

A Study on Actors' Emotional Experience and Expression in Theatrical Performance

Yuwen Sun^{1,2}, Jacqueline Tham^{2,*}

¹College of Humanities and Arts, Xi'an International University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

²Postgraduate Centre, Management and Science University, Off Persiaran Olahraga, Section 13, 40100 Shah Alam, Malaysia

*Correspondence Author

Abstract: *In contemporary theatrical performance, audiences are increasingly seeking deeper emotional engagement with artistic works. The background and significance of this study center on how to create and convey authentic and profound emotional experiences in performance in order to resonate with the audience on a deeper level. Theatrical acting is not merely a display of technique; it is a process of constructing a bridge between the emotions of the actor and those of the audience. This research aims to explore and analyze how actors can achieve genuine emotional expression through self-exploration, systematic training, and refined stage techniques. By doing so, it seeks to enhance the artistic impact of dramatic works and foster a stronger sense of emotional resonance among viewers.*

Keywords: Theatrical performance; Actor; Emotional experience; Emotional expression.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the continuous evolution of theatrical art, audiences are demonstrating an increasingly strong demand for emotional engagement in dramatic performances. As the central figures of the theatrical experience, actors play a pivotal role—their emotional experiences and expressive capabilities directly influence both the artistic quality of a production and the audience's viewing experience. This paper conducts an in-depth exploration of two key aspects: the emotional experience and emotional expression of actors within theatrical performance. The aim is to offer new perspectives and insights that may contribute to the further development of theatrical performance as an art form.

2. THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF ACTORS IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

2.1 Perception and Emotional Resonance

In theatrical performance, perception and emotional resonance are key to actors accessing the inner world of their characters and creating vivid portrayals. Perception refers to how actors engage their five senses to capture and understand the character's environment, experiences, and emotional state. For instance, an actor might be asked to imagine walking through a forest at dawn. This sensory immersion enables a more realistic portrayal of the character's reactions and emotions. Emotional resonance goes further, requiring the actor to connect their own emotions with those of the character, often drawing on personal memories and lived experiences.

In practice, training for emotional resonance may involve in-depth research into a character's background—analyzing how their past experiences have shaped their personality and motivations. For example, when portraying a character grieving a loss, an actor might be guided to recall their own experiences of loss to trigger authentic emotions. Techniques such as "psychological time"—a method of aligning personal emotional memory with the character's current situation—enhance the immediacy and authenticity of the emotional experience.

Colin Firth's performance as King George VI in *The King's Speech* exemplifies this principle. His profound understanding of the character's fear, frustration, and sense of responsibility as a leader generated emotional resonance that moved audiences worldwide. This example illustrates how perception and emotional resonance not only bring characters to life but also forge deep emotional connections with the audience, enhancing both the dramatic impact and artistic value of theatrical performance.

2.2 Life Experience and Character Identification

Life experience and character identification are central to shaping emotional depth in acting. Actors must merge their own emotional sensibilities with the inner world of the character to achieve authentic emotional transmission. One prominent actress noted that she immerses herself in the character's background, environment, and experiences to better understand and inhabit their emotions. This depth of exploration often includes mastering details of the character's daily life—such as habits, beliefs, and even speech patterns—to strengthen identification.

Actors also employ emotional memory—a core technique of the Stanislavski System—by recalling vivid emotional experiences from their own lives and aligning them with the character's emotional state. For instance, when portraying grief, an actor might draw on their own pain from personal loss to add complexity and realism to the character's emotional expression.

Character identification also involves a psychological commitment to becoming the character. This may require actors to remain “in character” for extended periods, both during rehearsal and performance, immersing themselves in the character's mindset and behavioral patterns. Such deep involvement enables more natural and convincing performances and may even foster a deeper understanding of human nature.

2.3 Situational Imagination and Emotional Projection

Situational imagination and emotional projection are vital techniques for merging the actor's emotions with those of the character. Actors use vivid inner imagery to construct the character's emotional world. For example, when portraying someone mourning a loved one, an actor might recall a personal loss or read relevant literature to stimulate emotional resonance. This enables the actor to authentically experience the character's emotions and present a more convincing performance.

During training, actors often use the Stanislavski method of emotional memory, which involves recalling intense personal emotions to construct the character's feelings. An actor might be guided to remember a particularly joyous or sorrowful moment and connect it to a specific dramatic situation. This technique bridges the real and fictional, allowing emotional projection to enrich and humanize the character.

Situational imagination also includes imagined sensory responses to the stage environment. If portraying a soldier in war, the actor must imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of the battlefield, enhancing the realism of fear or tension. Emotional projection then informs every aspect of performance—from body language and vocal tone to facial expression and muscle tension—bringing the character's emotional journey to life for the audience.

3. THE ACTOR'S EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

3.1 Physical Action and Emotional States

Physical movement is a vital medium for expressing emotion on stage, capable of conveying a character's inner world without words. Through carefully designed gestures, posture, and facial expressions, actors reveal nuanced emotional changes such as joy, anger, fear, or affection. For instance, surprise may be conveyed by widened eyes, a forward-leaning body, and trembling hands—details that enhance emotional authenticity and intensity.

Renowned actress Meryl Streep is celebrated for her expressive body language. In *The Iron Lady*, her subtle physical transitions portrayed the character's shift from tension to determination, demonstrating the deep integration of emotion and movement.

Actors train to convert real emotional experiences into physical responses using methods like Stanislavski's emotional memory. Michael Chekhov's technique, for instance, connects specific emotions to corresponding physical actions—such as associating sadness with lowered posture and slow movements. This helps actors embody emotion naturally and fluidly, enriching their characters.

Directors often choreograph movement to reinforce emotion. In a tense confrontation, for example, an actor may be directed to stand rigidly, breathe rapidly, and clench their fists—expressing inner anxiety while creating a suspenseful atmosphere. In *Cats*, performers use feline-like flexibility and movement to portray each cat's personality and emotions, highlighting the power of body language in emotional expression.

Consistency between emotional state and physical action is crucial. Long performances can exhaust emotional energy, so actors must learn to sustain emotional intensity while managing recovery techniques, such as deep breathing and mental resetting.

3.2 Spatial Use and Emotional Layering

Effective spatial use enhances emotional depth and dimensionality. Actors must understand their character's emotional state within a given scene and express it through spatial positioning. A character in despair might move to a corner or lower level of the stage, symbolizing emotional isolation or hopelessness. Spatial dynamics—such as advancing forward or climbing—can signal emotional escalation or resolve.

Stage props and scenery also contribute to spatial expression. A shattered mirror may symbolize a broken psyche, while warm lighting might suggest hope. These elements guide audience focus and deepen emotional understanding. By layering emotional cues through space, actors enable audiences to experience both surface emotions and the character's inner world.

3.3 Emotional Color in Dialogue

The emotional tone of dialogue is critical in shaping audience response. Actors must grasp the character's internal state and infuse their lines with appropriate rhythm, pitch, and intonation. A slow, deep tone might express sorrow in a tragedy, while a fast-paced, high-pitched delivery could convey joy in a comedy. By analyzing emotional turning points in the script, actors can adjust their vocal delivery to reflect emotional shifts and enhance dramatic power.

3.4 Vocal Variation and Emotional Intensity

Voice is a powerful tool for conveying emotion. Through modulation of pitch, volume, pace, and timbre, actors can express emotional intensity and internal conflict. Anger or excitement might prompt raised volume and quickened speech, while sadness may call for a lower pitch and heavy, deliberate tone. These vocal choices not only communicate emotion but also resonate with the audience.

Vocal variation reflects the character's personality. An aristocrat might speak with calm, refined tones, while a street character may use a gruff, rapid-fire delivery. Creating a distinct voice enhances character realism and audience engagement.

3.5 Emotional Guidance Through Music and Lighting

Music and lighting play pivotal roles in guiding emotional perception. Gentle lighting paired with soft melodies creates a romantic or peaceful mood, while sharp music and dark lighting can induce tension and fear. Designers often use emotional arc theory to align lighting and sound with the character's emotional development.

Modern technologies like real-time sound mixing and intelligent lighting systems enhance emotional immediacy. In *Hamilton*, precise lighting and musical cues shift dynamically with the action, immersing the audience in the emotional flow of the story. Music and lighting thus support the actor's performance and heighten audience empathy.

3.6 Emotional Implication in Stage Design

Stage design visually reinforces emotional themes. Color psychology links warm tones with joy and cold hues with sadness. Set elements like worn furniture or faded wallpaper can symbolize emotional trauma or nostalgia, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Physical stage layout—using elevation or depth—can reflect emotional highs and lows.

Sound effects and music add another emotional layer. In Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, changes in music mirror internal transformation, intensifying dramatic moments. Lighting effects—such as spotlights or gradual fades—highlight climactic moments or blur the line between dream and reality, as seen in Puccini's *Turandot*.

Stage design thus works in tandem with the actor's expression, dialogue, and nonverbal cues to construct an

emotionally rich theatrical space that bridges the audience's world with the character's inner reality.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, theatrical performance is a multidimensional art that integrates literature, music, dance, and visual design. At its core lies the actor's emotional experience and expression, which determine the artistic quality of the work and the audience's engagement. As theatrical arts continue to evolve, actors' emotional depth and expressiveness will become increasingly sophisticated, contributing to ever more powerful and resonant dramatic experiences. We look forward to a future where theatrical performance reaches new heights of artistic brilliance.

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