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Book Author(s): ELLY A. KONIJN

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1 Acting Emotions: Introduction

I will be brief.

Do you believe that there is any controversial issue, given equally strong arguments for and against, which remains unresolved?

DENIS DIDEROT (1713-1784, 45)

1.1 Introduction: Does Dustin Really Cry? What About Meryl?

For centuries actors have tried to make their characters as believable as possible, indeed so convincing that the audience no longer sees the actor, but believes that the actor is the character. In the theater and related studies, how best to achieve this goal has long been the subject of intense debate. The central question in the controversy is the relationship between the emotions of the character with those of the actor. Should these coincide or should they not? The portrayal of emotions is a critical component of acting, and also seems to be one of the most difficult and complex tasks of the actor. In ancient Greek texts we read how the actors struggled with the problem of making their characters seem as real as possible. The renowned Greek actor Polus carried an urn containing his own son's ashes on stage with him to insure 'real' despair. How does the actress make the audience believe she is Medea, murderer of her three children? Should the actor attempt to arouse similar feelings in him- or herself or is it better to leave that to the audience? Again in ancient texts we read that one audience was so subsumed by the drama that after the performance they lay in wait for the 'villain' to teach him a lesson. Plutarch (46-120 A.D.) asks himself why we become agitated when we hear voices which are authentically furious, gloomy or afraid, whereas we are enraptured when we hear actors imitate those same emotions.

At the end of the eighteenth century the French philosopher Denis Diderot wrote *Paradoxe sur le Comedien*. Diderot takes an extreme stance in the solution of the actors' dilemma, claiming that a great actor should feel nothing at all during his performance, and only then is he or she able to elicit the strongest emotions from the audience. Diderot put the relationship between the quality of acting and the actor's emotional sensitivity in these terms: 'Extreme sensitivity makes actors mediocre; average sensitivity makes masses of actors bad; an absolute lack of feeling is the basis for those who reach the highest level!' Becoming emotional or being moved by a performance appears to be one of the most important criteria an audience uses to gauge a performance; whether or not the actor him- or herself must become emotional is the point of contention. This debate has continued since the Paradoxe appeared: Over time new voices have joined in on the issue known as 'the emotional paradox'. At the end of the nineteenth century, Constant Coquelin stood as a staunch defender of Diderot against the fervent emotionalist William Archer. In our century, Konstantin Stanislavsky

and Bertolt Brecht take diametrically opposed views on the subject of the emotions of actor and character. Indeed, contemporary discussions about acting are consistently related to the paradox. It is therefore the starting point for the dissertation on acting in this book.

Such conflicting statements made today indicate that the problem Diderot posed two centuries ago remains relevant. Contemporary theater reviews, among other sources, make this clear. They contain *vivid* examples of the dilemma which actors still confront in their profession. Is sensitivity incompatible with great acting as the quotes (in the boxes) would suggest and as Diderot proposes in *Paradoxe sur le Comedien*? Must an actor keep a cool head while the audience expects larger-than-life emotions from him? Are actors too involved in 'managing' their performance to actually be 'deeply touched'? Can actors feel emotions and act them at the same time; can emotion converge with reason? Is this a matter of mystery or the key component of 'trade secrets'? Discussions about the relationship of the emotions of the actor with those of the character go to the heart of the art of acting. They are the subject of this book.

Acting Emotions will set out a theoretical analysis of how emotions *are* performed and examine this theory in practice. Using a present-day analytical approach I will try to unravel the paradox. Opinions drawn from current acting theories will be combined with contemporary viewpoints about emotions drawn from the field of psychology. This synthetic approach, rarely employed until now, provides new insight into the nature and design of emotions on stage. I questioned about three hundred professional actors and actresses in the Netherlands, Flanders (the Dutch speaking portion of Belgium), and the United States about how they shape their characters. Their answers form the basis for examining assumptions that are derived from acting theory. They show how practicing actors 'get into' their characters.

1.2 Editing Acting Emotions

The content of this book **Acting Emotions** is a translation of Arterell *en Emoties* (1997), which was largely based on the first Dutch edition *Acteurs Spelen Emoties* by Elly Konijn, published in 1994. The Netherlands Public Broadcasting based a 55-minute documentary with the same title on this publication (directed by Krijn ter Braak, NPS, August 1995). The second book *Acteren en Emoties* (1997) was written (when the first book sold out) because there was interest in a version using less scholarly language, and because the first book was based solely on the results of a survey among Dutch actors. The most important differences between the first and second book are as follows:

Acting Emotions includes the results of a survey of numerous professional actors in the United States. A central idea developed in the first Dutch edition - task-emotion theory - was developed to a great extent by the results of a survey of Dutch and Flemish actors and actresses. Because acting training in the Netherlands differs greatly from that in the United States, it was necessary to re-test these ideas to see if they were peculiar to a Dutch, or European context. By repeating the study on a large scale and in a

Oustin Hoffman decided to stay awake for 36 hours to feel just like his character Babe Levy. According to the script of the film *Marathon Man* he had not seen a bed for three days. When Hoffman's co-star Lawrence Olivier heard this, he remarked wryly: 'Have you not slept? Oh, dear boy, why don't you just act?'

(Harry Hosman. *de Volkskrant*, June 15, 1991)

comparable manner in the United States, it was possible to gain a broader, more international perspective on the task-emotion theory.

In writing the second edition, I wanted to respond to the demand for an accessible book about acting which would also be suitable for theater schools and acting teachers. *Acting Emotions* has been stripped of much 'scholarly' detail and the writing is considerably simpler. In-depth theoretical explanations, in particular extensive foundations for theoretical presumptions are restricted. With this edition, I have kept the theater professional in mind: One who wishes to learn more about styles of acting and the acting of emotions, not in terms of practical exercises, but in a theoretical context. To this end, I have also consulted theater professionals and acting teachers.

In presenting the results of the survey of professional actors (chapter 7) I have not included tables. In the body of this revised text, the complex results of statistical analyses have been explained in simplified language. These results, based on information on acting styles and emotions given by the professional actors surveyed, are illustrated using basic graphs.

A final important adaptation is that *Acting Emotions* is complemented by illustrative text. The boxes contain quotations or photographs, extra commentary and explanations of textual elements. Significant terms are explicated and examples of questions from actors are given. The boxes also include brief biographical sketches of important figures, such as Stanislavsky, Brecht, Brook, and others. Finally, a glossary has been added with definitions of the most complex terms.

1.3 What This Book is About: Acting and Emotions

As stated above, the most contentious debates about acting can be traced back to Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comedien*. Therefore, my theoretical argument begins with an account of what Diderot could have meant by his paradox. To do this it is necessary to position it in the context of the eighteenth century. Next follows a discussion of how current acting methods relate to the paradox, confining myself to main streams. Consequently, the focus is on distinguished methods for character acting and the way each method resolves the actor's dilemma. Acting styles tending toward emotional involvement are generally associated with the Russian director Konstantin Stanislavsky and even more strongly with the American *method acting* of Lee Strasberg and The Actors Studio. The more 'detached' acting styles are generally associated with Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and its predecessor Vsevolod Meyerhold's 'bio-mechanical' acting. A third approach can be called 'self-expression'. Here the expression of the innermost self is key, as in the work of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.

While examining the literature on the art of acting, in chapters two and three, a problem arises which Diderot initially described as follows: '...in the technical language of the theater there is such a considerable margin, a vagueness which permits reasonable people, with diametrically opposed viewpoints, to believe they have detected the light of self-evidence.'² Thus, the influential drama teacher Lee Strasberg can attest that Brecht's intention with his 'alienated' acting was the same as Strasberg's own with *method acting*. Those who fail to see this equivalency, according to Strasberg, have not really understood Brecht: '...both adherents and detractors of Brecht misunder-

stood him' (1988: 195). Elsewhere we read equally fervent arguments that they were on opposite ends of the spectrum. In still other treatises we are told that their acting styles differ only subtly from one another.

Nevertheless, the American director and performance theorist, Richard Schechner, says **that** there (is in plain fact no basic methodology or vocabulary of acting; no means by which scholars, teachers, and practitioners can fruitfully (and with some objectivity) discuss acting'. He sees Stanislavsky's terminology and method as a start. But, he adds, 'the System is not systematic: It is not a psychology of acting or of the actor; it is not a basic set of terms and methods which tells us what acting is, how the actor works, and in what context good acting flourishes' (Schechner 1964: 210).

On similar grounds Constantinidis argues the need for empirical research based on the hypotheses and models developed in the study and practice of theater. He says that such 'empirical research articulates its variables and hypotheses in the context of theatrical practice, but it borrows models, methods and techniques from the social sciences' (Constantinidis 1988: 69). In this book, I employ this methodology by combining theater studies, (emotion) psychology and theater as practiced (empiricism). Chapter three does with an inventory of several central problems in the acting of emotions which the different acting theories appear to have in common. In this way I can also formulate the most important acting tasks the actor must accomplish when portraying emotions. The insights derived by comparing the different acting theories will then be combined with current academic notions about emotion.

For the purposes of this study, the most comprehensive current emotion theory is the cognitive emotion theory as formulated by the Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (1986). Different theoretical insights into the complex area of research on emotions are integrated into this theory which will be discussed in chapters four and five. The essence of Frijda's theory distills down to viewing emotions as expressions of the individual which fulfill a central function in reacting to the environment. Surroundings or situations offer opportunities or threats; they pose certain demands for satisfying individual needs, desires or concerns and provoke engagement in relationships. Simultaneously, the situation reveals possibilities or impediments that the individual has within this context. When the elements contributed by the situation combine with their potential meaning for the individual, this combination may create an emotional reaction. An emotional reaction betrays the fact that interests are at stake in the situation. I apply this psychological emotion theory to actors in their professional surroundings on the stage as well as to characters in dramatic situations.

In the context of this book a psychological approach to acting means the following: I take the perspective of the actor at work as someone who does his or her work in a certain way, in specific circumstances, as would a psychologist studying 'normal people'. This approach leads to the conclusion that accepted acting

I have vivid memories of this production (*Avondrood by Het Werktheater*), especially because the actors were not at all ashamed to let themselves coincide with their characters (...). None of the actors in this production had anything to hide or anything to put on. No one attempted to hide behind the mask of an old person. The actors of the company were shamelessly themselves. And we, the audience, felt like a band of frightened peeping Tom's.

(Klaus Sandunski, in *Toneel Theatraal*, no. 7, September

methods handle emotions in a one-sided manner. These methods do not take into account the emotions actors experience as a result of performing their acting tasks in front of a critical audience, or with the demands arising from the theater situation. I have called these emotions task-emotions and these are related to the actor as professional.³ I propose that task-emotions play an important part in making character-emotions believable and convincing to an audience.

Sequentially, problematic notions involved in the portraying of character-emotions are introduced. Topics familiar in actor training *like* 'involvement with the character', 'identification and empathy', 'believability of emotional expression' and 'dual consciousness' are placed in the perspective of views on emotion in contemporary psychology (chapter 5).

Next, the field study I conducted among professional actors in the Netherlands, Flanders and the United States will be discussed. Various considerations played a role in this process. By permitting professional actors to speak for themselves, support for insights previously developed only in theory could now be based on actual practice. This has rarely occurred systematically and never before on such a large scale. With this empirical analysis I have taken a step toward increasing the understanding of professional skills in acting. Chapter six includes a condensed overview of previous field studies on aspects of acting. I also describe how my field study was set up and conducted, and what questions were asked.

Several hundred professional actors and actresses answered the extensive questionnaire. Their responses were collated and used as a basis for statistical analyses, the results of which are presented in chapter seven. The results reveal, among other things, that most actors seldom actually experience the emotions they are portraying on stage as they perform a character. However, the analysis does determine that actors in performance experience intense emotions of a different order, which I name 'task-emotions'. Further, it appears that the acting style utilized has no bearing on the degree of correspondence between the emotions of actors and characters. In practice, it appears that exercising an emotionally 'involved' acting technique does not yield greater correspondence between the emotions of the actor and the character than exercising a 'detached' style of acting.

Finally, in chapter eight, I attempt to point these findings towards the development of a contemporary acting theory.

1.4 What This Book is Not About: Limiting the Subject

This book is predominantly concerned with professional actors (not amateurs or students) who present emotions in roles they perform for a live theater audience. How these actors work during the rehearsal period is only peripherally touched on, though naturally live performance is not unconnected to the rehearsal process. I have limited myself to stage acting and have left film and television acting out of the picture. None-

We confessed to each other that we would love to figure out the secret of Marlon Brando's primal scream in the film *A Streetcar Named Desire*: 'Stella!!!'. We guessed our professor's answer ourselves: Marlon Brando's scream starts in his lommach. German actors don't act from the lower part of their body (like Americans do), but from their heads. (...).

(Klaus Sandunski in *Toneel Theatraal*, no. 7, September 1996)

theless, some actors in the American survey answered questions about acting for the camera. Their answers are more or less similar to those of the stage actors, but were too few in number to draw sound conclusions from. At certain points in the book film acting to stage acting are compared.

When I speak of characters I generally mean the most important or leading characters in the performance or text and not the minor roles. On most points the same principles would apply to major and minor roles, but the emotional content of minor roles is normally less than in major roles.

The nature of this study assumes that we are primarily trying to understand some fundamental principles of the emotional process of acting, in particular how emotions are shaped on stage. Consequently, the aim is not an exhaustive examination of varieties of acting styles. Neither will I dissect the nuances of diverse character types, genres, dramatic structures, etc., but instead concentrate on the most common, prototypical characters, their dramatic situations, and their presumed emotions. Since Diderot's *Paradoxe* is the starting point, the frame of reference is mainly (traditional) character acting.

During the last number of years in the West, there has been a visible growth of acting styles in which the representation of real (or realistic) character-emotions have assumed decreasing importance. Ensembles like Maatschappij Discordia (the Netherlands) and STAN (in Belgium) propose that the actors themselves - simply as people - are present on stage. Strongly choreographed 'abstract acting', as with De Keersmaecker, Jan Fabre, or Pina Bausch, makes very different demands on actors. Frequently, so-called experimental theater places scenographic aspects above (the portrayal of) characters or their emotions. Alternatively, I have also seen heightened demonstrations of raw character emotions in recent performances, witness Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Het Zuidelijk Toneel (Netherlands, 1996). One company member recounted that director Ivo van Hove was focused on making a sort of 'x-ray analysis' of the character's emotions.

Experiments with acting styles in the Netherlands seem to have developed further than in surrounding countries, most certainly than in the United States. Note that I emphasize acting styles; not experimental theater forms of which stunning examples may be seen in America. In the context of this book a thorough discussion of such developments would be too great a digression, but I will return in some measure to this issue in the final chapter. However, it is safe to say that the results of this study align well with developments in contemporary theater.

In conclusion I believe that the analysis of creative processes does not detract from their artistic nature, but can make a meaningful contribution to the nature of the arts. Performance scholar Richard Schechner contends: 'I do not believe that any creative process - in-

...according to the tried and tested Oiscordia method: Everything that is felt to be artificial is taboo. There is then no decor; once on stage the actors stand stock-still reading their lines, without performing any prescribed actions (tea drinking, sitting down, playing cards, fooking at each other). One of the tricks they have used for years is that every player can represent any man or woman, young or old without reflecting age or sex in intonation or posture. It is often guess work as to who is speaking, even if director Jan Joris Lamers sometimes calls out half-audible stage directions.

(newspaper *Het Parool*, February 19, 1997)

cluding acting - is beyond discussion and analysis; nor do I believe that analysis destroys creativity (it is not the actor-at-work who will be doing the analyzing)' (Schechner 1964: 211).

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