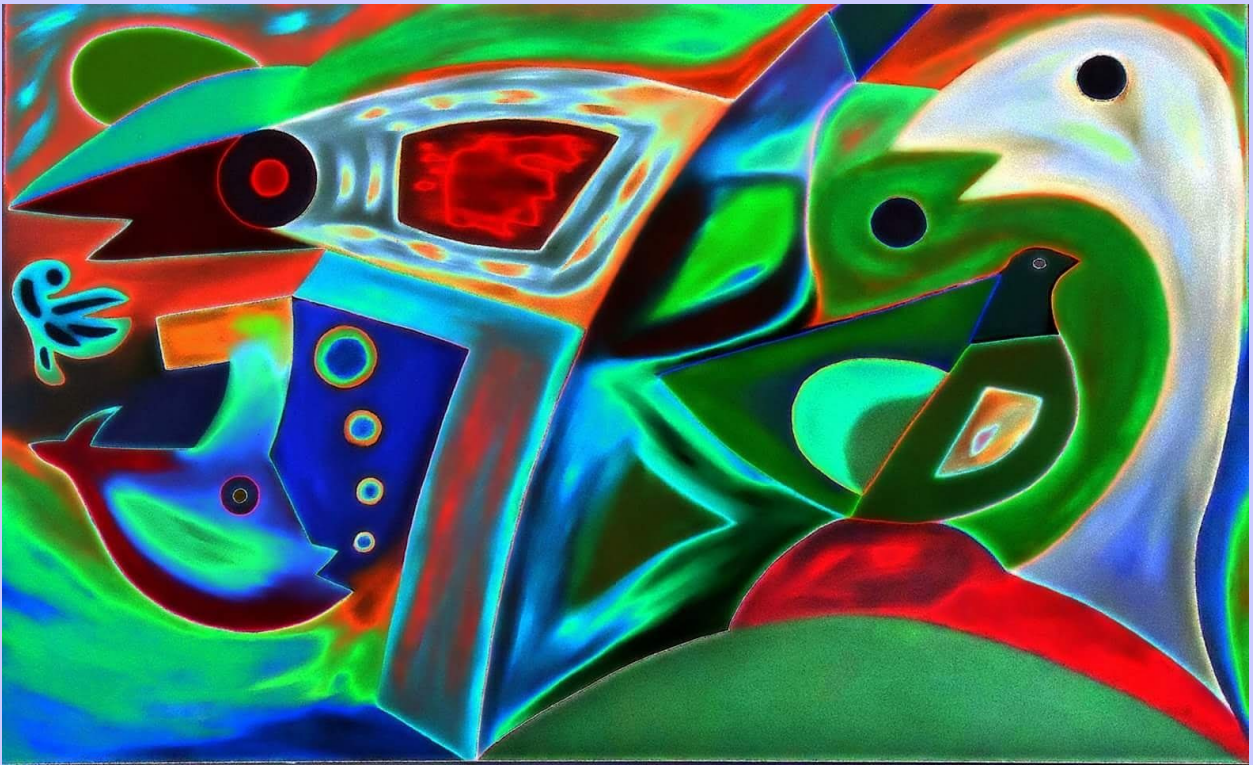


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# An Introduction to the Relationship Between Actors' Internal Experience and External Embodiment in Theater Performance

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**Abstract.** Theater performing art is an art of portraying a certain character through role-playing. As an actor, the process of entering the role is not easy to realize, but a complex process that requires a constant understanding of the role and a full expression of that understanding. In the process of character creation, the actor should not only combine subjective and objective factors, but also highly unify the physical and psychological. In fact, no matter how the actor to create the role by whatever means, are inseparable from an objective law, that is, the actor must have an internal experience of the role of the link and external embodiment of the link. And only by utilizing this law can the actor create a true and vivid image of the character. This article shows that the digital age has brought various influences on the process of actors' internalization and externalization of roles.

**Keywords:** dramatic performance; experience; embodiment; relationship, digital age.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between internal experience and external embodiment in the art of theater performance is a critical aspect of character portrayal. This study aims to bridge the gap between an actor's internal emotional journey and the physical manifestation of that journey on stage, thereby enhancing the authenticity and depth of character portrayals. Our research contributes to the field by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between an actor's subjective experience and objective performance, offering insights into the psychological and physiological processes that underpin effective acting.

The world-famous actor, Sir Laurence Olivier, once stated that "the actor's art is to convince himself that the part is congruent with his own experience." Building on Olivier's unique understanding of internal experience and external embodiment, our exploration delves into how actors can achieve a seamless integration of their personal emotions with the demands of their roles. By examining the cognitive, emotional, and physical dimensions of acting, this study seeks to uncover the strategies and techniques that enable actors to create more vivid and believable characters.

This research is particularly relevant in the contemporary theater landscape, where the line between actor and character is increasingly blurred, and audiences demand a higher level of emotional and psychological engagement from performances. By understanding the nuances of internal experience and external embodiment, actors can better navigate the complex terrain of character development, ultimately enriching the theatrical experience for both themselves and their audience.

In the subsequent sections, we will review the relevant literature to establish a theoretical framework for our study, articulate our research questions, and describe the methodology we employed to gather and analyze data. The results of our analysis will be presented, followed by a discussion of the implications of our findings for the field of

theater performance. Finally, we will conclude with a reflection on the significance of our research and its potential to influence future practices and studies in acting.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature review serves as the foundation for our understanding of the relationship between an actor's internal experience and external embodiment in theater performance. Historically, the craft of acting has been shaped by various theoretical frameworks, with significant contributions from practitioners like Konstantin Stanislavski, who emphasized the importance of emotional memory and inner life to create a believable character [12]. More recent studies have expanded on these ideas, exploring the cognitive and psychological processes that actors engage in to inhabit their roles [4]. Research in the field of theater performance has also begun to incorporate insights from psychology and neuroscience, examining the ways in which actors train their minds and bodies to express complex emotions and narratives [7]. The advent of digital technology has introduced new dimensions to the actor's toolkit, with some scholars arguing that digital media can enhance an actor's ability to connect with their internal experience and externalize it more effectively [11].

However, despite these advancements, there remains a gap in the literature regarding a comprehensive understanding of how actors reconcile their personal experiences with the demands of their roles, particularly in the context of contemporary theater. This study aims to address this gap by examining the interplay between internal experience and external embodiment through a multidisciplinary lens. Based on the literature review, the following research questions guide our investigation:

How do actors integrate their internal emotional experiences with the external demands of their roles in theater performance?

What cognitive and psychological strategies do actors employ to achieve a congruence between their internal states and external expressions?

In what ways does the era of digitalization impact the actor's process of internalizing and externalizing their characters?

## **3. The meaning and role of internal experience and external embodiment**

### ***3.1. Meaning of internal experience***

Internal experience refers to the process of the actor's deliberate use of suggesting himself/herself during the creation of the character, to feel the psychological activity of the characterization in the role, and to integrate himself/herself into the character.

In theater performance, with certain skills to experience the character's feelings about life, imagine the character's inner activities in a particular situation, and then perform, so that with the changes in their feelings and naturally show certain behaviors, to achieve the perfect fusion of the actor's own and the role.

Actors and roles due to different growth environment, different ideological concepts, different times, different social status, different life experiences, different behavior, different speech, forming the actor and the role of the "real me" and "false me" contradictions, and the two relationships are opposites and unity. [8].

These two relationships are opposites and unity. When the actor creates a role, he needs to take the "true self" as the main body of creation, and then he needs to overcome the contradiction between the "true self" and the "false self", and move towards the "false self" required by the script. Then they need to overcome the contradiction between the "true self" and the "false self" and approach the "false self" [10].

required by the script. Through the continuous experience of the role, they can bring the "true self" into the role, and truly and accurately express the image of the "false self".

The most important feature of Mr. Cheung's performance is that he can make good use of his eyes and facial expressions to realize the expression of his character's inner world. By understanding the emotions of the character, he makes the whole acting process very natural. In "Legend of Ah Fei", Mr. Cheung played the role of a rebel (Figure 1), but in "Farewell My Concubine", Mr. Cheung played the role of Chen Dieyi (Figure 2), who was a soft and tender character. It is through the full understanding of the character's emotions that Mr. Cheung is able to portray each character so evocatively.

When the actor wants to experience the emotion of the character, the first step is to analyze the script comprehensively, to understand the character traits and emotional experiences of the character, to imagine the physical behavior and psychological activities of the character, and to restore the character's image in the script to the performance through an all-round analysis of the character; the second step is to understand the background of the life of the character, for example, in Farewell My Concubine, the movie's scenes are created entirely on the basis of Chinese history, and only in the context of the cultural revolution can the conflicts between the protagonists be highlighted; the last step is to integrate the emotions of the actor and the characters in the script. For example, in "Farewell My Concubine", the scene of the movie is created completely based on Chinese history, only in the background of the cultural revolution can the conflict between the main characters be highlighted, and the final tragedy of the movie is also an extension of the conflict; the last step is to integrate the emotions of the actors and the characters in the script.



Figure 1. Forrest Gump style



Figure 2. Farewell My Concubine style

### **3.2. The role of internal experience**

Only by eliminating the contradiction between the "true self" and the "false self" can the actor create a character that is true to life. In the process of acting, the actor needs to add his own emotions to the experience of the character he is playing. Lev Tolstoy once pointed out that in the process of performing, the actor needs to emerge emotions similar to the situation he is performing, and then express the emotions through certain actions, gestures, tone and voice, so that the audience who feels such emotions can infect the people around them. From this, we can see that theater performance is a process of transferring emotions. Another famous artist suggested that "performance is the actor expressing his emotions in the world described by the script". Although it is said that theater performance is unrealistic, and the writer of the play sets up a particular life environment for the character, in the process of performance, the actor must show the authenticity of the character in the process of creating a false image of the character, and to see the truth in every aspect.

### **3.3 Meaning of external embodiment**

External embodiment refers to the results of the performance that the actor presents in the performance after completing the experience of the character. In order for an actor to embody a character in a performance, he or she needs to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role played, as well as conceptualize the character's image, and then only then can he or she find the proper behavior and emotion of the character. The actor's search for a sense of self in the role he or she is playing involves, on the one hand, analyzing the character's personality in the script, and then imagining what the character's outward behavior might be like under such a personality. In other words, the actor has to show different behavioral habits according to the particular character in the performance. Observing many famous actors, they all have a common characteristic: they pay great attention to their physical expressions such as standing, sitting, walking, etc., and combine their bodies with their roles in their performances [6]. For example, in "Sentinels under the Neon Lights", Mr. Gong Zi Pi played the role of the company commander, and in one of the episodes, when the commander commanded the company soldiers to sing, he clenched his two fists tightly and raised them above his head to beat the beat, which was a perfect expression of the character's personality, and at the same time embodied the characteristics of the army, and the audience was deeply impressed by his performance.

### **3.4 The role of external representation**

In theater performance, the actor's performance of the role is the process of creating the image of the role, and this process shows the actor's self-cultivation. Good role-playing must be realized by the actor's comprehensive analysis and conception of the role. According to the famous actor Stanislavski [12] and Strasberg [13], the actor must utilize certain techniques and technologies in order to bring the character to life and even express the soul of the character in the play. The technique mentioned here should be the actor's analysis and understanding of the role, and the technology is the actor's look, tone and movement and other forms in the performance, which expresses the psychological world of the character's image and enriches the character's image by integrating himself into the role.

Only through the continuous excavation and analysis of the character can the actor fully grasp the characteristics of the character, and in the process of experiencing the character, he or she can constantly add to the conception of the character, fully integrate the "true self" into the "false self", and finally express the character perfectly. Only in this way can the actor combine the character characteristics of the role he plays, integrate himself into it, complete the process of creating the character's image, express a vivid and lively character image, and achieve the ultimate goal of creating a distinctive character image in the theater performance.

## **4.The Relationship between Internal Experience and External Embodiment in Theater Performance**

Ancient Chinese opera performers summed up their performances in the saying, "When the face moves, the spirit follows; when the form appears, the spirit opens". This statement provides a more accurate explanation of the relationship between internal experience and external manifestation in theater performance. The actor's psychological and emotional understanding of the character is the basis of the performance, which dominates the process and determines the image of the character created. The external manifestation of the performance is subordinate to the actor's internal experience of the role, which is a result of the actor's experience of the role, and such a result is the actor's psychological and emotional manifestation of the role. This is the relationship between internal experience and external embodiment in performance.



Figure 3. This style from the performance demonstrates how actors convey complex emotions through facial expressions and body language during their act, highlighting the close connection between internal experience and external embodiment.

#### **4.1. Dominant determinants of experience**

In theater performance, from the beginning of the actor's contact with the role in the drama, until the complete characterization of the role image, the whole process of the actor needs to be involved in the experience of the role. The experience does not only refer to the actor's feelings of joy, anger, sadness and happiness, but also includes the actor's liking or disliking of the character he or she is playing. Once the actor is separated from the internal experience of the character in the process of performance, he or she will not be able to complete the creation of the character, and will not be able to accurately express the characteristics of the character image. Therefore, the significance of internal experience for performance is to give a vivid life to the character. When the performance is detached from the internal experience of the character, even with the most brilliant acting skills, the character performed is just a shell, pale and powerless. In performance, there is no model that can replace the internal experience and directly reflect an accurate and vivid image, without internal experience of the performance lacks the basis of moving the audience. Usually, the evaluation of the actor's performance ability is generally judged by whether the actor has the ability to express the inner life and emotion of the character through in-depth internal experience of the character, thus it can be seen that the internal experience has a dominant role in the performance of the opera.

In everyone's life, all kinds of life experiences in the past will leave a trace in the deepest part of the heart, and this kind of trace can help the actors to recall the emotions and feelings brought by the life experiences similar to the scene when they perform, but this kind of emotions and feelings is not the real emotions and feelings needed for the performance, because everyone's specific experiences are different, and the experience brought by them is different, and due to the individual differences, everyone expresses emotions differently for the same situation, such as remorse, anger, jealousy, fear, happiness, sadness, etc. And the same person expresses emotions differently every time at different times. , for the same situation, each person expresses emotions differently, such as chagrin, anger, jealousy, fear, happiness, sadness, etc., and the same person expresses different emotions each time in different time periods. However, different emotions also have their common points, and these common points constitute the emotional foundation. In the performance, the actor takes the internal experience of the character as the basis, and then searches for the common points of emotions in different

scenes according to his own emotional experience, and finally brings the common points of emotions into the character experience.

The internal experience of this kind of performance includes the recall of the actor's own emotions [15], but is not limited to combining them with a certain past experience, but only combining emotions from multiple life experiences. At this point, the actor does not need to experience such emotions, but only extracts and feels the roots in the emotions as a basis for the subsequent expression of the emotions of the scene. Generally speaking, the actor does not need to be familiar with the details of the emotions to grasp certain emotions, but rather grasps the essence of the emotions, and once he receives the appropriate stimulus in the theater performance, he can express the remembered emotions.

The famous performer Vakhtangov said this about the emotional layer in acting: "We are familiar with most of the emotions on the basis of our personal life experience. However, these emotions are not arranged in our minds in the order and logic required by the characterization. Therefore the actor's task is to draw from all corners of his heart the imprints of the desired emotions and to arrange them in accordance with the requirements of the logic of the life of the character portrayed."

For the actor, the emotion in the performance should be obtained from his own life experience, through the memory of his own life to stimulate his own emotion. In order to realize the creation of the character image, the actor must be inseparable from the emotional expression of the character image, and in order to express the emotions required by a specific scene of the play, the actor must be supported by his or her own emotions. Only when the actor combines the emotional experience of his past life with the dramatic scene can he create a character with character traits.

#### **4.2 Embodied compliance**

Internal experience is dominant in theater performance, and external embodiment can only be produced based on internal experience, but it is not true that with internal experience an accurate and distinct external form will necessarily be embodied. In order to accurately embody the external form of a character and form a distinctive character image, on the one hand, actors need to be professionally trained in articulation, gesture, expression and other performance skills, so that when they need to embody their own experience of the character in the performance, the character image will not be affected because of their performance skills; on the other hand, actors need to repeatedly study and explore the expression and forms of performance, so as to realize the most suitable means of expression and to realize the most suitable means of performance. On the other hand, it is necessary for the actor to study and explore the expression and form of expression in the performance repeatedly, to convey his experience of the character through the most appropriate means, and to be able to express himself freely no matter whether the character is to express delicate tenderness or surging passion. As Henri Irving said, "It is often thought that great actors rely on a moment's inspiration. There is nothing more absurd than this idea. The astonishing strokes of a great actor are generally carefully gauged, studied and honed." In theater performance, if the psychological activities and emotional state of any character are to be distinctly and vividly expressed, it requires the actor to have an internal experience of the character, to express the image and emotion of the character through the speech patterns such as the height of the voice, the lightness and weight of the speech, and the intonation and elevation of the speech, and moreover to intensify all the emotions expressed by the actor through the adjustments of some gestures, changes in gesture, and changes in the expression of his or her face. Drama performance not only requires the inner experience of the character, but also needs enough expression ability to reflect the image of the character completely and accurately [9].

### **4.3 Interaction between internal experience and external embodiment**

In theater performance, the actor's experience of the role is the basis for characterization, and the embodiment of the image of the role is an expression of the experience of the role. Therefore, whether the actor's experience of the role is deep or not will directly affect the final image of the role. The internal experience and external embodiment of the role interact and influence each other. When an actor performs certain logical behaviors or certain specific scenes during the performance, it is also easy to cause certain emotions to arise, thus deepening the experience of the role. When an actor wants to create a certain role, he usually first explores certain physical characteristics of the character image, such as the way of speaking, behavioral characteristics, emotional expression, etc. When the actor is performing these physical expressions, it will bring the actor into the situation of the character, help him experience the inner world of the character, and complete the shaping of the character. In the process of actor's performance, it is generally required that the actor first experience the character, generate desire through experience, and then bring this desire into external action, that is to say, the actor should firstly integrate into the character, generate a certain emotion from the inside, and then show this emotion through action. For internal experience and external embodiment, the two are mutually unified, mutual influence and interaction. [7]

Performing artist Jiao Juyin once said, "Characters develop gradually, unevenly upward, in the actor's heart and appearance, and organically linked between the inner and the outer, that is to say, from a little bit of change to the whole, from quantitative change to qualitative change, and from the contradiction of inner forces to a unity of character."

The dramatist Jinshan has described the internal experience and external embodiment in performance as follows: "Without experience, there is noway to embody; without embodiment, why experience; experience should be deep, embodiment should be precise; embodiment should be outside, experience should be inside; internal and external combination, interdependence." This passage illustrates the dialectical and unified relationship between internal experience and external embodiment.[11]

When you are affected by the emotion of anger you will slap the table, argue loudly, or drop something; and in turn, when you drop something or slap the table there will be a hint of excitement inside. This behavior and psychological stimulation of each other, in the performance has a very important role, when some scenes need actors to show passion, can not be in order to achieve the purpose of the external embodiment and desperately let yourself imagine that have passion, the more you imagine that there is a passion, but this emotion will be farther away from you, it is better to create a passionate feeling through the physical action. Through physical movement, and the feeling of bringing yourself into the scene, you can naturally induce emotions during the performance process, thus creating a better characterization.

Drama performance is a unique art to move the audience by expressing the inner emotion of the character image, which requires the actor to experience the emotion of the character with all-round dedication in the performance process, and then embody it in an appropriate way in order to create a flesh-and-blood character image, which can be called as a performance with artistic charm.

Actors who want to create a perfect character image in theater performance must have a deep experience of the role, while finding the right way of expression, only both at the same time in order to vividly and distinctly show the character image in front of the audience.

## **5. Actors' internalization and externalization in the digital age**

Expansion of resources for role shaping: The Internet provides actors with a vast amount of information resources, facilitating them to conduct in-depth research on historical backgrounds, cultural knowledge, and industry characteristics related to the role, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the role and enriching the connotations of the role. Actors can obtain detailed information about the era or profession of the role through online databases, academic articles, documentaries, etc. For example, when preparing to play an ancient emperor, an actor can search for a large amount of historical materials on the Internet to understand the political system and court life at that time, which helps to gain a deeper understanding of the character's situation and psychology.

Diversification of performance training methods: Digital technology has given birth to many new types of performance training tools and methods. For instance, by using virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, actors can experience different scenes immersively and enhance their emotional immersion. Online performance courses and workshops enable actors to access excellent teachers and teaching resources from different regions, broadening their performance ideas. Some performing arts training institutions use VR technology to allow actors to simulate performances in different environments, such as practicing on virtual stages and in different styles of architectural spaces, improving their adaptability.

Changes in performance space and audience interaction: Digital platforms provide actors with broader performance spaces, such as web dramas and short video platforms, enabling their works to reach a wider audience. Meanwhile, actors can directly interact with the audience through social media and other channels and obtain instant feedback, which helps them adjust their performances according to the audience's responses and better shape the roles. Some web drama actors communicate with fans through social media to understand the audience's preferences and expectations for the characters, and then strengthen these characteristics in subsequent performances to make the characters more deeply rooted in people's hearts.

New ways of role dissemination and image shaping: In the digital age, social media and the Internet have a fast dissemination speed and a wide range. The images of actors' roles can quickly become popular and form topics, which poses new challenges and opportunities for how actors shape and maintain the images of their roles. Actors need to pay more attention to the image shaping of the roles on the Internet. By releasing behind-the-scenes footage, character interpretations, and other content, they can guide the audience's understanding and love for the characters. At the same time, they also need to face the influence of online public opinion and adjust their performance and image shaping strategies in a timely manner. For example, some actors in popular TV dramas will share their shooting experiences and interesting stories about the characters on platforms like Weibo to increase the audience's favorability towards the characters.

## **6. Conclusion**

In theater performance, actors need to handle the relationship between internal experience and external embodiment correctly. The first is that the actor should have a reasonable knowledge and full understanding of the role, on the one hand, the role in the script should be studied in depth, full knowledge of the role, and then try to understand and feel the emotions of the role, and then finally the appropriate acting skills to create a vivid and lively character; the other is that the actor needs to experience more of life, so as to deepen the understanding of the role

in the script. The second is the actor's internal experience of the role, the actor in the role, need to observe more people and things in real life, follow the law of the theater performance from real life, so that there is room for imagination in a particular situation, the use of from the outside to the inside, from the inside to the outside, inside and outside of the combination of the way to create a vivid image of the character. In the role experience, only when the actor puts in his or her own real emotion can the difference between the "real me" and the "fake me" be minimized. The third is that actors are good at using acting techniques to portray their roles in the performance process. The actor's external experience of the role is the process of performing the role, in which the actor should not only fully experience the role, but also pay attention to the use of good speech, form, expression and other performance skills to reflect the psychological activities of the role. At the same time, when creating the character image, the actor should not only express it through body language, but also add some unique ways of expression according to his own understanding of the character.

In conclusion, the goal of this article was to explore the intricate relationship between an actor's internal experience and their external embodiment in theater performance, with the aim of understanding how this interplay contributes to the creation of authentic and compelling character portrayals. Our major findings indicate that a deep and nuanced internal experience is essential for actors to achieve a convincing external embodiment, and that this process is influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, physiological, and technical factors.

These results can benefit researchers by providing a framework for understanding the cognitive and emotional processes involved in acting, which can inform both the training of actors and the analysis of performance. Furthermore, by highlighting the importance of aligning internal states with external expressions, our study offers practical insights for theater practitioners seeking to enhance the impact and authenticity of their performances.

However, our work has limitations, including a focus primarily on theoretical perspectives and a reliance on existing literature, which may not fully capture the dynamic and individual nature of the acting process. Additionally, the study did not incorporate empirical data from actor interviews or performance analyses, which could have enriched our understanding of the practical applications of the internal-external dynamic.

We suggest future research should focus on empirical studies that examine the internal experience and external embodiment of actors across different genres and cultural contexts. This could involve qualitative research methods, such as interviews and observations, to gain a deeper understanding of the personal and subjective aspects of the acting process. Furthermore, investigating the role of technology in mediating the actor's internal and external experiences, particularly in the era of digital theater, could offer new insights into the evolution of performance practices.

By addressing these areas, future research can build upon the foundation laid by this study, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the art of theater performance and the complex relationship between an actor's internal world and its external manifestation on stage. This will not only enrich academic discourse but also have practical implications for the training and development of actors, ultimately enhancing the power of theater to engage and move audiences.

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