

Research Paper

In Search of the Character: A Study on Psychological Perspective of Theatre and Movie Artists

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the area of identification of self with the character played by Theatre and Movie artists. Nettle (2006) found high Empathy Quotient among professional actors indicating high correlation of empathetic identification of self with character. Also, according to Thalia Goldstein (2014), Acting is a form of pretense that's done with more realistic behavior, and a form of lying that everyone is in on. In this context a sample of 10 Theatre Workers and 10 Movie Artists were randomly selected for interview. The objectives of the study were, to determine if the artists had some identifications with the character they played and how it affected their own mental well-being, and, also to determine how the identification and mental well-being differs from the theatre artists to movie artists. It was seen when someone played a role on stage, the certain character or the specific ambience created in front of the audiences reflected some identification with oneself. It was applicable in terms of movies also, but in a different way, that was demanding some specific situations to be flourished upon and changed from moments to moments. The character that was being created affected the life of a Theatre Worker in a broad sense negatively or positively. Rather the movie artists were likely having some intense still momentary actions that was not affecting much of their own identity. Thus, it could be concluded that performing arts in these two different dimensions could describe the Artists' mental well-being differently. In a much broader sense, it could be suggested that getting involved into performing arts as well as getting involved into any form of creative works could definitely affect the mental well-being and also make human empathize more willingly.

Keywords: *Theatre, Movie, Mental Well-being, Characters, Empathy*

Can you remember the character you played for the first time? Has that ever been affected your real-life identity that was being engraved within you from the time you were introduced to the environment? In what way did you perform that has been required from you in order to react towards those stimuli? Something like this really happens when we are trying to get ready to reply to some realistic questions. It happens when you can feel the sole connection between you and your requirements to fulfill the desire to act in response to the present stimulus.

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In Search of the Character: A Study on Psychological Perspective of Theatre and Movie Artists

It doesn't matter in which stream of performing art you are into, incorporating and defining another situation could bring your sense of self into a place that is not real. It can take several ages of practice to perform an unreal situation in such a way that seems almost real. Years of researches shown the consistency of feeling and performing a character in a way where there is no room for discrepancy. I have noticed in my life, how people create their own environment, create their own characters and act according to them, over which they have little or no control! They are like a scriptwriter and a director of a play which they really cannot control. The most interesting part is that, the people seem to have little consciousness about that, like the directors do not know anything about what is going to happen at their own plays.

According to David Patrick Green (2019), "The biggest difference between performing onstage and performing for the camera is the location of your audience. Onstage, the audience can easily be 100 feet or more from the performers.... The result is a larger-than-life performance since the other actors are only a fraction of that distance from you." Indeed, when you act on stage it is always a live performance, where there is no room to rectify or change that. In other hand, while acting and incorporating a character in a movie.

Not only the performance part, but also the making of a performance differs among these two platforms. According to David Patrick Green (2019), "Television and film is different because the audience has never seen the writing. It is fresh and largely written on the fly. Words are being changed right up until shoot times in many cases." He also says, "When a play takes hold and becomes popular, it is put on by company after company, night after night, all over the world. That repetition creates an iconoclastic image of the story (2019)."

It is a way of realization that, these two different genres somehow and somewhere unite. We should have enough understanding about the phase and the space where these two become one and project accordingly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The basic difference between a movie and theatre is that, the theatre is a drama in front of live audience whereas the movie is a drama in front of camera with a retake option. So, an actor of theatre has to portray his character as flawlessly as possible with no second chance to rectify like a movie artist. The empathy towards the character would be stronger in case of theatre artist to play the role for next few hours. But on the other hand, movie artist has to have a high concentration level due to the breaks in between the whole movie shooting. In the words of one actor, "We do things in reverse in the theatre. We get the script which is . . . at the end of the thought process; we . . . go back and find out what the thought was . . . the impulse that created the thought that created the words" (Goldstein et. al, 2009; Noice, 1991). In Mark Seton, a performing art scholar's perspective the character played by an actor is difficult to separate from his/her life.

Bates (1987) founded in actors reports of dreams and some unconscious process that they had to 'possess' the character in themselves so that the role they play on stage could express the qualities of that particular character and in this process their real self-image gets influenced (Walsh-Bowers, 2006). In is seen that modern acting technique is based on the ability of the actor to enter into, comprehend and interpret to others, the experiences of, successively, many others and thereby to know all their joys and sorrows, think their thoughts, and veritably to live their lives (Nettle, 2006; Cole et. al, 1970, cited in Hannahet. al, 1994). According to Keysar, Barr, Balin, & Brauner (2000), an actor's job is "reacting

through the character's point of view," or it can be said that seeing the world through the eyes of the character an actor play. It is like "living the experience of the character," or reciprocating to the character's circumstance as that actor, could internalize the experience of that character, or cognitively transport his/her own real self into the narrative of the character (Goldstein, 2015; Green et. al, 2000; Kaufman et. al, 2012).

The training of empathizing with character (Levy, 1997; Metcalf, 1931; Verducci, 2000) to internalize and have long lasting after-effect is very common in theatre artist is evident from various studies (Goldstein et. al, 2009). This is empirically supported by a study of Nettle (2006) who found that adult actors scored higher on Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright's (2004) Empathy Quotient, a self-report measure of emotional empathy (Goldstein, 2009). In 2015, Australian actors' Wellbeing study founded that approximately 40% of actors were embedded in intense emotional feeling of the characters they play. An acting teacher have seen the transition of a soft, gentle, polite male to a rude and aggressive person when he played one of the characters involved in a enactment of the Anita Cobby murder. The teacher found out that there was a 'seepage' of the characteristics of role played into the actor's own life (<https://theconversation.com>). The social-personality scientist Kenneth Gergen (1971) also referred to the phenomenon of theatre actors' over-identification with the role played and alleged spill-over effects from characters enacted to the actors' off-stage personality (Walsh-Bowers, 2006). The boundary line of real self and acting self sometimes gets dissolve due to the need of enactment especially in theatre. (Nemiro, 1997; DeCosta et. al, 1986)

The lack of dynamic variations of a character portrayed on stage might lead to self-image problem in actor (Nemiro, 1997; Henry et. al, 1970). Movie actors have to carry their role for a long period of time but the intense involvement in it is very less than a theatre actor because of the enactment in a different set-up. Thus, the present study is a journey in search of movie and theatre actors' fainting boundary in between self and role-character.

METHODOLOGY

As the aim of the present study was to determine the nature of psychological processes involved into production of Theatre arts and Movie arts, qualitative analysis method is used here. "Analysis involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analyzing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing".

Participants

In the current paper, 10 Theatre artists and 10 movie artists of urban location were interviewed in a comfortable set-up. Prior permission of participation was taken from them.

Exclusion/Inclusion Criteria

Theatre Artists and Movie Artists residing in urban area, sufficiently exposed to the acting works for at least 5 years were eligible for the participation in the study. Two categories of participants were Theatre Artists and Movie Artists. In this study, we got Theatre Artists working in various sectors like Acting, Scriptwriting and Direction, whereas we got Movie Artists mostly from Acting and Direction background. All the participants were at least graduate with minimum knowledge of conversational English to respond.

Procedure

- A set of open-ended questions were pre-determined for taking one-to-one structured interview.
- Samples were randomly selected from the population on basis of inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Questions were asked and responses were recorded.
- Some earlier researchers have suggested that the researcher must listen repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with it.
- The data was fully transcribed.
- Transcribed data were coded. The coded units were like repeatedly used phrases or words by the interviewee.
- Similar kinds of information were grouped together into categories.
- The themes were related to different ideas.

Data Collection

Interview as a method of data collection was used to have an in-depth view of the perspectives of people. Open ended questions helped respondents to answer on basis of their complete knowledge, feeling, and understanding. The data was read over repeatedly and categorized for like or repeated phrases and themes which were then grouped to form a meaningful summary (Creswell, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study indeed has gotten so many participants working in vast areas of Art and media, having different kinds of dispositions and exposures. So it is a difficult task to generalize them and come into a definite situation. Before looking at them, it needs to be reassured that, we will look into it in an almost generalized manner that should not be the case while we do the typical qualitative studies.

We will now divide the collected data into two different segments as the different groups, are- (i) The Theatre Artists, (ii) The Movie Artists.

The Theatre Artists

While we were collecting data from the Theatre Artists about their psyche while preparing for a particular situation or scene or a character, one thing was clear enough that most of them has been gone through a rigorous procedure of assimilating a said situation or a character within themselves, also within their lifestyles and their ways of living. There have been some general similarities among the Theatre Artists' methods of similar kinds of accumulation. We will look at the data one by one as some specific examples reflected.

- a) Mr. PGR is a 27 years old Theatre Artist working in Kolkata in various groups and projects. He depicted his way of working and getting into a particular situation and character as a way that is mostly related to Catharsis. According to him, he may not be a good human being in his personal life, he doesn't consider himself to be a good human being. According to him, Theatre makes him a better person, and this is the reason he craves out to do Theatre works in his profession. Also, he wants to connect emotionally with his environment. According to him when he gets into a character, not only the character and also the entire script gets him to connect with the characters in terms of socialization and affection.
- b) Ms. RH is a 25 years old Theatre Artist. She sees herself as the happiest person in this world because she is involved into such profession where human mind is so

In Search of the Character: A Study on Psychological Perspective of Theatre and Movie Artists

vastly described. She feels that this practice taught her so much about Human expression and emotions that she can spread this knowledge in her real life too.

- c) Ms. KG is a 23 years old Theatre Artist working in Theatre field aspiring to learn more about 'Method Acting'. She is constantly devoting herself to achieve and learn through the psychological aspects involved with the Theatre.
- d) Mr. AB is a 25 years old Theatre Artist, constantly devoted into improving not only into the areas of acting, but also through singing, sports, attending better workshops for physical acting.
- e) Mr. AnB is a 25 years old Theatre Artist working in various parts of India, also having a vast experience of Engineering studies. He is aspiring to be a Street Theatre artist someday achieving the expertise of vocal expressions.
- f) Ms. SS is a 25 years old Theatre Artist working in various parts of India. According to her, Theatre can lead to a character's unconscious as well as learning the procedures of the human unconscious.
- g) Mr. AP is a 27 years old Theatre Artist seeking an expertise through voice performance. He wants to explore the complexity of different characters performed on stage.
- h) Mr. DM is a 22 years old Theatre practitioner who strives through learning the most about complex characters. According to him, it really is a tough job describing how it is incorporating real life experience into the stage experience.
- i) Mr. DA of 26 years age is not a performer. He is more into scriptwriting and direction. According to him, it is more difficult to get rid from a character while from a directional perception than the acting one. It takes months to get rid from the status after a performance is being staged.
- j) Mr. AGC is a 28 years old stage Artist working in urban areas of Kolkata. According to him, the journey of getting into a character through rehearsals is quite lively, that it can be with you ages after your performance.

The Movie Artists

- a) Mr. AP is an aspiring movie director of 27 years of age. According to him, works in movies are basically involved with the technical parts having no or a little room for getting into a character.
- b) Mr. SB is an eminent Film Director of 27 years of age, seeing the movie performance no different from working in other professions.
- c) Mr. MK works in mainly outside of West Bengal and also works internationally. He is 40 years old. According to him, Movie is mostly a Businessman's point of view rather than an Artist's one.
- d) Mr. SD is a 45 years old Movie Director working mainly with Bengali Movies. He has very vast number of skills and according to him, it is essential for every worker in a set to incorporate skills before knowledge.
- e) Mr. JB is a 45 years old Movie Director having the realization of the lack of scopes to make a movie as lively as Theatre.
- f) Mr. AM is an aspiring movie actor of 33 years of age. According to him, it is essential to have some knowledge about different past works in this field before going out to perform in front of camera.
- g) Mr. ARK is an aspiring Movie Director of 25 years of age. He also made some similar comments to study well especially in the area of filmmaking before jumping into works.

In Search of the Character: A Study on Psychological Perspective of Theatre and Movie Artists

- h) Mr. BS is a 28 years old independent film maker. His works are mainly based in Mumbai. According to him, it is very easy to portray the intensity of a character through efficient planning and managing the entire crew.
- i) Mr. AC is a movie director of 30 years of age, having exposures in different countries. According to him, the scope of breaking through the barrier through movies is quite difficult than stage acting.
- j) Mr. BR is an aspiring Movie Director of 29 years of age. According to him, the intensity of the expressions will vary while being in front of camera than being in front of live audience on stage.

After re-evaluating every aspect and every point of view, it can be clearly seen that, Movie Arts and Theatre Arts are quite different from each other despite of real time. Movie acting requires little and smaller reactions while Theatre needs a bigger one. Overall, the Theatre needs to be acted upon with accumulating the psyche of the mass, whereas the movies ensure the specification of one certain situation. In the words of one actor, “We do things in reverse in the theatre. We get the script which is . . . at the end of the thought process; we . . . go back and find out what the thought was . . . the impulse that created the thought that created the words”. The training of empathizing with character to internalize and have long lasting after-effect is very common in theatre artist is evident from various studies. Thus, it can be interpreted as the Actor's choice on which kind of assimilation they are doing with the given environment.

Through thematic analysis, five major themes emerged from the above interview-

Theme 1: Psychological Immersion and Character Internalization

Theatre artists predominantly described a process of deep immersion, emotional catharsis, and prolonged identification with the character. Participants reported internalizing the character's emotional world, sometimes experiencing difficulty detaching even after performance. In this study, the search for the character in theatre appears as an inward psychological excavation, where actors merge aspects of their self with the fictional persona. Movie artists, however, described more controlled and situational immersion. Their psychological engagement was less prolonged and more technically contained. This suggests that cinematic structure moderates the depth of internalization.

Theme 2: Psychophysical Discipline and Preparation

Theatre participants emphasized rigorous preparation involving voice modulation, physical training, workshops, and continuous refinement of craft. Theatre artists' search for the character thus becomes a holistic integration of body, emotion, and cognition. Movie artists, on the other hand, emphasized technical preparation—understanding camera angles, studying filmmaking, and managing production logistics. Their approach reflects a more cognitive–technical model rather than a deeply embodied one.

Theme 3: Technical Mediation versus Live Presence

The difference between live audience interaction (theatre) and camera mediation (film) can be examined through social and performance psychology. Theatre artists described performing for the “mass psyche” with amplified expressions. In contrast, movie artists emphasized subtle expressions and micro-reactions. Thus, in theatre, the search for the character unfolds dynamically in real time. In film, the character is assembled through technical and editorial processes.

Theme 4: Professional Identity and Artistic Meaning

Theatre artists frequently described their work as transformative and identity-shaping. They viewed theatre as a medium for emotional and moral development. Movie artists often described cinema from a professional or industrial standpoint, emphasizing business structure and skill execution. Thus, the search for the character in theatre appears existential, while in film it appears functional and project-oriented.

Theme 5: Emotional Detachment and After-Effect

A significant difference emerged in terms of post-performance emotional residue. Theatre artists reported difficulty “getting rid” of characters, sometimes for months. Film artists reported fewer long-term after-effects. Thus, theatre fosters prolonged emotional absorption, while film allows compartmentalization.

CONCLUSION

Theatre and movie, as two distinct genres of artistic creation and media, generate fundamentally different psychological experiences for performers. As reflected in the themes identified in this study—psychological immersion, psychophysical discipline, technical mediation, artistic identity, and emotional after-effect—the process of “searching for the character” varies significantly across these forms. Theatre encourages deep internalization, sustained emotional continuity, live audience interaction, and often prolonged identity engagement with the character, whereas film acting requires technical precision, fragmented emotional activation, subtle expression, and quicker detachment due to mediated production processes. An artist working across both mediums may therefore experience frequent and abrupt psychological shifts, moving between immersive embodiment and controlled compartmentalization, expansive projection and restrained micro-expression, intrinsic artistic transformation and structured professional execution. These repeated recalibrations may influence emotional regulation, stress levels, identity integration, and performance anxiety. Hence, while the present qualitative findings illuminate the nature of these psychological processes, a quantitative approach is necessary to systematically measure the extent, intensity, and long-term effects of such genre-based shifts on artists, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological dynamics involved in the search for the character.

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In Search of the Character: A Study on Psychological Perspective of Theatre and Movie Artists

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Conflict of Interest

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