

Drawing the Boundary Between Actor and Character Prioritizing the Actor's Mental Health in the Portrayal of Human Suffering & Emotional Distress

We are curious human beings by nature. We investigate the way things are. We question all the time who? What? Where? When? How? Presenter and natural historian, David Attenboroughⁱ has made a long and incredibly successful career out of his curiosity about wildlife, ecology, and nature among other topics. Merriam-Webster defines curiosity as; a desire to know; interest leading to inquiry. We tend to think of curiosity as something that occurs within us as a result of something that happens outside of us. For example, I hear a strange noise next door and I'm immediately curious about what it could be. But what about internal curiosity? The desire to inquire into our own behaviour, thoughts, and actions. We all do it to some extent. It's this curiosity turned inward that, when explored, becomes self-reflection and has the power to change people's lives. It can heal emotional wounds, answer our 'what if' questions and influence our decisions. The reason some actors take on a role, I believe, is for these same reasons. It answers a question or several questions for them, and they are prepared to do it experientially. They 'live it' through character portrayals not only for their own need but for the sake of others – their audience. This can have serious ramifications on their own mental health in the process.

It's in the service of their craft that actors need to take care of their own wellbeing - not something that all acting schools teach, or productions are even aware of. Outside of the social drink, going to the pub after the show is no longer a valid option for those actors who have become reliant on alcohol to soothe themselves. 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). There have been many 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.

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 memoryⁱⁱ, and later Strasberg's Methodⁱⁱⁱ were both designed to blur the boundary between actor and character. 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, what I call into question and is of concern to me is how does the actor unblur themselves from character portrayals? 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 that were categorized as either physical, mental, or emotional or all three. These lingerings ranged from intense to subtle and everything in between. How do they and the rest of the acting population 'come back' to themselves from such powerful states of being?

The Impact of Vicarious Experiencing

I have been involved in psychodramas as an Auxiliary Ego^{iv} where the experience of taking on a role has had resonances with my own life. In the group sharing, though I am able to de-role by either physically shaking off the role or verbally acknowledging that I am not the role I was playing for the protagonist^v, others in the group found it harder and emotional triggering was evident. For the student psychodramatist, this triggering or lingering could be held by the group leader and dealt with as part of the students warm-up toward their own work in sessions that followed. For the actor

who experiences the emotional journey and perspective of their character, fictional as it may be, still feel as if they have lived it and that experience is unerasable (Szlawieniec-Haw 2020). Much like an Auxiliary Ego in a psychodrama, actors must also de-roll from a character. The difference for actors is the emotional lingering may not only be unavoidable but also a burden to carry if not properly dealt with. How its handled by those guiding the actor, whether it be the director or a coach, is of ethical concern to me. To this point, I have developed an approach that I have started using with actors. It respects their boundaries as being non-negotiable yet, when new perspectives arise in the actor's awareness, can be permeable and malleable at their discretion. It considers the actor as a person who needs to take care of their wellbeing especially when submerging themselves in a character.

Defining the Actor

Whether it be in a scene study class, amateur theatre, professional stage, film, or TV, I posit that every actor who accepts an emotionally distressing role is doing so because of a conscious or unconscious need to reflect on themselves. I believe that each character portrayed is an opportunity for the actor to develop personally and increase their awareness of their own ever-expanding identities. Even the most established, veteran actor is still developing and understanding who they are as they continually unearth and reveal to themselves their human potential. In unpacking Markus and Nurius' (1986) definition of "possible selves", Gregory Hippolyte Brown (2019:8) in his dissertation shares his perspective as it pertains to acting as "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." 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".

"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^{vi}. According to Gabor Maté (2021) past traumas can also be linked to one in five Americans having experienced a mental illness in any given year.^{vii}

Now as we head into 2022, most of the world has been traumatized on some level by COVID-19. There is more awareness and focus on mental health being a huge factor on how our everyday lives are impacted. Discussions on how we need to self-care and respect our bodies, our opinions, our feelings, our boundaries. In short and in therapeutic terms, we need to reconnect to our inner child and give them space in our lives. At the most fundamental level we need to reparent our inner child because, for most of us, we never received the good enough parenting as children. As a result, we have experienced a loss of connection to ourselves. It's that disconnection from the self that is the greatest trauma (Maté 2021). So, we need to learn, for the first time, in our adult lives how to be our authentic selves without leaning into shame-based responses, without thinking that we'll hurt or displease our parents or others in authority if we express ourselves authentically. Actors are among this population yet, aside from Intimacy Co-ordinators, there has not been a whole lot of adjustment or accommodating to those in the arts to address it.

In developing my coaching approach with actors, I found that the material they brought to work on was either directly or indirectly connected to their own past traumas. What's even more interesting is that they all came to me with the issue of not being able to connect emotionally to the material.

Thomas

When Thomas (not the actor's real name) offered at the outset of our 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.

Though I worked with Thomas to manage his personal defences and safely unblock his emotions connected to his character's trauma, it was also clear to me he had yet to process his own trauma. Hence the personal defences he had in place. This was my first real insight into the blurring of boundaries between the actor and their character portrayals. 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]). Had he contracted in our coaching sessions for boundary creation I would have explored it further with him. As such we only touched the tip of the iceberg.

Kate

Whether the actor is aware of it or not, they are reflecting on who they are through the characters they play. It's in the safety and guise of the 'character' that they can express their unprocessed feelings about past traumas whether it be relationships gone wrong, the loss of a loved one, abuse or a plethora of other events that were too overwhelming to process at the time it happened. Through their acting they are continually looking to express themselves, be heard, acknowledged and to heal. As is the case with Canadian actress Kate Drummond. During my podcast discussion with her she revealed her award-nominated^{viii} performance in *Nowhere to Be Found* was a catharsis for her personal losses. The role gave her permission to grieve. With a regimented daily self-care routine and regular calls to her therapist, she was able to maintain her resiliency from her character's emotional suffering throughout the shoot (Powell, Key 2021).

Gary

For actors who don't follow a self-care regime or who don't prioritise their mental health, when the production is over, they are still left carrying their trauma because either they don't know how to process it on their own or are unaware of the underlying link they have to the character, as was the case with Thomas. Regardless of whether they are aware of the link or not, for some actors, it can become a form of repetition compulsion^{ix} where the actor re-enacts repeatedly their own unresolved material. They use the turmoil and affect it triggers as fuel for their character portrayals. During one of my podcast discussions, British actor Gary Oliver came to the realization that, for his darker roles, he draws on an inner rage to fuel his performances. However, he is not aware of any traumas that would warrant such rage. Had I been in my role of Creative Development Facilitator, I may have delved further to see if there were links but it being a podcast discussion, I respected the boundary.

You Can Act but You Can't Hide

The interpretation the actor gives to the lines, to the behaviour, to the thought process are all motivated by the actor on a conscious level. At the same time, and possibly on an unconscious level, there is much more happening that speaks volumes to the actor's personal life and to past traumas, should they exist, that may either be limiting their artistic expression in the present, "Sometimes, your past emotional experiences can hijack your feelings in the present; thus, interfering with your creativity or performance" (Ivan Holtz 2020), or opening a floodgate of emotion that needs to be managed. Ultimately, no matter how well the actor embodies emotionally distressed characters they cannot ignore that they are the vessel from which it came. They cannot ignore the mental, emotional, and physical impact this 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 of character development. 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" Reekie (2009) also suggests, we cannot not be ourselves. Unfortunately, actors, like the rest of us, don't know what they don't know. Add to this the similarities of the character's they are portraying and unknowingly boundaries between actor and character can become blurred. This can cause much emotional distress even before one's acting career gets off the ground. Burgoyne, Poulin, Rearden (1999) conducted a study with student actors who were unaware of the emotional implications of boundary blurring until such a distressing experience actually happened to them. The study also recommends that "the theatre profession address boundary management as an aspect of acting pedagogy." In fact, one participant in the study, a student of several theatre programs, felt that the impact of acting on the student's mental health "are not addressed systematically in actor training."

That's a Wrap

There are many actors who take care of their mental health during the creation and portrayal of characters that represent human suffering & emotional distress. There are also several studies that suggest there are many actors who are not taking care of their mental wellbeing. When you have mental health on one side of the scale and a career on the other side it seems that self-care is the key to balancing both. This requires the actor to be proactive and accept that there are responsibilities that come with portraying emotional distress and human suffering. One of which is to reflect on their own lives and be able to acknowledge why they have taken on the role or why they feel they were hired to play the character. What might be mirrored for them in the character and how are they different? This is where my work begins and is the first stage in the process of my own approach with actors.

If the actor neglects their own wellbeing, this very essential piece of self-care, they may well end up inadvertently minimizing and therefore 'absorbing' the shockwaves of their characters' trauma – what Szlawieniec-Haw (2020) referred to as *lingerings*. By not processing what it means to the actor in their own lives they are missing an incredible opportunity for self-discovery, and personal and artistic development. However, if the actor starts the character development process with personal self-reflections, whether that be journaling or in confidence with me, they make the implicit explicit, the hidden obvious, and turn their darkness into light. This ongoing process is what creates boundaries and a greater understanding of where the actor ends, and their character begins – always negotiating what to keep and what to leave on the stage or on set. This clarity is incredibly empowering. It could even be healing as was the case with Kate Drummond's award-nominated performance.

About the Author

[Alan Powell](#) is a film director, creative development facilitator 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 holds certificates in humanistic integrative counselling, psychodynamic integrative counselling, psychodrama and the Therapeutic Spiral Model (Level 1). He is the creator of ACES (Actualizing Characters through Expanded Self-awareness), a technique for actors that adapts a clinically modified form of psychodrama used for treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It's not therapy but it is therapeutic. He is also the co-host and creator of Artists in Depth <https://www.artistsindepth.com/>

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ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Attenborough

ⁱⁱ Stanislavski's technique of the actor recalling events in their life to trigger specific emotions for use in the character's they're portraying.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

^{iv} For the purpose of this article, Auxiliary Ego in Psychodrama is defined as the representation of individuals that make the protagonist's world real and tangible.

^v In psychodrama, the person who desires to do personal work puts themselves forward and if supported by the other group members they are chosen to become the 'Protagonist' in a group psychodrama.

^{vi} National Institutes of Health

^{vii} National Alliance on Mental Illness

^{viii} 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*.

^{ix} In psychoanalysis, a type of compulsion characterized by a tendency to place oneself in dangerous or distressing situations that repeat similar experiences from the past. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) introduced it in 1914 in an article on 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' (Standard Edition, XII, pp. 147–56) and discussed it at length in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In analysis, the transference often contains elements that involve recreations of past conflicts with parents and other family members.