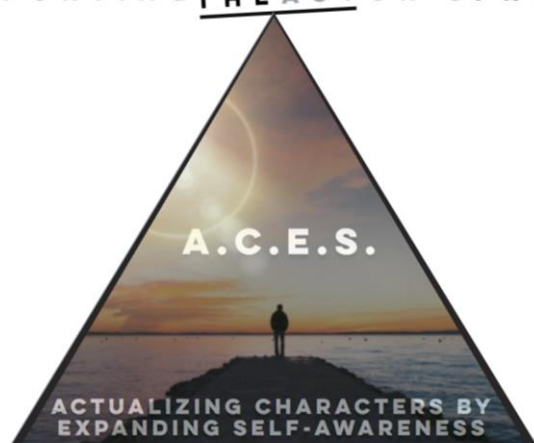


SUPPORTING THE ACTOR'S PROCESS



# THE CORNERSTONES OF A.C.E.S.

## ABSTRACT

A clinically informed, research-based character development process. Designed to prioritize the actor's mental health while increasing capacity for embodying emotional distress and human suffering in character portrayals.

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## Preamble

I am not a therapist. My job is not to heal but to provide a safe and containing space to guide actors in creating solid boundaries between themselves and the characters they portray. I do this by expanding their self-awareness. The vehicle is the actor's artistic expression. Without question their personal development is wrapped up inside that. If there is personal work to be done outside the work of character creation, I set the boundary and always sign post the actor. My responsibility as I see it, and why, on top of my directing career, I trained for years in psychotherapy and experiential techniques is to support the actor's wellbeing before, during and after they dive deep into the characters they are embodying. This involves the ability and willingness to help reflect with the actor while they embody their characters. It's very personal and creative work but necessary for the serious, health-conscious actor who wants to grow with every role they perform, become emotionally stronger, more self-aware, and resilient in their craft.

My connection with actors started in the 1980's when I was an actor myself. In 2005 I turned to directing and started what has become a 16-year collaboration with the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children at Western University in London, Ontario Canada. I've directed hundreds of trauma-based dramatizations for their educational toolkits with an equal number of professional actors. It's the intersection of my five years of psychotherapy training with clinical supervision and directing actors in trauma-based narratives that created the seedbed for Actualizing Characters by Expanding Self-awareness (ACES) - which I stress is not therapy. It's character development for trauma-based narratives. This paper is an epiphany, an 'aha' moment that has taken years to arrive at and only after collaborating with actors as a director, acting instructor and an actor myself.

## **What I Could Never Figure Out...until now**

It started almost 40 years ago when I was taking acting classes. There were actors who were full of themselves and there I was trying hard to be authentic against a wall of falseness or what I thought was insincerity from the occasional scene partner. If I could just tell them what the crux of the scene was, they would be able to act it. On occasion I could not hold back my frustration and my impatience got the best of me. I would blurt out what their character was going through emotionally and what they needed to do to make the scene work. They listened intently but still could not hit the emotional notes that I could feel inside myself and, funnily enough, also struggled to release in my own character work.

Twenty years later, when I started directing, I came up against the same kind of actor when casting projects. I never hired them. I wanted authenticity and that required a certain amount of baring one's soul. I needed to be emotionally engaged watching them – not only from a director's perspective but from an audience perspective as well. If I didn't believe what they were saying, the message of the narrative will not be taken to heart by an audience.

When I began teaching acting, I thought "I now have the perfect opportunity to dig into the actors process and tell them what's what!". To my surprise, I found that not every actor wants to dig deep into their soul and pour themselves into their characters. It takes a certain type of actor to want to do that. Those are the actors I praised while the other ones I did my best to work with but felt that I failed them - not to mention how they must have felt with me prying into their personal space and pressuring them to get emotional. It was a shameful act and I apologise to all the actors who had that experience with me. No acting instructor or director or anyone collaborating with actors should disrespect those boundaries.

To my point, about five years ago I had an actor in one of my workshops. He was rather good. A talented, good looking young man. He seemed to hit all the right notes in his monologue, was interesting to watch but he had no emotional connection to the material. I did not feel anything from him. We went through a series of 'hot seating' questions that was designed to get him in touch with his character's emotional world. After a time, I could tell he was getting in touch with something in his own life. I had him recite some of the lines from the monologue. It was different. Not as gimmicky and more honest even if it was void of emotion. At least it wasn't gimmicky. When I asked him to start the monologue from the top, he went back to the way he was performing it before. The work I did with him changed nothing. After that night he never returned to the workshop. Then there was the incredibly emotional actor who poured her heart out in the 'hot seating' exercise and when I asked her to use it in her monologue she froze. Her emotions 'locked up' and she desperately wanted to free them. Though I tried, I was at a loss of how I could help. Interestingly, the monologue was about rejection and feelings of inadequacy around being an artist and performing in public. Based on these and many similar experiences over the years, I jotted down a half-baked theory about the fear actors have of using their true self in their characterizations:

*The experience of emotionally connecting to oneself feels foreign, strange, uncomfortable, even unreal. They prefer to produce tears and use visual gimmicks rather than connect to their own internal emotional life. They have drawn no emotional parallel from their own lives to fulfil the character. They have a preconceived idea of what the character should be and strive to meet that idea which disconnects them from their own emotional life in the process. The result is a desensitised representation of a person. They act in a vacuum and cannot connect to the other actors let alone themselves.*

What I did not realise at the time, and what I understand now after being on the frontlines as a psychotherapist in training, is that I described the effect of trauma on human functioning. It's quite possible, though I couldn't prove it then, that these actors were protecting themselves from their own past trauma through the fight, flight or freeze responses. As much as they may have wanted to use themselves in the role they were blocked by their own defences. Five years on and four psychotherapy certificates later, I figured out I can help actors by increasing their capacity for resilience and by managing their defences. This in turn provides increased capacity to embody emotional experiences which in turn increases their courage to create robust characterizations.

### **Trauma Based Narratives & the Actor**

If we consider all the trauma-based stories that are being told on stage, film, and TV and how it impacts us, the viewer, then we must take time to consider how it is impacting the actor who is embodying those roles in which the fictional trauma is happening.

*"Trauma, by definition, is unbearable and intolerable. Most rape victims, combat soldiers, and children who have been molested become so upset when they think about what they experienced that they tried to push it out of their minds, trying to act as if nothing happened, and move on. It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability" (Van Der Kolk 2014)*

Sometimes, not until after the role has been embodied does the actor even become aware of the impact it has on them. Burgoyne, Poulin, Rearden (1999) conducted a study that surprisingly found that student actors were unaware of any emotional implications of roles until such a distressing experience actually happened to them. Mandell (2017:39) also noted "...It is something that is mostly ignored in actor training in the United States and that's a problem for actors... it affects their health." When we talk about embodying characters and the complex management of boundaries and defences, acting is not only about the journey of actualizing the character "but also the return"

to self (Schechner 1983, 97). As Panoutsos (2021) suggests, “The lack of ‘return’ processes taught/practiced, indicates the requirement for the re-consideration of the performance cycle by training environments, where the warm-up, the performance and the cool-down will be seen as inseparable”. Burgoyne, Poulin, Rearden (1999) also noted that one student in their study, who attended several theatre programs, felt that the impact of acting on the student’s mental health “are not addressed systematically in actor training.”

The evidence is out there, in a multitude of articles and videos all over the internet, that show mainstream actors and their struggles, after the fact, with certain roles and the major impact it has had on their mental health. As *Szlawieniec-Haw (2020) concludes*, an actor’s self-awareness is a vital component to their health and wellness. As directors, producers, agents, managers, coaches, and acting instructors and anyone else who associates with actors professionally and personally we have a responsibility to ourselves and to those actors. We need to support their wellbeing by checking in with them, being sensitive to the potential retraumatizing and/or mental health risks their roles may expose them to. We should never assume that they will be okay when portraying a role with a trauma-based narrative.

### **Actualising Characters by Expanding Self-awareness (ACES)**

ACES is a process I developed that increases the actor’s capacity to embody a character’s emotional distress and suffering - what I refer to as ‘trauma-based’ characters - while keeping the actors’ mental wellbeing a priority. In presenting ACES and its cornerstones of *Resilience, Boundaries, Defence Management* and *Self-reflection*, I realize that the actors’ mental health has never truly been incorporated into any of the acting techniques that have been taught in the past hundred years. Stanislavski warned that the actor must not lose themselves in the role but never instructed how *not* to do this. Similarly, Mandel identifies the gap in the actors’ post-performance practice: ‘in Stanislavsky’s writing, there’s a great deal of attention to becoming the character ...but there’s no attention to becoming yourself again’ (Mandell 2017, 41). Meanwhile Strasberg’s Method insisted on bringing the actors personal material to the role. Stanislavski, Strasberg, Meisner, Grotowski, Chekhov, Adler, Hagen and even the Practical Aesthetics technique developed by Mamet & Macy have been the acting techniques of choice. Even hybrids of all the above are being used for learning the craft of acting yet none of them provide the actor with a detailed process to look after themselves while disentangling and elucidating a characters’ emotionally complex life.

ACES is in addition to all the standard acting techniques. It adds the ever-important element of safeguarding the actors’ mental health. As Mandell (2017;39) states, the actor’s health “may also affect the quality of their acting—if you are afraid [that] you may never be able to get out of character, or let go of the character, you may resist getting fully into character”. Ultimately, ACES increases the actors’ capacity and resilience for embodying emotional distress and human suffering. It develops stronger actors who aren’t afraid to bring more of themselves to the challenging roles they portray.

The ACES model has clinical underpinnings informed by the Therapeutic Spiral Model (TSM), a clinically modified form of psychodrama for healing trauma. I will be referencing TSM as well as drawing on my own practical work with actors using the ACES approach to demonstrate its effectiveness. For reasons of confidentiality, I have changed the names of those actors I have included in my examples. I will also be referencing research on the actor’s wellbeing and how embodying emotional distress and suffering affects their own lives.

You may be asking ‘Why use a clinical model for treating trauma to develop a method for working with actors?’ While it’s true that the trauma-based characters they embody are make-believe,

Danielle Szlawieniec-Haw's 2020 actor study revealed that although 'reversibility' is the difference between actors representing emotional distress and suffering and actual events of equal intensity, it is not erasure. She uses the example of an actor playing a holocaust victim and an actual victim of the holocaust. At the end of the performance the actor is still alive and leaves the production thus the actual lived experience of being a victim is reversible. However, and unfortunately, the actors' thoughts and feelings are still experienced as real to them and carries consequences. As Mark Seton (2013) explains, although little attention is paid to the impact a trauma-based performance has on an actor, research has shown that trauma "does not distinguish between cognitively understood fiction and perceived experience. Therefore, management of traumatization requires both cognitive awareness and embodied engagement with the possibilities of traumatization". Seton further suggests that an increased 'duty of care' is needed in the preparation for representing physical and psychological violence. A self-supporting resiliency that can regulate the vulnerability of the actor as they experience the inevitability of trauma in their character portrayals. Returning to Szlawieniec-Haw's research (2020:33) she reported that, "the greater the level of vulnerability, the more strength required to achieve it". Her study also revealed that the path to maintaining that "depth of strength" is through self-awareness and self-trust. To this end, *Actualizing Characters by Expanding Self-awareness* is a response to Szlawieniec-Haw's and Seton's conclusions as well as additional notable research in the field.

### **Inspiration for ACES**

Before I explain ACES and the principles on which it operates it is important to first explain the model that inspired it. In order to do that I will need to give an overview of both psychodrama and TSM and its purpose in the therapeutic world. I will do my utmost to be succinct without too much psychobabble.

Firstly though, it's important to know that I was drawn to TSM because of its action methods. One of its key components is physically embodying different perspectives by *role reversing*. This can lead to insights that would never have been acquired otherwise. It can open us up to emotional as well as cognitive understanding of various parts of ourselves and others. An important part of the ACES process is embodiment and role reversal. My own practical research with actors indicated that role reversing actors helped greatly to embody and name the affect and not overwhelm them emotionally while they build a layered character portrayal. Similarly, Szlawieniec-Haw (2020) noted in her study that emotions can be challenging to label and give words to which make it harder for the actor to express and therefore process. Having such a space for processing is a "fundamental part of the actors' health and wellness" (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:82).

### **Psychodrama**

About 100 years ago JL Moreno developed Psychodrama. It was inspired by live theatre production hence the terms used in a psychodrama are similar. The group therapist is called the 'director'. The client is referred to as 'the protagonist', the main actor in a psychodrama. Group members supporting the work, known as 'auxiliary egos', take on 'roles' in the protagonist's life. It was originally developed as a group action method, is now used in one-to-one therapy, it comes with its own theory on childhood development and, is rooted in existential philosophy. Its focus is on developing our true selves through discovering and exercising a plethora of authentic roles that exist within us that allow for spontaneous<sup>i</sup> and creative responses. Part of that self-discovery journey involves acknowledging the roles that no longer serve us and that hinder our ability to be spontaneous and creative which Moreno believed is the key to living fully in the present.

Psychodrama's philosophy and theories are very distinct and separate from Klein's object relations theory and Bowlby's childhood attachment theory. Moreno strayed from the norm. His theories were wildly imaginable and consequently he unintentionally managed to do what no other theorist

of his time could do – psychodrama physicalized aspects of Klein’s and Bowlby’s theories. Moreno’s practical application of his action techniques of *role reversal*, *doubling*<sup>ii</sup> and *mirroring*<sup>iii</sup> were clinically sound and dovetailed beautifully with attachment and object relations theory. Today, these techniques have found their place in various mainstream therapeutic modalities in some form or another.

### **Therapeutic Spiral Model (TSM)**

TSM is a clinically modified form of psychodrama specifically used to heal trauma. It was initiated by Dr Kate Hudgins and further co-developed with Francesca Toscani several decades ago. TSM, like Psychodrama, is an experiential group action method that promotes personal discovery and growth through spontaneity. What sets it apart from classical psychodrama is its internal role map or what TSM practitioners call the TSIRA (Trauma Survivors Internal Role Atom). It has been clinically proven effective in working with trauma survivors and those diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The map includes Prescriptive Roles, Containing Roles, Internalized Trauma-Based Roles and Post-Traumatic Growth Roles.

There are also six safety structures that are implemented during warm-up and prior to any work commencing. These safety action structures are used to create a space that contains and supports the work of trauma survivors, so they become less anxious and more spontaneous which, like psychodrama, is the primary purpose of TSM. The goal for both is to be fully present in the here and now. Though all safety action structures and the TSIRA are important when working within TSM, I will discuss only the aspects of TSM that pertain to the cornerstones of ACES and how I have adapted them for my work with actors.

### **The Cornerstones of ACES**

I believe in the power of acting and its influence it can have on people’s lives – the change it can facilitate, the wounds it can heal, the ‘what if’s’ it answers, the influence it has on our decisions. My admiration for actors is connected to their ability to take an imaginary circumstance and make it so believable that it stirs emotions within me. I am grateful to the actors who make me think and feel and reflect on my life through their portrayals of characters that are challenged with life’s difficult obstacles. They inspire me to make changes in my own life. To those actors I thank you. To those actors who aspire to this level of influence I support and encourage your journey. This is why I developed ACES.

Simply stated, ACES is a safe and ethical process to explore the painful and distressing emotions of characters while prioritizing the actor’s mental health. It operates on the principles of: *Resilience*, *Boundaries*, *Défense Management* and *Self-reflection*. These cornerstones can be addressed individually and, by consequence, may address the other cornerstones concurrently. Ultimately they support actors by emphasizing awareness of their personal resources prior to accessing their vulnerabilities. It empowers and it strengthens their ability to be in the moment making spontaneous, authentic choices that are aligned with their character.



### **Cornerstone of Resilience**

*“The greater the level of vulnerability, the more strength required to achieve it. How do actors...build and maintain the depth of strength necessary to continue putting themselves on the line in their work, pushing themselves outside their comfort zones..?”  
(Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:33)*

Szlawieniec-Haw's study revealed that actors found support in thinking about acting "as occurring in a safe, sacred space outside the everyday realm". This idea allowed actors (in her study) to "feel freer and better able to cope with a range of emotions, dialogue and actions they engaged with through their characters, especially when representing unethical individuals or perpetrators of dolesse<sup>iv</sup>" (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:79). ACES cornerstone of Resilience resources the actor, safeguards them and builds capacity for increased vulnerability by reminding them of their strengths and/or developing new ones. It puts them in a positive place where they can feel their own agency, be less anxious and more present. It's their foundation on which they can explore their characters and from which they can return. A home base if you will. In ACES I call it the *actor's centre*.

In TSM this process has been referred to as a "state of spontaneous self-organization" (Hudgins 2019:5). Prior to any work with trauma a series of "Prescriptive Roles" or "Restorative Roles" are created and embodied in support of facing the horrors of past trauma. The roles are designed to reclaim lost spontaneity, build creativity, and ultimately gain resilience (Hudgins 2019). This is accomplished through the embodying of internal or intrapsychic, interpersonal, and transpersonal strengths. In ACES, an actor knowing, stating, and embodying the strengths they bring to their work is a stark reminder of their resiliency. It's this resiliency that gives them security and a safe space from which they can venture out and explore familiar and unfamiliar emotional terrain. In attachment theory (Bowlby 1982) this is considered a secure attachment. A child needs a secure base from which they can explore the world knowing they always have a safe haven to return to. In the case of ACES, it's a secure attachment to oneself rather than a caregiver.

### **The Actors Centre – Creating the Home Base**

#### **Interpersonal Strength**

Much like the trauma survivor who embarks on their healing journey in TSM, the actor embarks on their characters journey uncovering past and present traumas that awakens an emotional life. As a result, Szlawieniec-Haw (2020) found that actors who portray emotional suffering, distress and violence in their work are prone to character '*lingerings*' after a performance or several performances as is the case with theatre production.

Her study found that one way actors ground themselves to their everyday life is to reach out to a family member or close friend. Long established relationships helped these actors drop "back into themselves and their everyday lives. For example, when one participant experienced intense lingering, a telephone call to their father instantly grounded them in a familiar parent/child relationship and, through that, re-established a sense of self" (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:101). In TSM this is considered an interpersonal strength, i.e., a strength that one obtains through a dependable relationship (past, present, real, or fictionalized) in volatile times (Hudgins, Toscani 2013).

In working with ACES, I ask actors to embody a strength that they either get from someone else or that they give to others. Either way they are connecting with a relationship that gives them strength. As Szlawieniec-Haw discovered and, has been proven clinically with TSM, the purpose of this strength is to ground the actor to someone trusting in their lives. In so doing it also grounds them to their own identity - prior to stepping into the world of their character.

#### **Intrapsychic/Personal Strength**

In addition to interpersonal strengths, I also ask the actor to bring a personal strength to the session. This strength comes from within and is something that the actor relies on to get them through difficult situations. In this instance I will compare the struggling actor to the Hudgins & Toscani (2013) description of survivors of trauma. Both can feel isolated in their respective worlds and need



to rely on their own skills for survival. In this context, both have within them inner strengths whether they know it or not. This internal strength is self-generating and needs no one else to prompt it or inspire it. It lives with them and is readily accessible and can be summoned whenever they need it. It can be courage, honesty, empathy, self-compassion, humour, analytical, assertiveness, playfulness, anything that supports their survival.

### **Transpersonal Strength**

TSM defines transpersonal strengths as “anything bigger than oneself and are clearly different from religion” (Hudgins & Toscani 2013:84) although Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and other religious figures have been used and concretised. Music, Nature, and Poetry can also be used. Anything that is larger than oneself and can be relied on to hold super-human, universal power. The need to go beyond personal and interpersonal strengths in TSM is encouraged because it is this level of power that the survivor will need behind them to confront their trauma (Hudgins & Toscani 2013). The same can be said for an actor embarking on a trauma-based character exploration. Szlawieniec-Haw’s study (2020:54) showed that some actors found it “calming or soothing” to be with their higher power, religious or spiritual beliefs, “Such relationships could provide a great comfort”. Based on my own work with actors this can also include fictional characters, past iconic figures, even make-believe characters that the actor has created themselves!

The challenge with Szlawieniec-Haw’s study was a number of actors found it hard to maintain a transpersonal connection when representing emotional distress and human suffering. “They found it more - if not impossible - to connect to their higher power or spirituality”. This left some actors “feeling lost and alone” (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:53). However, those who could maintain their connection to their transpersonal beliefs reported feeling more resilience and peaceful. For this reason, I introduce a transpersonal strength to concretise the actor’s existential truth. It’s the core of their being and, if needed, could be an in point to reconnect them to their other strengths. Szlawieniec-Haw also noted that a relaxing hobby or activity can also connect actors to themselves. This could involve being in nature, watching mindless programs on TV, video games, exercise, etc. Although the latter few are not considered transpersonal, they are activities that can be acted out to bring the actor back to their world where they can continue to ground themselves in their strengths.

### **Resilience in Action**

An example of using strengths is evidenced in my work with Olivia, an actor who cast herself in the lead role of her own play. She was producing it in a small theatre in London’s West End. The role was Karen, a victim of domestic violence. Horrible domestic violence is suffered at the hands of her perpetrator. I read the play and thought she’s going to need a lot of strength to get through this. I was also aware that this was very personal play for Olivia having wrote it.

In our first session we reflected on differences and similarities between character and herself. I was curious about a line her character said that resonated with her. She felt a surge of emotion and hesitated before saying the line “I’m not worth shit”. Knowing some of her history already, I said “it sounds like this role may connect you with your inner child – the child that never got what it needed from its parents. We all have that inner wounded child that needs attention.” She explained, she had intentionally drawn on childhood in general but not specifically her own for the writing of the dialogue. Yet the lines expressed the implicit messages she was given as a child by her father. I could see that we were heading into a sensitive area and expressed this. I then added, “I would like to acknowledge your strengths as an actor before we go any further”. She brought in Courage, Peace of Mind, Inspiration and Meditation. These were all important strengths, yet I was concerned about her resonance to the line “I’m not worth shit” and wanted her to find a strength that will help her keep the boundaries clear between herself and her character. After some inquiry, Olivia told me that she thought she was stupid growing up, praying to God as a child and asking why she was so stupid? It

took her a few academic degrees and a session with a hypnotist, before a meeting she had with a group of executives, that made her realise she was not stupid. I asked her to name this part of herself that is smart, has academic degrees, is confident and courageous? She came up with the transpersonal strength of 'Superwoman'. I had her role reverse and we worked on her embodiment of Superwoman. I asked Superwoman to tell Olivia how she supports her. I directed her to role reverse back to herself and receive the message from Superwoman. I explained that it was important that this strength be there for her as an actor when she returns from her character work. This is a very important division that creates part of the boundary between actor and character.

In session two, Olivia arrived feeling very self-critical. The line from the play she wrote, "I'm stupid. I'm so fucking stupid" was now triggering her. She also felt the director of her play was verbally attacking her and she was taking it personally. She was feeling like she wasn't good enough, that she could do better, that maybe she shouldn't be in the play. My first comment was that she had found a significant part of the character but was too enmeshed in it to be objective. She was doubtful of that knowing that she has experienced this mindset in her past – with her family of origin. She expressed her need to have clarity - a clear distinction of roles. We brought in her strengths from our first session and worked at giving her clarity between Olivia the actress and the character she was playing. This time she was ready to fully embody 'Superwoman' truly owning it, not just cognitively but also physicalizing it, and verbalizing it. I had her standing up and posturing as Superwoman, "I got the power", "You can do it!" were the spontaneous messages she gave to her actor self. There was a huge shift in Olivia's energy as she integrated Superwoman's presence. She was very grateful for the session, and she was excited to dive into her rehearsals again. The following week I received this email from her:

*"To update you. The session we had on Monday was amazing and I was on a high.....and I took this into rehearsal this weekend. This was the best rehearsal so far and I was the strongest I have been in my acting so far.....as I left the self-doubt".*

### **Summarizing Resilience**

Knowing there is an established 'home base' of *personal, interpersonal, and transpersonal* strengths grounds the actor and gives them the safety and containment to move confidently away from their own selves and into a character's emotional distress and suffering. This speaks to Bowlby's healthy attachment theory as well as Hudgins' and Toscani's (2013) clinical TSM map with Restoration or Prescriptive Roles. The ACES cornerstone of resilience also gives the actor a head start on boundary creation (another cornerstone of ACES) between themselves and the character. This was the case with Olivia as she moved from, what she later described as, imposter syndrome to feeling vindicated as an artist. She became a leader for her cast and set the bar for the production.



### **Cornerstone of Boundaries**

*"You're traveling through another dimension -- a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination" (Rod Serling 1960-64).*

Stanislavski talks about the many inspirations an actor draws from to create "an external characterization out of himself" (Stanislavski 1949:8). From the power of observation and different art forms to the actors' own experiences of life to imagination itself. The only stipulation Stanislavski makes is that the actor "must not lose his inner self" (Stanislavski 1949:8) in the process of their research. Interestingly enough Stanislavski's emotional memory<sup>v</sup>, and later Strasberg, who believed

that the Method<sup>vi</sup> was about “bringing the actors *lived* experience to imaginary circumstances” (McFarren 2003), unintentionally were blurring the boundary between actor and character. To Stanislavski’s credit he was continuously improving on his system noting the ill effects some of his processes had on the actors who used it. In reference to Stanislavski’s system Jean Benedetti (2013) suggests this blurring is a creative state. Though I understand the need for blurring to actualise a character, my focus is on unblurring the boundary between actor and character after a day’s work. I am speaking specifically about actors who are portraying human suffering and emotional distress. Szlawieniec-Haw’s (2020) study found that out of twenty professional actors interviewed all of them experienced either long-term or short-term *lingerings* from portraying such characters. These *lingerings* were categorized as either physical, mental, or emotional or all three and ranged from intense to subtle and everything in between. There have been many more studies conducted that have concluded that boundaries can and have been blurred between the actor and the roles they take on. The result is collateral damage to the actor’s psyche and their personal relationships. In Australia acute pressures associated with demanding roles are driving actors to use a wide variety of prescribed, over the counter, herbal and illicit substances in an attempt to separate from their characters or ‘cool off’ after a performance (Maxwell, Seton, Szabó 2015).

One of the pathways to maintaining the actor’s well-being is to keep their personal histories separate from the character they are creating. Before the actor can ‘be’ in character and in order for the actor to step out of character cleanly and decisively the actor must have a starting point of where they end, and the character begins. As pointed out in McFarren’s (2003) research, another example of why boundaries are important can be found in the acting teacher, Robert Benedetti’s explanation of Stanislavski’s ‘Magic if’ referring to it as the difference between self-expression and self-expansion in acting. “There is a potential danger in personalizing (i.e., Self-expression) the role. If you do not truly reach out into the character’s experience but instead merely force the character to fit you, you may end up distorting the character and damaging the play” (Benedetti 1970:89). Although actors should be mindful of not ‘forcing’ the character to suit themselves, there are actors I have worked with who unknowingly blur boundaries and bring their own lived experience to fit their characters regardless.

In unpacking Markus and Nurius’ (1986) definition of “possible selves”, Gregory Hippolyte Brown (2019:8) shares his perspective in his phenomenological study on actors, “the exploration of a role, as it might relate to an investigation of elements within the actor’s own personality, as well as research about somebody else (a created character) and a fantasy connection to that character” thus creating the desire to be ‘in their shoes’. He further suggests that the creation of a role is influenced not only by the research and approach to the role but also by the actors own “social world, culture, past experiences, idealized or damaged self-perceptions, and, often, experiences of trauma”. In my work with actors, I found that their characters’ circumstances either directly or indirectly represented their own past traumas. For this reason alone, it is important to create explicit boundaries between actor and character.

### **Boundaries in Action**

Revisiting Olivia in the previous example of how her strengths brought her to a place of resilience, it also brought clarity. She grew up with a father that abused her mother and continually sent the implicit messages to Olivia that she was not good enough, was stupid and ‘not worth shit’ as evidenced by the lines she wrote for Karen, her character, and was triggered by when she began rehearsals. The strength of Superwoman allowed her to define the boundary between her actor self and the character of Karen. Once she was able to make the distinction, I asked her to place the ‘destructive self-critic’ that her actor self was carrying into a box and put it on a shelf that she could access if she needed it for her character. I also asked her to take a healthy dose for herself in the

form of ‘constructive criticism’. In doing so she can work collaboratively with her director and not feel that he’s devaluing her.

Clearly, clinical reasoning in TSM favours healing the client’s trauma and, if I were practising clinically, my supervisor would expect me to identify the perpetrator voice (Olivia’s father) that’s been internalised by Olivia represented by the triggering line, “I’m not worth shit”, and then reference TSM’s *trauma triangle*, bring in strengths and direct Olivia through a TSM *drama* that would bring her to a role that is connected with her *autonomous healing centre* where she can begin to make meaning of her experience and emerge with a *post traumatic growth role*. They would definitely not agree that Olivia having access to her ‘destructive self-criticism’ (internal perpetrator voice) should she need it, is appropriate. That’s ludicrous. Why would a TSM practitioner leave their client with such a destructive trait for a person who clearly needs to rid themselves of such negative thoughts? Thankfully, I’m not a therapist and Olivia is an actor who needs to have access to all of herself – good, bad, dark, light. For better or for worse, she needs it all for character portrayals. My job is not to heal her but to provide a safe and containing space and guide her in creating solid strengths and boundaries for her to understand and manage. At the same time making her aware of her personal challenges that may need her attention at some point. Having said that, what I did do is direct her to access her ‘superwoman’ strength to deal with the role of her self-critical voice. You could say that in of itself is healing but certainly not therapy. I will put forth a theory that is a reversed form of Szlawieniec-Haw’s (2020) character *lingerings*.

In my first session with Olivia, she said that she is no longer in the victim role and has spent a lot of time working on that. She obtained many academic degrees, started her own business, became a TV presenter and actor, hypnotherapy also helped her through. However, her abusive childhood was triggered by the lines her character had to say. This could be considered *lingerings* but from a personal source. The actor isn’t experiencing character *lingerings* instead they are experiencing their own *lingerings* or possibly being retraumatized. Either way, the boundary between actor and character needs to be clearly defined with strength-based roles for the actor to feel safe, contained, and confident enough to continue their character’s emotional exploration.

### **Creating an Ending in the Beginning**

Knowing where the actor ends and the character begins is ongoing in the ACES process and starts in pre-production or before the first rehearsal, continues through the length of the production and winds down weeks after the last performance. It involves in depth discussions between me and the actor and though its personal it’s also conducive to creating healthy boundaries. It develops the ever-powerful perspective of objectivity. Although it’s impossible to have a neat, separate divide between the world of character portrayal and the reality of everyday life, the safe and sacred space of the stage or set also allows actors to “ground material there” thus creating a separation in their own minds from their characters and providing some degree of protection from intense emotions experienced through representing emotional distress and human suffering (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020). It gives them permission to ‘leave it on the stage’ and have their own lives outside of their character’s suffering.

At the end of the day, the actor must remember a character is a collection of emotions and thoughts in response to a fictional conflict that they have been asked to imagine and to create a visceral experience for others. The character is an illusion of a real person and is the vehicle for this experience. They exist to tell a story and for no other reason. They’re like a hologram – projected in time and space but not really existing in any time or space except in that of our imaginations. It’s like entering a twilight zone. On the other hand, the actor is a real person and exists in the world, outside the story of the character, with their own personal challenges, conflicts, and history.

ACES enforces those boundaries and honours the separation that actors need to preserve their well-being in the world in which *they* exist.



### **Cornerstone of Defence Management**

*“Hide in your shell cos the world is out to bleed you for a ride. What will you gain making your life a little longer. Heaven or Hell was the journey cold that gave you eyes of steel”. (Davies, Hodgson 1974)*

“After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system” (Van Der Kolk 2014:53). The ramifications on the survivor and their body can be a multitude of physical symptoms stemming from attempts to suppress the resulting inner turmoil. Autoimmune diseases are one example of how the body reacts physiologically to a traumatic event (Van Der Kolk 2014). Autoimmunity has grown to epidemic proportions in the USA with 24 million people being affected<sup>vii</sup>. Past traumas can also be linked to one in five Americans having experienced a mental illness in any given year.<sup>viii</sup>

The reason I’m bringing up trauma statistics is to demonstrate that a great majority of us on this planet have adapted psychological defences to preserve and protect ourselves from further harm due to trauma. Unfortunately, this comes at a cost. “Trauma is [that] scarring that makes you less flexible, more rigid, less feeling and more defended.” (Maté 2021). This is a challenging place to be for an actor. On one hand they want to express themselves to the world through the honest authentic portrayal of their characters. On the other hand, they may be stuck emotionally and therefore revert to ‘tricks’ or ‘cheats’ to represent the emotion. As a young actor I was always challenged to embody painful emotions. I worked hard at the multitude of acting techniques - sense memory, emotional memory, substitution, the magic ‘if’, script analysis, conditioning factors, anything that would get me into the headspace of the characters emotional life. Though I always managed to embody the general energy/persona of the character I was still faced with the challenge of embodying the painful emotional life. No doubt this was due to me having numbed out most of my emotions by the time I was fifteen. In retrospect, I realise that studying acting was my first attempt at ‘thawing’ out my emotions. I wanted to feel something rather than being apathetic and distant which was my defence to the ongoing violence, addiction, and serious mental health issues that existed in my family home. “The fundamental thing that happened and the greatest calamity, is not that there was no love or support in childhood. The greatest calamity, which is caused by that first calamity, is that you lost the connection to your essence” (Almaas 1999). Aye, that I did indeed.

#### **Enter our Personal Defences**

Defences serve us extremely well and have helped us survive when we became overwhelmed and could not regulate our emotions during a traumatic event. It then becomes automatic to defend ourselves when there is a threat. In fact, it becomes part of our unconscious make-up. We walk around defended unaware that we are doing it. Unconsciously, the actor can bring their defences to the character. This is not a bad thing. They just need to be aware that they don’t need to defend as intensely today as they did while their own past trauma was occurring. A lack of awareness may result in the actor becoming stuck in their defence. This can be identified as an emotional ‘block’ by the actor. This ‘block’ or defence is triggered by something that happens in the present, i.e., a set of circumstances that a character is experiencing in a play, which is related to a past trauma that tells the actors’ brain to defend their vulnerability at all costs. However, for the character they’re portraying, they need to access that vulnerability. This is where acting coaches may get ambitious and think they can help the actor by pushing them into an affective memory exercise or some other technique. However, without resourcing the actor (or their guise of the character) with strengths,

this can be retraumatizing for them because what they need is protection from their own painful emotions. This protection is referred to in drama therapy as *over distancing* (Landy 1986), yet these emotions need to be accessible by their character.

At the other end of the spectrum is the potential hazard of the actor having easy access to their vulnerability and not knowing how to regulate themselves. The consequence of this could be overwhelming emotion with no 'off' switch. Landy (1986) refers to this as *under distancing*. Also referred to as flooding by James and Johnson (1996). Though the reactions are different, the initial response to being either over or under distanced is the same - the actor shuts down and defends against their vulnerability. In support of the actor, painful feelings need to be protected especially if they are feeling unsafe and unable to self-regulate. The fear of 'going off the deep end' or 'losing themselves' in the role can become a reality. What could end up happening as a result is the actor accommodates their defence and figures out a way to play the role avoiding the painful emotions of their character. What Benedetti (1970) was referring to regarding forcing the character to fit the actor. The danger in that is the actor can believe that their defence *is* the emotion. I'm not saying the actor shouldn't use these defences as choices in their work on character. I am saying that they need to be aware that they are defences and play them as such. Before they can do that, they must first experience the vulnerable feelings the defence is protecting. Then we get into a whole new sphere of layered performance that can be brilliant to watch as it unfolds. There is a beautiful example of this in a scene from *Big Little Lies* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRSW9O6oCOk>. Nicole Kidman's character is in session with her therapist. She first denies the abuse she is enduring from her husband. She protects him, a smile here and there, defending against the therapist's comments until she can no longer ignore the painful truth. As an actor she was able to access both sides of the character – the defence and the pain under it. Another example I have pulled from Szlawieniec-Haw's (2020:34) research that shows the result of playing a defence without the underlying vulnerabilities being acknowledged. An actor felt unsafe in performance due to another actor's inability to follow the director's note to "tone down the level of anger and aggression". Although not noted in her study, I would call this a defence that the actor was bringing from their own life and completely unaware that he was not grounded in the characters emotional life but his own unresolved pain that he needed to protect himself from.

### **Defense Vs Emotion**

What exactly is a defence and how does one identify it when it's happening? It comes down to the actor feeling blocked, that lack of flow and balance between thinking and feeling. Too much thinking and not enough feeling will also disconnect the actor from the character. The more they play at what they *think* is the "emotion" the longer they stay in their defence and remain disconnected. In developing ACES, I found that the scripted material actors brought were either directly or indirectly related to traumas in their past. What's even more interesting is they all identified the same issue - not being able to connect emotionally to their characters.

In reference to Landy's *distancing* concept, the sweet spot for the actor is in the "midpoint between states of emotional immersion and cognitive distance" (James and Johnson, 1996:312). It involves a range between thought and feeling. In TSM this is achieved through *containing* roles: *containing double*, *body double*, and *manager of defences*. The objective being to "titrate the emotions into measurable dosages that do not overwhelm" and "help the protagonist to stay aware and make meaning in the here-and-now of long dissociated emotions" (Hudgins Toscani, 2013:85). This is achieved by establishing safety through containing affect, verbalizing confusion, and giving clarity to the interpersonal world of the protagonist. ACES borrows from this method in applying the principal of *defence management*. By having the actor, in the guise of their character, give voice to their defence, we can begin to understand its purpose and manage its function. Once safety and containment are provided, the defence will trustingly step aside to allow the actor's/character's

vulnerabilities to be accessed. As in TSM, the role of the defence moves into the actors' awareness and can be used in a conscious, productive way in their acting choices rather than the defence being an unconscious, automatic response by the actor.

### **Defence Management in Action**

#### **Example One/Under Distanced**

Thomas offered at the outset of our first session that he had been planning to be a professional figure skater when he suffered a serious accident that broke both his shins. That trauma also broke his dreams. The monologue he presented was about a young man who just lost his father and has to deal with the reality that his life isn't going as planned. He had performed the monologue when he was attending theatre school and connected immediately to the material yet had no idea why he was flooded with tears. He needed to put defences in place in order for him not to be overwhelmed every time he did the piece. As a result, he shut down and could no longer connect emotionally to the character. In fact, this was an ongoing issue for Thomas. He could connect immediately to material and overwhelm himself to the point of shutting down and then struggle to reconnect.

I worked with Thomas to manage his personal defences by regulating his affect through containment and having him embodying strengths that allowed for, what Hudgins & Tuscani (2013) describe as, "[titrating] the emotions into measurable dosages that do not overwhelm". Though we safely unblocked his emotions connected to his character's trauma, it was clear to me he had yet to process his own trauma. Hence the personal defences he had in place.

Unfortunately, Thomas' sessions with me were not a priority and he decided to discontinue after the second session. He was rehearsing for a play and prepping for various auditions all requiring his emotional energy. He decided that he needed to preserve himself and limit where he exerts his emotional energy. Interestingly, he used his defence in our last session to keep me at a distance. When I followed up with Thomas a few weeks later to see how he was in relation to the work we had done, he wrote back, "*I definitely think about what we talked about a lot when it comes to emotional difficult scenes. Especially ... the comparison to my own traits*" (Personal communication [sic]).

#### **Example Two/Over Distanced**

Nicholas, mid-thirties, an ex-military turned professional actor, spoke of an emotional block that he feels in his throat. "It gets stuck right here" he said, referring to his neck. Shortly after and seemingly unrelated he expressed that his sister had suicided a few years back. He was the one that found her – in his home. He also told me about doing jail time for severely beating someone up. Not sure of the order of these two events. Either way there's trauma behind the trauma. When he presented his monologue, he consciously chose to be cold, calm, and emotionally distant. Perfectly good choices and he presented it extremely well. A very talented actor I thought.

We got down to work and addressed the cornerstones of *resilience* and *boundaries*. I then recommended exploring his character's trauma of feeling the responsibility and remorse for accidentally shooting and killing someone. I found it interesting that he brought up his sister's suicide in our first session and that his monologue was about feeling responsible for someone's death. Nicholas improvised in the role of Dean, his character, touching on his coldness/emotional disconnection (again, a conscious choice Nicholas made for his character). This was a flag for me. I wanted to explore this further as I knew it was a defence against the character's trauma (and possibly his own). Dean role reversed with coldness/emotional disconnection. I asked, 'How are you serving Dean'? Sure enough we got all the details of how this defence was protecting him from a

downward spiral from which coldness was born. When I asked coldness/emotional disconnection if it was okay to step aside so that Dean could look down the spiral, the response was positive, and the defence stepped aside knowing it could return at any time should it become overwhelming for Dean.

Dean then came to a tearful realization; his defence was protecting him from his vulnerable inner child. He wept. They were real tears. I asked him to role reverse with his inner child. This little boy spoke of his feeling of being abandoned. At this stage I was acutely aware that these tears may well have been Nicholas' and told Nicholas that if this were therapy, we would do some healing work with that inner child, but this is not therapy. I pointed out to Nicholas, the actor, that what he has uncovered is the core of Dean's inner conflict/pain and it's up to him as the actor to hold it as the script requires. I also made him aware that the coldness/emotional detachment is what Dean uses to protect himself from the pain of his inner "broken boy", as Nicholas described it. It's his defence and can be used whenever Dean feels the need. I asked him to do the monologue again. The block he had previously experienced in his throat had shifted. He had an emotional fluidity that brought the piece to a whole new level. He reflected on the experience in an email to me a few days later, "*I distinctly remember my voice 'dropping into place' after the work we did, and recognised that in the moment of it happening; I must have a heightened awareness of it as I've felt its previously been an issue for me. I put that down to establishing a truthful connection to the work and being present*".

In our session debrief Nicholas also came to a discovery about himself. He too uses the defence of emotionally detaching and being cold as a way of moving away from deep feelings. It was our work together that led him to the realization about his own defence. Which takes us into the final cornerstone of ACES, Self-reflection.



### **Cornerstone of Self-reflection**

*"The more actors know themselves and are grounded by that knowing the more their strength builds. This then allows actors to become more vulnerable, bringing new depth and complexity to their work" (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020:33).*

The term *meaning making* is often referred to in TSM when *post traumatic growth* roles are introduced. This is part of the healing process that requires one to reflect on what they have been through and where they have 'come out'. How will they make meaning of it? The same goes for the actor who is creating a character. At every step, and every corner there's opportunity to reflect on similarities, differences and who they are as artists and people. When coming out the other end of a character how do they make meaning for themselves?

I start all my sessions with the very important ACES principal of *self-reflection*. I ask the actor to talk about why they feel they were hired or why they chose to accept the role. If they are working on an audition monologue, then why did they choose it? What does it represent in their lives? What issues may be lying dormant or are very much alive and at the forefront of the actor's conscience that need to be explored, reflected on, or revisited? I don't ask these questions to nose around in their personal lives or to try to solve their issues. I ask them because I want to create a space for the awareness of their own personal material. They cannot ignore the mental, emotional, and physical impact that portraying characters of emotional distress and suffering has on them. What personal material it may trigger – resolved or unresolved? Either way, self-reflection needs to be part of the actor's process. Hannah, et al. (1994;278) theorizes, "the actor does not create a role in a vacuum but brings his or her own personal history—emotions, memories and drives into the role". We



cannot *not* be ourselves (Reekie 2009). In my experience as a director and acting instructor I have found that actors, whether conscious or not, are reflecting on who they are through the characters they play. This may be my own personal bias given my history and reasons for wanting to act when I was younger. However, I realized that it's in the safety and guise of the 'character' that the actors I've worked with in the ACES process can express their unprocessed feelings about past traumas whether it be relationships gone wrong, the loss of a loved one, abuse, rape or a plethora of other events that were too overwhelming to process at the time it happened. Through their acting they are looking to express themselves, be heard, acknowledged and to heal. A perfect example of this is Canadian actress Kate Drummond. During a podcast discussion (Powell, Key 2021) she revealed her award-nominated<sup>ix</sup> performance in *Nowhere to Be Found* was a catharsis for her recent personal losses. While in service of the character she also gave herself permission to grieve. With a regimented daily self-care routine that included regular calls to her therapist, she was able to maintain her boundaries and resiliency from her characters emotional suffering throughout the shoot.

With each actor I have worked with there have been self-revelatory moments that have increased their understanding of their character as well as themselves. Consequently, they become more connected, more grounded, more authentic in their character portrayals. In this paper I described how Olivia's realisation that her inner child was being triggered led her to call upon her 'superwoman' strength. As a result, she created a boundary for herself so she could serve the emotional distress of the character she was portraying. I shared how both Nicholas' and Thomas' reflected on their discovery of their own defences as a result of breaking through their 'character's' defence.

### **In Summary**

I would like to reiterate what I stated at the beginning of this paper.

I am not a therapist. My job is not to heal but to provide a safe and containing space to guide actors in creating solid boundaries between themselves and the characters they portray. I do this by expanding their own self-awareness. The vehicle is the actor's artistic development. Without question their personal development is wrapped up inside that. If there is personal work to be done outside the work of character creation, I set the boundary and always sign post the actor. My responsibility as I see it, and why, on top of my directing career, I trained for years in psychotherapy and experiential techniques is to support the actor's wellbeing before, during and after they dive deep into the characters they are embodying. This involves the ability and willingness to help reflect with the actor while they embody their characters. It's very personal and creative work but necessary for the serious, health-conscious actor who wants to grow with every role they perform, become emotionally stronger, more self-aware, and resilient in their craft.

### **About the Author**

[Alan Powell](#) is a film director, Actor-Care Specialist, and certified experiential specialist (level 1). He has earned multiple international awards for his film directing. Through the Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children in London, Canada he's directed hundreds of trauma-based dramatizations for educational purposes with an equal number of professional actors. He has taught on-camera acting in Canada and the UK. Prior to this he was a talent agent for 10 years having founded PN Agency. Prior to that he was a struggling actor. He holds certificates in humanistic integrative counselling, psychodynamic integrative counselling, psychodrama, and the Therapeutic Spiral Model (Level 1). His three years as a placement therapist under clinical supervision enabled him to work with clients with complex PTSD, anxiety and depression. The intersection of his five years of psychotherapy training and directing trauma-based narratives created the seedbed for ACES (Actualizing Characters by Expanding Self-awareness). He is also the co-host and creator of Artists in Depth <https://www.artistsindepth.com/>

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<sup>i</sup> Moreno defined spontaneity as having a new response to old situations and an adequate response to new situations.

<sup>ii</sup> An individual, one of the auxiliary egos, who speaks or acts out the presumed inner thoughts of the protagonist

<sup>iii</sup> A protagonist who is stuck and unable to tap into their spontaneity can move into 'mirror' to gain insight and objectivity into their behaviour by watching 'themselves' in action, through an auxiliary ego.

<sup>iv</sup> *Dollesse* is defined by the author Szlawieniec-Haw as the Latin word for pain, suffering, sorrow, and grief (*dolor*) and essence (*esse*).

<sup>v</sup> Stanislavski's technique of the actor recalling events in their life to trigger specific emotions for use in the character's they're portraying.

<sup>vi</sup> The Method requires the actor to draw from their own personal experiences and use that and the emotion that arises for the character being portrayed.

<sup>vii</sup> National Institutes of Health

<sup>viii</sup> National Alliance on Mental Illness

<sup>ix</sup> In 2020, Kate Drummond was nominated for *Best lead performance in a TV movie*, for *Nowhere to be Found* by the [Canadian Screen Awards](#). The same film was nominated for *Best Movie*, *Best Writing* and *Best Photography*.