psychology has addressed the nature of creativity through a myriad of quantitative and qualitative studies investigating the 4 Ps--people, process, product, and places. These studies have examined creativity and psychopathology, eminence in children and adults, psychobiographies, cognition, product development, and creative achievement. There is ongoing interest around the relationship between personality and creativity, yet there are limited studies with artist populations as the subjects of research.

There are more quantitative and qualitative studies looking at musicians and visual artists in terms of process and psychopathology than there are actor-subjects. The research that has been done on actors has looked at cognitive, personality, and biological traits; contextualized studies examine the socio-cultural dynamics operating within creative ensembles, between actors, and their audience (Thomson *et al.* 2011). Social psychology has looked at the social influences that enhance the process of acting, which include clear direction, trust, freedom, respect, challenge, collaboration, unity with the audience, and spontaneity (Nemiro 1997). Developmental psychology has discovered that actors have an early affinity for fictional worlds, the alternative world of others' minds, the ability to imitate and memorize, all of which lay the groundwork for performance (Goldstein *et al.* 2009).

Acting as a Creative Activity

There is no single well of inspiration, within an easily defined perspective of personality, where all creativity emerges.

Creativity is a relatively new term used to describe human endeavors. Many cultures around the world perceive artists to be messengers of a higher source, while many theorists distinguish artists as individuals who apply the imagination within a specified field. A Western-dominated psychology of creativity distinguishes art from creativity by referring to it as a domain.

Acting has existed since the beginning of recorded time, and the diversity of styles can be seen across cultures. Performance was born out of cultural, social, and human complexities; it was meant to be a form of expressive communication and a means for the realization of human kind (Barba *et al.* 1991). Actors train to learn systems of performance that will help them translate the energy and potential of mind, body, emotions, voice, and text in order to be a multidimensional transmitter of stories to an audience. The actor transports themes, morals, and story lines through the performance of a character.

Konstantin Stanislavsky's training at the Moscow Arts Theatre emphasized a system of acting utilizing the imaginative structures of "what if" and "affective memory" in the actor (Banham 1988). Stanislavsky (1950), within his system of acting, encouraged the actor to acquire a complete mastery of "the art of self-possession," that is, an ability to forget all about oneself, and "yield his place to the character on stage" (p. 117). His system was later adapted into a more psychologically and emotionally based "Method" approach, which characterized the trainings of the Actor's Studio in New York. Despite differences in the Stanislavsky and "Method" systems, both approaches referred to the portrayal of truth in the actor-subject. Stanislavsky (1968) explained, "It is only when his sense of truth is thoroughly developed that he will reach the point when every pose, every gesture will have an inner justification, which is to say they express the state of the person he is portraying" (p. 185). Training leads the actor to truthfully represent the state of his character, a process requiring him to become one with it.

Acting, Becoming, Being

The art of acting is a developmental activity. The actor trains, rehearses, and performs characters to live audiences. The enterprise of acting stimulates and engages the creative imagination of the actor and the spectator. Any study that investigates the performing arts must appreciate that performing artists are always embedded within a contextual setting, moment-to-moment interactions with others, and draws from personal, past and relational experiences, and imaginings with self, other, and/or the environment (Thomson *et al.* 2011). For example, a study comparing the childhood of actors and lawyers found that actors tended to report reading and enjoying fiction more, as well as engaging in more pretend and role play than lawyers (Goldstein *et al.* 2009). It can be inferred that actors have a natural propensity for openness, stepping into the world of stories, and becoming another. Actors also endorse higher fantasy proneness, which is significantly associated with the disorienting effect of dissociation (Thomson *et al.* 2011).

For the actor trained in method acting, the qualities of a character in a story are imagined and adapted from within the actor-resource. An actor is given a text, and he brings the character to life. He defines the basic qualities of a character including age, marital status, residence, the era he lives in, and social concerns of that time. The actor will, then, infer more

complex details of a character such as his feelings, opinions, behaviors, and objectives. The actor will create a personality profile for the character that he plays, which will serve as a trajectory of information in order to become a character.

  Becoming a character associates with *being* a character, and the two verbs are often used interchangeably by those in the field. When an actor becomes or is a character on stage, in a film, or on television, there should be belief from the spectator's point of view that the actor is that role. This is a result of the intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, and energetic embodiment of the personality profile within the multidimensional actor. The spectator is immersed in the context of themes, morals, and storyline; he believes, for example, it is Phaedra on stage. The spectator is conscious it could be Lindsay Lee from Kansas, however, the belief has been placed on the nature of her becoming Phaedra. What features of an actor's personality make the art of becoming a character possible?

Personality and Boundary Blurring

Individualistic research methods have looked at the affective qualities of actors, and have found that actors were more emotional and sensitive than non-artists; performers had an ability to feel and express emotions honestly, as well as in unique ways that were effective in meeting the demands of both intrapersonal and interpersonal situations; performing artists were emotionally less variable compared to a control group which suggested that these artists possessed more emotional regulation (Thomson *et al.* 2011).

  The actor has a unique ability to access emotions as a result of increased emotional regulation. This could explain, in part, how an actor can embody the information of the personality profile to then delve into the emotional reservoir of the character, and swim, not sink. Actors may be able to submerge themselves within the role of a character due to an increased ability to employ non-pathological dissociation. In particular, actors have "the ability to engage in heightened states of absorption that cause diffuse self-states and intense sensory emotional imaginative experiences" (Thomson *et al.* 2011). The diffuse self-states and imaginative experiences may be due to the embodiment of the character's personality profile.

  Personality is a dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine her characteristic behavior and thought (Costa *et al.* 1994). Personality is also the unique and relatively enduring set of behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and motives that characterize an individual (Feist 2010). It is those behaviors, feelings, thoughts and motives that are presented by an actor when she becomes a character. Similarly, the actor's personality traits determine the quality by which she approaches her craft.

  The five-factor model provides an analysis of trait concepts. Historically, trait psychology has been unable to clarify which traits are fundamental and which are derivative. Frustrated with ambiguity, researchers have sought to derive the structure of trait terms through the big five model (Davis *et al.* 1994). The model indicates five central human concerns: (I) Surgency (Extraversion), (II) Agreeableness (Warmth), (III) Conscientiousness (Will), (IV) Emotional Stability (Neuroticism), and (V) Culture (Intellectance, Openness to Experience); they have demonstrated considerable generality and applicability across various self and peer report measures of personality traits. The five factors cover a vast conceptual space

that encompasses the central human concerns of power (Surgency), love (Agreeableness), work (Conscientiousness), affect (Emotional Stability), and intellect (Culture) (McAdams 1992). In what ways do trait factors relate to the actor's personality, and the creative process of becoming a character?

First, the model is not perfect science, nor is it culturally comprehensive. Rather, it is a hierarchical spectrum of conceptual language that is widely used in personality psychology, and it has unlocked some research on the actor and personality. When it comes to creative inspiration, research has indicated that artists believe imaginative assertiveness, cultural competence, intrinsic motivation, and having many ideas enhanced creativity (Gluck *et al.* 2002). This would reinforce that creative activity is a result of individual or combination factors in (I) Surgency (Extraversion), (V) Culture (Intellectance, Openness to Experience), as well as (III) Conscientiousness (Will). Furthermore, professional actors demonstrate higher levels of extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and empathy as compared to a general population sample (Thomson *et al.* 2011). Actor traits may then be correlated with factors (I) Surgency (Extraversion), (II) Agreeableness (Warmth), and (V) Culture (Intellectance, Openness to Experience) in the big five model.

Personality traits also indicate qualities about the actor's process. An actor's ability to submerge into the emotional experiences of becoming a character marks the emotional regulation indicated in factor (IV) Emotional Stability. Based on trends in personality psychology, it is possible that boundary blurring occurs as result of contrasting traits. All traits in the model are a spectrum with its contrasts, and actors maintain both their own personality and their characters. For example, factor (IV) has contrast traits which include nervousness, moodiness, and tempermentality (Goldberg 1993). Actors who fluctuate in emotional stability within their own personality due to nervousness, moodiness, and temper, yet are open, may be more vulnerable to boundary blurring. Different acting techniques may lead to potential increase of distress if actors are not able to regulate shifts between their self and their characters, hence, the process of blurring boundaries between role/ self.

Boundaries are developed in actor training to establish emotional, mental, physical, and psychic distinction between self and character. It is a wall between the vast diffusion of self-states and imaginative experiences, so there is little to no distortion. The inside-out approach (in reference to Western theatrical forms, including method acting) as opposed to outside-in (in reference to Eastern theatrical forms) require actors to connect emotionally, mentally, and psychologically to their characters; hence, a diffusion of role/self may provoke a loss of control onstage or cause increased emotional distress post performance. Although the inside-out approach may lend a performance more immediacy and potency, the Western actor is at risk for increased psychological distress (Thomson *et al.* 2011).

The process of developing a character is an act of vulnerability; actors train to be open. "Open people tend to be more imaginative and curious, and so it is not surprising that open people are more creative. This is not just a theoretical connection, but an empirical one" (Feist 2010). On the other hand, an actor who is emotionally stable, yet lacks openness,

may be unable to access the emotional, mental, physical, and psychic facets, which allow him to become his character, and provide the immediacy and potency an audience desires.

How, then, do individuals who work with actors onstage and offstage support the potential for boundary blurring of role/self? Is there a way change can be addressed in research, in psychotherapy, in an actor's training studio, in rehearsal or, simply, in the way in which one communicates with him/her onstage and offstage?

DISCUSSION

The art of acting is a transmission of the human condition. Artist practitioners and colleagues must build awareness by observing their own bias, increasing sensitivity, and discussing modes of intervention at appropriate times within the relationship and in recognition of the transmission.

Actors, like most people, are composed of the relationships between traits, the environmental and natural factors that communicate with traits, and the individual self as a living system with other selves. Congruently, the characters they portray have their own personality profiles. When working with an ensemble, these relationships are multiplied thereby making diversity of experiences imperative in one's relationship with actors. The multiple dimensions call for an individualistic approach to research, and a strong sensitivity in the case of communication to an ensemble.

Building sensitivity within an ensemble is paramount. It is important to create rehearsals which honor the transmission of experiences in a safe way, which can include meditation, warm-ups, vocal, and other body exercises which emphasize entering and releasing of a character. Alternatively, facilitating conversations between actors where they communicate experiences without bias on the part of others to qualify and/or define their experiences as negative or positive.

A significant consideration in the occurrence of boundary blurring of role/self is to engage one's sense of reality. It is important to ask oneself: What factors in this role constitute change in self? How do I perceive change in self? How am I able and/or unable to deal with these changes? These observations should be documented.

If boundary blurring of role/self has occurred to the extent that the individual and/or the ensemble are in threat, other forms of immediate interventions may be needed, based on the resources of the artist community. They may include a mental health clinician, a psychiatrist, a spiritual leader, a body healer, and/or other specialists. Due to vulnerability inherent in the art form, caution should be considered, safety is recommended, and support networks should be made available in times of dissociation.

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