

Emotion Regulation in the Acting Process

Abstract

With our ever-increasing awareness of the psychology of trauma in today's world, educators face the challenge of finding tools and techniques to negotiate with its presence not only in scripted stories being performed but in the student actor's life. When it comes to psychological realism in acting, Active Analysis, Stanislavski's last contribution to his system (Knebel 2021), falls short of accommodating this need and can benefit from integrating a trauma-informed approach to Character development. I believe one of its gaps is the absence of a device to manage emotional dysregulation which can be caused by engaging empathetic imagining and physicalisation of a Character's emotional life. As a result, actors can experience vicarious trauma and/or the reactivation of their own past trauma. How do we support actors wellbeing and increase resilience to embody characters that have traumatic stories? Although resilience supports, i.e. mental health first aiders, counsellors, and therapists have been implemented in tertiary drama schools and can be accessed when mental health challenges arise, preventative measures also need to be integrated into Active Analysis and other actor training techniques. This paper will introduce Actor Care®, Inscaping, and Emotional Fluency Training for Actors as models that prioritise self-regulation and actor wellbeing before, during and after embodying emotionally distressing Characters. They can be used in conjunction with Active Analysis or any acting technique, and all are inspired and adapted from other models and research in the field of psychology.

Note

** In light of the fact that character can also refer to an actor's self-identity I have capitalised the word Character to mean a role an actor is portraying.*

***I am using two different spellings of Stanislavski/y since both have been used in publication and is dependent on who I am citing.*

Introduction

Stanislavsky dedicated his life to the art of Psychological realism in acting. His system is a permanent fixture in acting training. Authentic representation of human behaviour under fictional circumstances is at its heart. What keeps that heart beating is the very thing that gives life to performance, that breathes spirit into a Character and is the expression of human nature itself – emotion. But what strategies are in place to support the actors wellbeing whilst committing to imaginary circumstances that involve acts of violence, great loss and human suffering? When it comes to psychological realism there needs to be a strategy to regulate distressing emotions for actors in training. Not only are wellbeing supports and reporting mechanisms needed, when challenges arise as a result of the work, but a preventative strategy that is implemented in the process of acting is also needed. “That’s when it’s most vital. Most injuries are sustained in the middle of Character work not before or after” (Jarman 2024a). The three emotion regulation models I will be introducing are preemptive strategies for maintaining wellbeing in the process of acting.

The wellbeing I am referring to is very different from Stanislavsky’s definition as stated by Chambers (2024) in which he describes wellbeing as a “flow state” and clarifies it further with explanations from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi that include “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Chambers 2024:20). A dancer that Csikszentmihalyi quotes describes it further, “Your mind isn’t wandering, you are not thinking of something else; you are totally involved in what you are doing”. “No area where you feel blocked or stiff. Your energy is flowing very smoothly. You feel relaxed, comfortable, and energetic” (Chambers 2024:20). This description is the essence of Stanislavsky’s Overall *Scenic* Sense of “Well-Being”, Scenic as in stage reality and its given circumstances. In contrast, I am using wellbeing in reference to the state of the actor’s mental health prior to, during and after the portrayal of a Character. A wellbeing that exists not on

stage under fictional circumstances but in the actor's actual lived experience of their own reality. A wellbeing that is required to achieve and sustain Stanislavsky's flow state on stage in fictional circumstances.. Without that support actors are in a precarious position in today's climate where, as American literary critic, Parul Sehgal (2021) attests "one plot—the trauma plot—has arrived to rule them all".

More writers and directors are giving voice to traumatic experiences which translates to more actors having to embody them. Given that the world's population has suffered some form of trauma (Levine 1997), and past traumas can be linked to one in five Americans having experienced a mental illness in any given year¹, it makes sense that these stories are finding expression, now more than ever, on the stage and screen. The 2024 Edinburgh Fringe had so many solo shows about "depression, death, grief, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling addiction, obsessive compulsive disorder, ADHD and more" that critic Fergus Morgan was compelled to write an opinion article in *The Stage* aptly titled "Why is the Edinburgh Fringe flooded with solo shows about awful experiences?" (Morgan 2024).

In my opinion "Any Character worth watching on stage and screen has been traumatised regardless of whether the trauma appears in the story or not" (Powell 2022). Stanislavski seemed to be of the same opinion judging by the advice he offered to the actress Vera Kotlyarevskaya on how to approach the role of Charlotta in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, "Remember to play Charlotta in a dramatic moment of her life. Try to make her weep sincerely over her life. Through such an image you will discover all the whole range of notes you need" (Benedetti 1999:168). The depths that he suggested Vera should go was clearly pushing her toward a moment of painful overwhelm or, as we now know it, a traumatic event. Today, "Trauma has become synonymous with backstory" (Sehgal 2021). This is true in my own practice as well. I work with actors to unearth and integrate their Character's traumatic experience into the backstory. I'm also mindful of the potential of actors having their own traumatic past that may seep into the work. Through personal reflection, resilience activities and effective boundaries I prioritize wellbeing in support of spontaneity and creativity. My practice of Actor Care® approaches the development of Characters with a trauma-informed lens. Meaning it operates with a 21st century

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness

understanding of a Character's psychology and supports actor resilience when portraying them. My definition of a 'trauma-informed' approach aligns with Witkin, Robjant (2022), "Trauma-informed methods of working are based upon an understanding of the harmful effects of traumatic experiences together with fundamental principles of compassion and respect". In my practice this is true when working with actors in prep and when exploring their Characters.

A large part of the trauma-informed lens is understanding the importance of emotion regulation when acting in the style of psychological realism. I define emotion regulation in acting as a process in which emotion is managed through the acknowledgement, acceptance and articulation of its expression for the purpose of increasing emotional range, fluency, proficiency and control when crafting a Character.

Why Traditional Acting Models Need Emotion Regulation Techniques

There is no shortage of acting techniques for the actor in training. From Stanislavski and Chekov to Demidov and Meisner and Adler to Strasberg and everything in between. There is a shortage however on methods for safely accessing and regulating emotion in the process of using these acting techniques when developing a Character.

Traditional acting techniques have their own philosophies on how to access emotion. From Demidov's "passively surrendering" and being guided by their "intuitive perception" to find the Character's "impulses" (Malaev-Babel 2015:78) to Stanislavsky's Active Analysis and experiencing the physical life/actions of a Character that the actor will, "as a reflex", experience "the inner feelings" of the Character (Knebel 2021:111). While I agree that Stanislavski's psycho-physical approach to acting is a more reliable source for "creating emotional performances" (Carnicke 2023:186), it's not a psychologically safe approach unless we create space for the actor's wellbeing. As Stanislavsky states, using *imagination*, *empathy* and *physical action* is a powerful way to immerse oneself in a fictional experience (Knebel 2021). However, it is also an excellent conduit for stirring up personal resonances and potentially reactivating past trauma. Additionally, boundary blurring can easily occur if the actor is holding trauma that collides with their Character making it incredibly challenging to decipher between what is Character affect and what is their own flashback (Jarmain 2024).

For actors whose own traumas are being activated by the scripts content they are more likely to have a fight, flight or freeze reaction than a healthy intuitive, and spontaneous response. Meaning they have found ways to cope emotionally with their own trauma and are now living in a protective state. However, in some of these instances, cognitively they may *think* they've moved on from their trauma. As Levine (1997:47) points out, "Because trauma symptoms can remain hidden for years after a triggering event, some of us who have been traumatized are not yet symptomatic" hence actors push themselves or allow themselves to be pushed by educators or directors to the point of triggering their symptoms. And in other instances actors are aware of their trauma, have not moved on, and intentionally shut down or plough into their emotions and get overwhelmed and struggle to regulate afterward. In either case, the traditional acting techniques for accessing emotion do nothing to support, regulate or further develop their emotional apparatus.

Actors living in a protective state who want to pursue psychological realism may resort to another acting technique. The Method. Though not taught in actor training in the United Kingdom, actors are attracted to it because of its Hollywood mythology. Dr. Jessica Hartley (2024a) states that "actors are still drawn to it regardless of whether we tell them not to". They will push themselves out of their desire to "secure tremendous glory" in what is seen as the "Hollywood model". This is the motivation for actors to willingly resort to their own version, a bastardization, of Method acting as a way of accessing emotions that they think will help them win the respect of their teachers, their peers and ultimately the industry. At the heart of the Method is the use of Stanislavski's affective memory². It involves actors revisiting personal memories that have impacted them emotionally. These memories can often be traumatic though the Strasberg Institute does not encourage the use of trauma³. These memories are then used repeatedly in performance as motivation for a Character's emotional behaviour⁴. According to Cohen (2017) the affective memory exercise "is an advanced practice suited only for long-time studiers of [Method Acting] who are personally and emotionally grounded" (Moses 2024:6). However, Remi Moses, an acting instructor at the Lee Strasberg Film & Theatre Institute, suggests that "critiques of the advanced Affective

² The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute <https://strasberg.edu/about/what-is-method-acting/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Memory exercise are worth further investigation” (Moses 2024:6). Nonetheless, for those less experienced actors employing the technique on their own and without guidance may well be opening up emotional wounds connected to trauma that have not been managed well in the past and have not healed to the point of warranting use in performance. The adverse effects on mental health from using the Method on even the most established actors have been well documented. From Jared Leto, Jamie Foxx and Meryl Streep to Jim Carrey, Joaquin Phoenix and Heath Ledger (Cox 2024). Regardless of the technique being used the issue of safeguarding and emotion regulation remains. As Hartley (2024a) expressed so succinctly, “Regardless of what we teach. Regardless of what the safety mechanisms are in drama schools. Actors still don’t have the self-awareness to be able to understand how to self-regulate in relation to these techniques”.

Borrowing from our new knowledge of trauma, there are ways of safeguarding actors who are accessing distressing emotions that give them agency. Through a host of techniques and models we now have the ability to support mental health in the acting process and achieve Stanislavski’s vision of truthful acting and flow state without the potential hazards. Through scientific studies we now have vocabulary that can identify and manage what’s happening in our bodies, brains and nervous systems when we experience emotion. This makes it easier to support self-regulation, build awareness and hone the emotional muscles of actors.

Emotion Regulation Models for Actors - A brief overview

In the left frontal lobe of the cortex exists the Broca’s area. This area is one of the speech centres of the brain and is what allows you to put your thoughts and feelings into words. According to Van Der Kolk (2014) during a traumatic event and even during a flashback this area shuts down. How many of us have witnessed actors struggling for a line as soon as they start to feel an emotion they are not used to? They may well be tapping into uncharted emotional territory, most likely caused by a past trauma, that has not yet been regulated. Hence, they freeze or have a ‘deer in the headlights’ response and lose their train of thought. Dr. Suzie Jarman has personally struggled with this in performance. She reflected her lived experience of abuse and identity loss as a gigging actor in her PhD solo show, *The Disappearing Trilogy*. Her Character was an actor who was not able to voice some of their dialogue, “repeating words losing her mind, arms, legs literally as she struggled for

cognizance in the present moment” (Jarman 2024a). Post performance can also be a struggle. Szlawieniec-Haw’s (2020) study of twenty actors noted, when decompressing from distressing Characters, emotions can be challenging to label and give words to which make it harder for the actor to express and therefore process. She concludes that having such a space for processing is a “fundamental part of the actors’ health and wellness” (Szlawieniec- Haw 2020:82). The emotion regulation models I am introducing work backwards from this conclusion. In other words, it gives actors the space to first articulate emotions for their character. Then embody them affect by affect before they dive in and experience it as a whole. Slowing down and acknowledging the different emotions in a Character is the first step to actors self-regulating.

Actor Care® is a model that slows down the entire process of Character development. The basic premise is to engage strengths before accessing vulnerability. It operates on the principals of Resilience, Boundaries, Defense Management and Self-reflection. All four principals are designed to accommodate the actors mental wellbeing by methodically and safely constructing a Character’s emotional life. The principals not only support the actor while in Character but also provide the necessary containment before and after embodying the role. Although it was adapted from psychologist Dr. Kate Hudgins’ Therapeutic Spiral Model (TSM), clinically modified psychodrama used for healing survivors of trauma, Actor Care® is not limited to actors with pre-existing trauma. In fact, It mainly supports actors who want to embody a deeper sensation of Character with safeguards in place. Hollywood actress, Jessica Lange shares her personal experience of the precariousness of embodying a Character, “your body doesn’t understand that it’s make believe” “Everything is internalised. That rage. That sorrow. That grief.” “It seeps into the marrow of your bones. Every molecule is actually believing that this is happening. And no matter what the mind is telling it, everything is internalised” (Lange 2017). It’s this somatic as well as the psychological and emotional internalisation that Actor Care® assists in releasing after a Character portrayal.

Inscaping, another model that slows down Character development is an embodied, art based, depth psychological approach which first engages the embodied self-inquiry of the actor as its starting point. Inscaping places "I," the actor before "I," the character. It was developed by Sara Lovett, PhD, RSMT and Actor Wellbeing Facilitator and “is built on the work of Marion

Woodman's Body Mapping and Carl Jung's 'self experiment'...his 'confrontation with the unconscious accompanied by his own paintings' (Jung, 2009, p. ix)" (Lovett 2024). Like Actor Care® embodiment is key to Inscaping and both support boundaries between actor and Character. Both also identify life events that have shaped the Character, although Inscaping begins first by identifying the "Stepping Stones" or life events of the actor themselves prior to the character's. Whereas Actor Care® first explores the Character's overarching themes and then asks the actor to reflect on where/how does it fit within their own life? In terms of boundary exploration, Inscaping takes an in depth look at the felt sense of both the actor's and Character's inner world via two body maps. These body maps are life size hand drawn outlines of the actor's body, then the character's body, drawn by the actor. From these maps the relationship to body parts are explored, along with each identified life event for the actor first and then for Character, through movement, then writing, and drawing on the "Inscape" or body map. This reveals two distinct bodies, an "I" and an "Other" in which boundaries and potential blurring can be identified and explored.

In Actor Care® the boundary between actor and Character is established by two different physical spaces. The actor's centre and the actor's lab. The *actor's centre*, as in the actor's core self, is where the actor embodies a resilience narrative for themselves. It involves stepping in and out of different "parts" of self—somatically and cognitively. This space creates a self-care environment that helps reduce stress, which can have an adverse affect on emotional self-regulation (Bauer 2016). It also decreases anxiety and consequently increases spontaneity, curiosity and imaginativeness (Blatner Blatner 1988). The second space, the *actor's lab*, is where a Character's emotional life is explored and embodied. When the actor steps into the actors lab they do so as their Character. All work done in the actors lab is with the actor in Character. If the actor wants to say something that pertains to themselves, has a revelation about Character or are de-rolling they need to step back into the actor's centre. As with Inscaping and its "I" and "Other" maps, the physicalization of these boundaries takes it out of the actor's head and into an actual space making it easier to identify potential blurring and help with the de-rolling process. In the actor's lab the Character embodies narratives also referred to as 'parts'. The standard narrative structure in the assimilation of a Character consists of a resilience "part", a defensive "part" and a vulnerable "part". All three parts are

embodied individually at first by the Character who expresses the reason for each part existing in the Characters life. Once expressed the Character ‘steps out’ of the part but intrapsychically, emotionally and physically still holds its message. This is repeated until all three parts are held within the Character. This structure supports a self-regulation strategy that is built right into the Character’s psychological make-up. For example, an actor can default to a defense and/or resilience part as a Character choice when the need to ease up on their vulnerability “part” arises. As a consequence of this self-care strategy the Character is more fully actualized having profound dimension, depth and complexity.

Inscaping facilitates the self regulation of emotion through self-inquiry, i.e. having the actor witness challenging emotions from outside of their body, in front of them, and at a distance on their own and on their Character’s ‘body map’. This brings a new level of understanding and a deeper relationship to the power of the emotion and gives the actor more control (Lovett 2024a). In Actor Care® each ‘part’ of the Character holds a narrative that is heard, acknowledged, managed, and regulated as the Character desires. This process enriches the Character’s ongoing inner narrative with the actor in control and when the work is completed, is left behind in a ritual leaving of the actor’s lab/returning to the actor’s centre. Inscaping has the actor dialoguing with the character through a self-care contract in which they establish their emotional, physical and mental boundaries, and through the exploration of both their own, and the characters Stepping Stones or life events to discover their own emotional experiences before deciding if, and then how to, integrate them with Character. Both models allow actors to reach deeper within themselves and empathise with aspects of Character they have not considered or find challenging to connect with.

Another approach to slowing down and self-regulating is Emotional Fluency Training for Actors (EFTA). It’s not packaged as a Character development model, hence its own section here, but rather “controlled approaches to entering and exiting emotional states” (Buchli, Stroud 2023:7). Established by Emotional Body® instructors Tom Stroud and Ines Buchli, EFTA uses Emotional Effector Patterns (EEP)⁵, first identified by psychologist Susana Bloch and neurophysiologist Guy Santibáñez. These EEP’s create a “somatic practice to identify and regulate the expression of emotions, and develop[s] strategies for self-care” (Buchli,

⁵ Emotional Effector Patterns are precise breathing and muscle manipulation patterns linked to specific emotions (Buchli, Stroud 2023)

Stroud 2023:2). There are six patterns associated with six basic emotions which, once learned, can be combined to create more complex emotions much like primary colours are mixed to produce an array of colours. A neutral pattern is also taught which is designed to return the actor to a state of balance.

The training stresses how emotions function in the body and clarifies the difference between emotions in life and on stage, effectively creating boundaries between each to promote an emotional intelligence specific to the art and craft of acting. It also brings a technical aspect to the expression of stage emotions setting it distinctly apart from the organic expressing and dialoguing with emotions that Actor Care® and Inscaping offers. To avoid the highly subjective nature of emotion words, EFTA created a vocabulary of emotion using numbers and letters. For example, emotional effector pattern 1B can be identified as existing in the general category of anger. However, it is the level of intensity one chooses to embody in the physical aspects of 1B that will determine how the emotion is interpreted. At low levels 1B may be seen simply as determination while at high levels, it could be interpreted as rage. It is in the process of somatically practicing and modulating the intensity of the six emotional effector patterns and returning to neutral balance that emotion regulation is achieved. Additional restorative practice is also taught to further assist with boundaries and resilience.

As different as EFTA is from Inscaping and Actor Care® elements from all three models can be used in tandem much like the combining of acting techniques. There is also a commonality that ties them together. All three models use somatic experiencing to some degree to regulate emotion.

In Conclusion

When it comes to psychological realism in acting and the potential (re)traumatisation and resulting impact on actor wellbeing, the many acting techniques for tapping into emotion is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach. While they are useful for some actors, for others it can be harmful to their emotional wellbeing without proper support. Integrating emotion regulation techniques that support brave choices is an admirable goal for any actor trainer. Emotional Fluency Training for Actors, Inscaping and Actor Care® are among the dozens of specialised offerings that are available in the Actor Wellbeing Facilitators Collective (AWFC), a global

group of educators, researchers, therapists, acting coaches, wellbeing practitioners and specialists of which I am a founding member along with my colleague Dr. Mark Seton. At the time of this writing, there are approximately 40 members (and growing) worldwide with one intention - to support the wellbeing of actors in education, production and lifestyle. Not one of us do exactly the same thing which speaks to the vastness of the gap that currently exists.

As Chambers points out, Stanislavsky recognized that “his System is not actually a system: it is a set of hypotheses about human nature in search of a unified field theory” (Chambers 2024:13). As research suggests, the world’s population has experienced some form of trauma. The impact of which alters our mind, body and brain. It’s time to expand that “unified field theory” to include our new understanding of this impact on human nature. It’s time to bring it into the training institutes, onto film sets and rehearsal studios. ‘Trauma-informed’ is not a term to shy away from but rather embraced and respected for its insights it can offer in actor training. Having DIY tools to regulate emotion during performances is a game changer. It’s the difference between an actor suffering for their art and an actor being in control of their craft.

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