

“When you cry you really cry”: Playing with actors’ emotions

Soseh Yekanians¹

Abstract

Historically, acting was in essence a practice derived from imitation and mimicry however, nowadays it seems that this understanding has shifted to more realistic interpretations in performance. As such, the connection and consequences of an actor’s psychological and emotional wellbeing within actor training is being called into question. In Australia particularly, research suggests that when it comes to teaching Emotional Acting, despite varying safer techniques available, psychological exercises such as Constantin Stanislavsky’s Emotional Memory (1936) are still favoured amongst most drama schools and teachers. Although these methods can be effective and aid to more “authentic” performances, they need to be practiced in a controlled and safe environment and even then, actors may lose themselves so far into their past emotional state(s), that then they are left vulnerable and distressed once the acting is over. Furthermore, there is an argument that this method of acting can be indulgent and forces the actor feel self-conscious to the point where they are taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place. Through observation of the current global liabilities and realities in actor training practices, this paper will discuss why it is vital that actors in Australia are offered alternative non-psychological methods to access emotions onstage so that they can remain safe and psychologically detached from their real-life emotions offstage.

Keywords

Theatre; Acting; Emotional Acting; Actor Training; Constantin Stanislavsky; David Mamet; Australian Actor Training; The Alba Technique; The Perdekamp Emotional Method; PEM; Emotional Memory; Actors Wellbeing

In an era post Harvey Weinstein, post #MeToo, post #TimesUp, post #NotInMyTheater, the state of our global performing arts industry has undoubtedly been brought into question. Actor training alike has responded to some sort of cultural shift. Institutions and trainers have been interrogated and held accountable for their once orthodox teaching methods that are no longer deemed as acceptable. Examples of this were seen in 2016, when American actor-teacher Cameron Thor was sentenced to

✉ Soseh Yekanians: syekanians@csu.edu.au

¹ Charles Sturt University, Australia

six years in a state prison for “lewd conduct” with a thirteen-year-old female student. Thor was found guilty of taking advantage of his status and the girl’s vulnerability during their private coaching sessions (Robb, 2016). In 2018, we witnessed New Zealand born actor-teacher Lee Rene Naufahu being sentenced to one year of home detention for indecently assaulting female students through a “gross abuse of power” (Hurley & Leask, 2018). Whereas closer to home, acclaimed Australian actor Geoffrey Rush is being accused of using his dominant pundit status to engage in sexually predatory behaviours towards a much younger female co-star (McGowan, 2018). Whilst, these indecencies have commonly been associated with sexual misconduct, it does bring into question the whole integrity that such power imbalances can have within this profession. More recently, these disparities have made their way into another area of concern that specifically relates to Emotional Acting and the training an actor receives in order to portray an emotionally “truthful” performance.

There is no doubt that at the heart of great acting surrounds this notion that onstage whatever you do has some sense of reality or truthfulness to it. After all, acting notability Stanford Meisner (1987) famously professed that acting was “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (p. 15). Unfortunately, this belief has at times been misinterpreted to mean that an actor must “suffer for their art” – leading to irreversible psychological and emotional consequences. This can be attested towards a great divide that commonly lies within actor training, which derives from our foremost notaries who each believed in their own contradictory methods. Lee Strasberg (1988) for example was interested in actors working from their real life events and painful experiences whereas Meisner (1987) and Stella Adler (2000), considered that an actor’s most valuable tool was their imagination – rather than revisiting traumatic memories from their own lives. The most famous misconception however, involves Russian theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavsky and his conviction that each and every time an actor repeats the process of creation s/he must ‘live the part’ by actually experiencing feelings that are analogous to the character (1936).

In the first part his trilogy of acting, Stanislavsky (1936) discusses a new method or system of acting that actors can use to portray “real” emotions by putting themselves in the place of the character. He notes, “Plan your role consciously at first then play it truthfully. We must assimilate a psychological technique of living a part, and that this will help us to accomplish our main object, which is to create the life of a human spirit” (Stanislavsky, 1936, p. 15). Within this system lies numerous exercises that actors can rehearse with one of which, is called Emotional Memory or Emotional Recall (1936). Predominantly, this exercise came from his earlier work surrounding “The Method” and his recommendation that in addition to external research, vocal and physical preparation, actor training should have within it ‘psychological realism’. For that reason, the Emotional Memory exercise tasks actors to use an emotional memory from their past that is comparable to how the character is feeling at the time. The idea being that, once the actor thinks back to where they were in their own lives when that emotion took place, then they are able to connect that to the character and portray the emotional stakes of that character/scene truthfully.

In theory, while the Emotional Memory exercise may seem harmless and simply a means of accessing some truth towards an actors' performance, in practice the side effects of this psychological process can be detrimental. Even when practiced in a controlled and safe environment, actors may lose themselves so far into their past emotional state(s), that then they are left vulnerable and distressed once the acting is over. Furthermore, there is an argument that this method of acting can be indulgent and forces the actor feel self-conscious to the point where they are taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place (Mamet, 1997). Regrettably, in Australia, research suggests that despite a multitude of safer techniques available to help students access emotions, variations of psychological exercises such as Emotional Memory, are still favoured amongst most drama schools and acting teachers, which is leading to dire consequences towards the actors overall wellbeing (Taylor, 2016).

In her doctorate study, *Actor Training and Emotions: Finding a Balance* (2016) Dr Leith Taylor, specifically investigated the role that emotions played in actor training as she examined the particular stresses incurred by acting students during their schooling and how, the emotional and psychological aspects of this were managed by the selected group of Australian drama schools. What was disturbing about Taylor's research however, was that it established that even with all the caveats, students were persistently being asked to participate in dated practices that posed a risk to their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Her findings strongly weighed up the need for better emotional and psychological safeguarding of students within the classroom and presented recommendations for the employment of more emotional management strategies (2016). And I understand first-hand the concerns that Taylor's study uncovered.

As a young student, I was in my first year of an acting class when the tutor walked into the room, turned off the lights and said something along these lines:

Get ready, because today we are going to go into a deep dark place. A place that will make you cry, breakdown and get as a raw as you can get. Emotional Memory. If your emotions aren't real, if your tears aren't real or if you don't 'really' want to punch that person in front of you, then you're never going to be an authentic actor and that means you will never work.

I was three weeks into my acting degree and could barely tell you the names of five people around me let alone willingly sit there and publically produce "real" tears. Even at nineteen years of age, I was suspicious of what was about to unfold. Not to look defeated or 'less than' I gave it a go as the tutor asked me close my eyes and recall my saddest memory. Under watchful pressure of my peers I knew that I had to recall a memory and that it needed to be something good. And so, I remembered being five years old and seeing my grandmother's lifeless body sitting in our bathtub, which until that moment I had never revealed before. Thus, began my eighty-minute relentless passage through Stanislavsky's Emotional Memory (1936). As traumatic as that experience was I was lucky to have walked away from the exercise embarrassed but unharmed. I cannot say the same for many of my peers, some of whom have now taken

their own lives. Of course, while I cannot with certainty say that there was an inherent link between any of those incidents', *The Australian Actor's Wellbeing Study* (2018) does support my suspicions that, the exercises I witnessed my peers going through in-class perhaps, led them into drugs, alcohol, depression and eventually suicide.

In 2011, the National Performers Committee was alerted to anecdotal reports of high levels of stress, depression, bullying and sexual harassment, as well as alcohol and drug abuse amongst its members (Equity Foundation Website, 2018). As result, the Australian Equity Foundation, together with the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney, initiated a ground-breaking Actors' Wellbeing Study. The nationwide report set out to gain better insights into the physical, psychological and emotional health of Australian actors compared with the rest of the population, in direct correlation to their work practices and how it impacted on their overall health and wellbeing (Equity Foundation Website, 2018). A few years later, Maxwell et al.'s study (2015) was completed and its results brought truth to those once anecdotal stories. In the section "Coping with Work", respondents were directly asked, "Did you ever take one of these substances [alcohol, painkillers, legal substances, anti-depressants, marijuana, anti-anxiety medications, illegal medications, and beta blockers] as a result of problems related to your work as a performer?" (2015, p. 94). Out of 782 actors surveyed, 287 reported using alcohol in response to problems related to their work as a performer. 98 reported using prescribed anti-depressants (such as Prozac or Paxil), and 65 using prescribed anti-anxiety drugs such as Xanax. 140 reported using other legal substances (such as herbal or naturopathic remedies), while 87 had used marijuana, and a further 53 illegal drugs, such as cocaine, ecstasy or LSD (2015, p. 94). Within the findings, the researchers purposely stressed that this question did not refer to the actors' recreational use of these medications or substances, but in fact, to their use in direct response to performance-related problems. Therefore, it is evident that in order for actors to 'let go', debrief or cope from the strains of an emotional performance, they mostly turned to some form of anaesthetising substance.

The psychological and emotional safety of an actor's well-being during a performance is a topic that has been much debated and researched since the time of Aristotle and the Greeks (Konstan, 2006). Even then, questions were asked about the associations between psychotherapy and acting and what the side effects of some of these practices would be. In contemporary times, writer/editor Emily Kirkpatrick (2018) revived this topic by asking, "What happens when getting into character doesn't just involve an actor putting themselves in temporarily uncomfortable situations, but actually damaging their own mental health indefinitely?" (para 3). In her article, Kirkpatrick probed into "how far is too far?" explicitly, alluding towards the psychological ramifications that emotional acting can have on actors (2018). Deborah Margolin, an Obie-award winning performance artist and Associate Professor in Yale's undergraduate theatre studies program, personally understands the psychological complications that Kirkpatrick (2018) refers to. As a performer, she notes that "the line separating her real self from her stage self became less defined the deeper into character she went" (cited in Ohikuare, 2014, para. 2). Margolin recalls, "It was depressing. My character would cry, and I would cry. She was miserable, and I was miserable. She was a frustrated, ignorant person trapped in a narrow life, and I felt like

that” (cited in Ohikuare, 2014, para 4). Worse yet, she discusses the emotional toll that her behaviour had on everyone around her long after her performance was over. Margolin’s understandings echo the claim that some health experts make when they avow that any mistreatment of an individual’s psyche, specifically, emotional or psychological abuse while harder to recognise, can be just as damaging as physical abuse (Healthdirect Australia Website, 2018).

And it seems that neither Margolin nor Kirkpatrick are alone in their assessments. In fact, in an article titled *When You Cry You Really Cry: the emotional toll of stage acting* (2016), theatre critic Matt Trueman looked into the emotional and psychological toll “real acting” had amongst professional actors. Trueman revealed that even in a highly trained working environment, actors were continually being asked to push themselves to exceedingly emotional states in order to produce “real” performances. Actress Michelle Terry spoke of her performance in Sarah Kanes’ *Cleansed*. “Two hours of extreme emotions ... Living with that was quite hard. You’re not meant to feel those feelings all of the time. It’s an emotional shock, having to remind your body of feelings you’ve felt in the past. It came with consequences, carried offstage into everyday life. I was living with a low-level grief” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 2). Similarly, actress Kate Fleetwood who played both Lady Macbeth and Medea recounted that she spent most of her evenings going to “these horrible places” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 1). Whilst Fleetwood believed that for the most part this was an actor’s duty, she stated that it took a huge toll on her life and at some level, became real. “A real act” she says. “In real time with real consequences...You’re not just technically producing it. When you cry, you really cry – physically, emotionally, everything. It’s in you. It’s part of your life” (cited in Trueman, 2016, p. 1). It was clear that in some way both Terry and Fleetwood had adopted mindsets that somehow assumed unless they subjected themselves to some form of psychological torture, audiences or potentially directors, would devalue or discredit the worth of their performance.

While the area of emotions and behaviour has been widely researched, there is yet to be sound evidence promoting actual distinctions between great acting that is derived from psychological means verses non-psychological means. In 1884, Victorian philosopher William James had a theory surrounding this argument in which he declared that, it is was not our feelings that guided our actions but rather, it was our actions that guided our emotions (Barbalet, 1999). Therefore, one does not need to feel happy in order to laugh but instead, one needs to simply laugh and they will feel happy. James’ theory certainly draws parallels to acting and supports suspicions that there is in fact no difference between revered emotional acting derived from truthful psychological impulses and one that is simply forged via a physical manipulation. Remarkably, the suggestion of the former has been endorsed amongst actors so often that, it is easy to accept as fact. And fact, that Kirkpatrick (2018) believes is more of a myth perpetuated by Hollywood tradition that is ill advisedly filled with glorified stories about famed methods that actors delved into so deeply, that they almost permanently lost themselves in character (2018). This valued folklore seems to trickle down into young susceptible actors who believe that unless they too submit themselves to similar physiological struggles, their performance will never hold up to their celebrities. What

is most concerning however, is that these behaviours are fortified through the initial training an actor receives before launching into these professional careers.

American writer-director David Mamet insists that the underlying issue is the fixation that actor trainers have with preparing actors for “emotional” performances. He deems that, in life there are no emotional preparations for loss, grief, surprise, betrayal, discovery; and therefore, there are none onstage either (cited in Viagas, 1997). Even so, contrary to Mamet’s views, preparing actors for emotionally demanding scenes is an existent reality of actor training. Having had personal experience in some of these psychological practices as a student, as a teacher, I have become fascinated with the paradox of emotional acting. Specifically, what methods we insist actors’ practice in order to (re)produce authentic emotional performances onstage, while still asking them to somehow remain safe and psychologically detached from their real-life emotions offstage. The inconsistency of these demands propels me to further question the industry’s obsession with asking actors to (re)produce “real emotions” in the first place. Why not simply ask the actor to stimulate a replica of these emotions? Is acting not by definition simply “to feign, to stimulate, to represent, to impersonate” (Kirby, 1972, p. 1), or have we somehow forgotten this initial understanding?

In one earliest acting essays written, *The Paradox of Acting* (1883), Denis Diderot notes that “the actor must have in himself an unmoved and disinterested onlooker. He must have consequently, penetration and no sensibility [emotions] ...The art of mimicking... It is the audience who feel and the actor just performs in a self- controlled and detached way” (p 14). Diderot (1883) believed that if the actor gave into his ‘real’ passions and emotions onstage or when portraying the character, then this actor was inconsistent and not to be relied upon from one performance to the next. Correspondingly, Mamet (1997) too maintains that if an actor gave into his real emotions, then that form of acting was indulgent and forced the actor to feel self-conscious to the point where they were taken right out of the play – defeating the goal of an authentic performance in the first place. In direct reply to Stanislavsky’s Method (1936), Mamet (1997) maintains that this form of self-centered actor training does not work and cannot be practiced. It might look good in theory and design but it is an impractical teaching tool. It is just as useless “as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane” (Viagas, 1997, para 4).

Instead, Mamet (1997) suggests that it is not necessary to believe anything in order to act. “Here, again, is your job: learn the lines, find a simple objective like that indicated by the author, speak the lines clearly in an attempt to achieve that objective” (p 57). And it seems there is some probability to his beliefs for Stanislavsky himself –after much trial and error –made advancements from his initial precarious “Method” to later appreciate that acting should arise out of rigorous preparation that was obtained through extensive character study and given circumstance, rather than emotion or inspiration (1989). With James’ (1884) philosophy in mind it is feasible to consider that while Diderot (1883) argued acting came from imitation and mimicry, Mamet (1997) considered acting came from the passionate pursuit of actions (the doing) and Stanislavsky (1989) subsequently considered it came from an intimate process of

creation, eventually, all three practitioners harmonised against an actor trying to act through forced emotion.

Elsewhere in the world, actor-training institutions have already begun to make substantial advancements in their training; moving towards safer practices that echo James' Theory of Emotions (1884) and Diderot's (1883) views that acting cannot be self-indulgent but instead, must display the 'illusion' of feeling. Reputable acting methods such as Practical Aesthetics (1986), The Meisner Technique (1987) and the Stella Adler Acting Method (2000) successfully demonstrate that actors can still be truthful in their performances without resorting to emotional or psychological manipulations from their instructors. In direct response to emotional acting, the *Alba Technique* (also known as *Alba Emoting*) is a successful actor training process that teaches actors how to stimulate emotions safely while remaining psychologically detached from their everyday lives. Initially, designed by French Neuroscientist Dr Susana Bloch (1987), the *Alba Technique* is a way to physiologically identify emotion based on the scientific 'effector patterns of emoting'. Systematic progressions that actors can mimic to help stimulate "real" emotion through the manipulation of breath, posture, and facial expressions. Actor Elizabeth Townsend (2009) notes that Stanislavsky's approach to emotional acting via memory exercises was problematic for her. Therefore, by adopting the *Alba Technique*, she finally had an approach to accessing emotions that was safe and could be trusted upon instead of merely reliant on "rummaging through one's personal images from the past" (p. 31).

Similarly, *The Perdekamp Emotional Method* (PEM) has likewise become an innovative emotional acting method, proving to be a positive alternative to the more dated psychological approaches. Originally developed and designed by German director and playwright Stephan Perdekamp (2018), PEM teaches actors how to replicate emotion that is solely based on biological processes as oppose to, personal experiences or emotional memory. Comparable to the *Alba Technique*, PEM does not intend make an actors performance any less truthful nor does it replace the actors own creativity and imagination but rather, offers technical support by which that emotion is accessed making it safer and reliable. Actor Mitchell de Best observes that with PEM, actors can successfully connect to emotions and then let go, rather than "being stuck with them" (Testimonials section, 2018, para. 9). This statement from de Best is significant when deliberating the psychological complications that some emotional acting exercises can have on an actors psyche well after the "acting" is over.

As the strains of competitive industry demands and pressures towards generating more realistic interpretations onstage escalate, so do the stresses surrounding an actor's psychological and emotional safety. More and more, actors are feeling the burdens placed upon them to produce "real" emotions rather than simply pretend. As a result, actors are often unable to let go of these emotions once offstage and instead, find themselves carrying the weight of their characters into their everyday lives – causing psychologically and emotionally damaging effects (Taylor, 2016). Regrettably, when attitudes still largely revere emotional performances generated via "real" emotions rather than mimicry, the process between how actors access, (re)produce and then 'let go' of emotionally demanding/challenging roles will remain an ongoing health concern;

particularly in the context of actor training. For that reason, as the state of our global performing arts industry progresses and actor training navigates through its challenges and evolves, so should our mindset, language and responsibilities around the assumption that “when you cry you really cry” (Trueman, 2016, p. 1), as it not only counters the very underpinnings of great acting but, leads so many actors into treacherous territory.

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About the author

Dr Soseh Yekanians is a graduate from the Australian Academy of Dramatic Art in Sydney and the Atlantic Theater Company Acting School in New York. In 2012 she was awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship to embark on a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) in Perth. Her practice-led research titled, *Creatively Pursuing Persona: Finding Identity through Directing*, investigated how theatre directing and the performing arts could provide a culturally displaced individual with a sense of identity and belonging. Her practice-led study, which resulted in an exegesis and two components of an original creative work, specifically provided new insights into how theatre directing allows an individual to (re)discover their identity through leadership in a non-judgmental forum and how the theatre as a space for communal exchanges and conversations

can initiate dialogue about cultural differences. Following her doctorate, a major career highlight has been the publication of her children's literature book, *The Special Team Elite*. The story is derived from her own upbringing in Australia and explores her real and fantastical experiences growing up as a culturally displaced individual within a world, which, at times, can be unforgiving of 'the other'. Additionally, her revised thesis, *Finding Identity through Directing* was recognised by world leading academic publisher Routledge and is in developments for world-wide publication. Dr Yekanians is currently a Senior Lecturer in Theatre/Media at Charles Sturt University.