Article

An Analysis of Emotional Expression Methods in Theatrical Character Development

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Abstract: As a comprehensive performing art, the core of drama lies in conveying the inner emotions of characters through the role shaping of actors. In recent years, with the continuous deepening of cross-disciplinary research in psychology, performance studies and cognitive science, how actors can touch people's hearts and shape their characters with emotions on stage has become an important issue in performance teaching and practice. This article, through the analysis and summary of relevant literature, explores the methods of emotional expression in the shaping of drama characters, with a focus on analyzing the synergy of actors' emotional experience, body movements and voice intonation, as well as the guiding significance of Stanislavsky's system for emotional authenticity in modern performance. Research has found that the authenticity of emotional expression stems from the actor's psychological immersion and situational resonance, rather than superficial imitation. Meanwhile, technological and psychological research have provided new tools and perspectives for emotional training and assessment. This article aims to provide theoretical support and practical reference for the teaching and creation of contemporary drama actors.

Keywords: character building in drama; emotional expression; Stanislavsky system; performance psychology; actor training

1. Introduction

The essence of character portrayal in a drama is that actors transform fictional characters into perceptible "real existences" on the stage through physical, verbal and psychological experiences. This kind of "authenticity" is not a simple imitation of life, but rather the transformation of personal emotions into artistic expression through the actor's feelings and understanding. Xu and Guo (2024) pointed out in their analysis of character development in "Teahouse" that actors should, on the basis of understanding the character's fate and social context, take emotional experience as the core to endow the stage characters with a real and vivid sense of life. This indicates that emotional expression is not only the core link in character building but also the foundation of the audience's aesthetic resonance.

Those who study this have already re-examined from the perspectives of emotional psychology and cognitive science what to focus on in performance training. The concept of "perezhivanie" proposed by McNamara (2023) emphasizes the emotionally interdependent relationship between actors and characters. Performing is not merely about piecing together the skills learned outside; rather, it involves reorganizing one's inner emotions. When actors perform, they go through a cycle of "experience - reflection - re-experience", and eventually become emotionally united with the character. In this way, performance is no longer merely about imitation but a genuine psychological process. It is precisely for this reason that Stanislavsky's "experiential school" has become the core foundation of performance theory.

Pelfrey (2024) stated that this experiential system is in line with Vygotsky's psychological ideas, both holding that emotions are at the core of understanding things and taking practical actions. Straulino et al. (2023) further pointed out that the shaping of stage emotions should not only focus on facial expressions; body movements, voice intonation and spatial rhythm also play significant roles in emotional transmission. Zhou and Bamman (2024) proposed an emotion measurement model using film and television performance data, confirming that the coordination of actors in multimodal expressions (facial expressions, voice, body language) is a key factor influencing audience emotion recognition.

However, genuine emotions do not mean unlimited emotional investment. Brott et al. (2025) found through qualitative research that if actors are immersed in

high-intensity emotional roles for a long time, they are prone to the "role residual effect", that is, they continue to experience the character's emotions even after the performance. This psychological load may cause anxiety and fatigue, suggesting that drama educators should introduce emotional recovery mechanisms into the training system to help actors maintain psychological balance between "getting into character" and "getting out of character".

In the context of Chinese drama, emotional expression has distinct cultural characteristics. Peng (2024) took the phrase "Life is like a play" as an entry point and mentioned that when Chinese actors portray historical figures, they place more emphasis on the "integration of emotion and reason" - meaning that they first understand the social identity and the situation in which the character is situated through reason, and then use this to drive the expression of emotions. This "restrained and reserved" expression method precisely reflects the aesthetic characteristics of the East and complements the Western performance style that places more emphasis on showing emotions externally, each having its own merits. Xu and Guo (2024) also pointed out that Chinese drama is shifting from "imitating techniques" to "expressing emotions". This change not only indicates the progress of drama education but also the improvement of people's aesthetic awareness, which can be regarded as a double gain. Shehu (2025) found that if an actor's facial expressions, tone of voice and body movements are in perfect harmony, the audience can more clearly understand the emotions he intends to convey. From this perspective, the emotional experience, physical performance and language expression together form the three-dimensional structure of the emotional portrayal of characters in a drama. When actors are training, they combine their inner feelings with external skills. Only in this way can emotions that are both genuine and artistic be performed on the stage.

2. Method

To systematically sort out the intrinsic connections among the emotional expressions of drama characters and the practical methods that can be used, this study mainly employed two approaches: literature analysis and theoretical induction. Literature analysis involves carefully reviewing existing studies, objectively evaluating their quality, and identifying research gaps that have not been covered before. Theoretical induction is to integrate theories from different disciplines and

distill analytical ideas that can guide practical operations. When selecting literature, the focus should be on these themes: "Emotional expression in performance", "psychological experience of actors", and "character shaping in drama". The sources should also be concentrated on three core contents: drama theory, psychological experiments, and performance education. At the theoretical level of drama, the focus is on Pelfrey's (2024) comparative study of Stanislavsky and Vygotsky's psychotheories. The former emphasizes that actors achieve the deep internalization of character emotions through "empathy", believing that genuine emotional experience is the foundation of stage expression. The latter points out that the generation of emotions depends on the social and cultural context in which the character is situated. Pelfrey pointed out through comparison that the two are theoretically complementary to each other - the emotions of drama characters not only require the individual experience of the actors as the core, but also need to be "contextualized and calibrated" in combination with the social attributes of the characters. This conclusion provides an important theoretical support for this study to establish an analytical perspective of "experience-context integration".

At the level of psychology and experimental research, the "Actor Emotional Physiology Database" proposed by Aly et al. (2024) is of great significance. This study, by collecting physiological and behavioral data of actors from multiple countries when they performed different emotions, revealed the physiological consistency between emotional performance and real emotional responses. For instance, when an actor expresses "restrained grief", their heart rate and skin conductance response are significantly lower than those of "overt grief", indicating a clear coupling relationship between performance emotions and physical state. This achievement provides quantifiable emotional expression basis for this research, enabling the analysis of the emotions in drama to break through the traditional subjective description. Straulino et al. (2023) further pointed out that existing emotional research overly focuses on "a single basic emotion", while neglecting the "complex emotions" commonly found in drama and the differences in their expression. They emphasized the existence of a "performance threshold" between stage exaggeration and everyday emotions, and this finding became the entry point for this study to explore the "logic of compound emotional expression". Meanwhile, the research by Raz, Reiter-Palmon and Kenett (2025) starts from the relationship between creativity and emotional regulation, providing theoretical support at the

cognitive level for understanding how actors maintain the coherence of their performances in multiple emotional states.

At the practical and educational research level, the achievements of Xu and Guo (2024) and Peng (2024) provide a localized perspective for "Emotional expression Training in the Chinese Context". Xu and Guo, taking classic plays such as "Thunderstorm" and "Teahouse" as examples, pointed out that Chinese drama actors often achieve "externalization of inner emotions" through "subtlety" and "stylized transformation" in emotional expression. For instance, they convey complex emotions through "expressing feelings through eyes and voice through breath", rather than relying entirely on the outward release of body language. Peng (2024) emphasized from a teaching perspective that the emotional immersion process of Chinese students is more susceptible to the influence of "collective cultural psychology", and they should shorten the emotional distance with their roles by recalling similar situations in their personal lives. These studies actually all indicate that drama education needs to strike a balance between the Western theoretical framework and traditional Chinese aesthetics. Only in this way can an emotional expression training system suitable for the Chinese mainland be created. Ultimately, the methodology of this research takes into account both theoretical depth and practical application. From a broad perspective, integrate the two viewpoints of "experientialism" and "social culture". From a small perspective, combine physiological experimental data with actual cases of performance training. Finally, a complete research approach from theory to practice was formed, laying a solid foundation for exploring the structural mechanism and teaching practice of emotional expression in drama.

3. Results

An analysis of relevant literature reveals that there are mainly three core methods for drama characters to express emotions: the emotional experience method, the body movement method, and the voice intonation and facial expression method. These three methods support each other, forming the "emotional three-dimensional structure" of character shaping, and together determine the depth and authenticity of emotional expression in stage performances.

3.1. Emotional Experience Method (Experience School)

The emotional experience method used by actors is based on the Stanislavsky system. The core lies in recalling or re-experiencing genuine emotions, evoking inner feelings similar to the situation the character is in, and then relying on these feelings to drive external performance. The "perezhivanie" concept proposed by McNamara (2023) states that an actor's emotional experience is not simply imitating the emotions of a character. Rather, it is through empathy in the heart and the regeneration of inner emotions that the actor temporarily integrates with the character psychologically. This kind of "experience" is not merely a mental activity but also a creative behavior. It can transform an actor's performance from a mere display of skills into a genuine exchange of emotions. In this way, actors can evoke genuine emotional responses in the "imagined scenarios", and the stage appeal will also be stronger. (Brott et al., 2025)

3.2. Body Movement Method (Body-Emotion Co-construction)

The body is not only a "tool" for performance, but also an important way to generate emotions. Straulino et al. (2023) found that body movements not only express emotions but can also, in turn, influence an actor's own emotional experience. The posture of the body, the rhythm of movements, and the movements on the stage all have a reverse effect on the actor's psychological state, forming a dynamic relationship where "the body and emotions build each other". When actors consciously adjust the tension, rhythm and strength of their movements, they can effectively mobilize their emotions, making the performance more natural and layered. This method is particularly important in drama performances. After all, the stage space is limited, and body movements become an important way to create an emotional atmosphere.

3.3. Pronunciation, Intonation and Facial Expression method

Language and expressions are the most direct ways for actors to convey emotions to the audience. Shehu (2025) found in his research on facial expression classification that if an actor's voice tone and facial expressions are well-matched, the audience can more clearly understand his emotions and are more likely to resonate with him. The pitch, speed and rhythm of the voice can psychologically stir up the emotional ups and downs of the audience, thereby making the emotional expression

of the characters more prominent. Meanwhile, Aly et al. (2024) 's physiological data analysis indicates that changes in voice and intonation not only affect the audience's emotional perception intensity but are also closely related to the actors' own physiological and emotional responses. In other words, voice control and emotional mobilization form a two-way interaction mechanism. The degree of coordination between an actor's voice and expressions directly determines the emotional authenticity of the performance.

In conclusion, emotional experience provides psychological motivation, physical movements carry external forms, and voice expressions achieve communication and transmission. The three together constitute the core mechanism for the emotional expression of characters in a drama, endowing the "fictional characters" on the stage with a real emotional life that can be perceived by the audience.

4. Discussion

From a theoretical perspective, Stanislavsky's system remains the core basis for contemporary performance teaching. Pelfrey (2024) pointed out that for actors to act in "imagined situations", they need to achieve real experiences through the "emotional arousal" mechanism in psychology. This is highly consistent with the "inner experience" theory described by McNamara (2023).

However, contemporary performance education is no longer confined to the natural expression of emotions, but rather emphasizes the controllability and sustainability of emotions. Brott et al. (2025) 's research reminds us that although emotional investment can enhance artistic appeal, if there is a lack of appropriate psychological adjustment mechanisms, actors may experience the problem of "character emotional retention". Therefore, teachers should guide students to establish a psychological boundary between "getting into the role" and "getting out of it" to ensure the health and safety of emotional expression.

In the field of Chinese drama research, Peng (2024), based on the cultural view that "life is like a play", holds that actors should, on the basis of understanding the social background and historical circumstances of characters, transform emotions through "rationality" to achieve the unity of emotion and reason. This viewpoint reflects the uniqueness of Eastern performance: emotions are not merely the release of sensibility, but rather the integration of aesthetics and thought.

5. Conclusion

The emotional expression when shaping characters in a drama is actually a fusion of psychology, body language and the art of voice. When actors perform, they must not only make their emotions genuine but also have the ability to express this true feeling in an artistic way. Actors have to rely on emotional experience to immerse themselves in the characters' hearts. In this way, stage performance is no longer just superficial imitation, but a process of mutual integration with the emotions of the characters. This also confirms the idea of the "experiential school": To express emotions truly, it's not just about skills. The key is that the actor has to thoroughly understand the psychology of the character and recreate it. Only when an actor truly empathizes with the character can the audience feel the vitality in the character's emotions.

In addition, body movements and character language are both important carriers for conveying emotions, and these two also form the framework of a character's external expression. Body movements are not only visual symbols of performance, but also can influence the psychological state of actors through the "action-emotional feedback mechanism". Actors shape the psychological tension and emotional dynamics of their characters through postures, rhythms and spatial displacements, enabling the audience to sense the inner changes of the characters from their body language. Similarly, both facial expression research and voice physiological analysis indicate that the coordinated control of voice and expression is an important factor in evoking emotional resonance among the audience. Through the ups and downs of voice and intonation as well as the subtle adjustments of facial expressions, actors not only convey emotional information but also construct the psychological depth of the characters.

Therefore, in the future, drama performance and education should pay more attention to the scientific and systematic training of emotions. On the one hand, the position of the experiential theory in teaching should be further strengthened to enable actors to learn to shape their characters based on genuine emotions. On the other hand, the research achievements of psychology and neuroscience should be introduced. Through the establishment of body movement feedback, voice control training and emotional recovery mechanisms, actors can achieve self-regulation and psychological

protection. Scientific performance training not only helps improve the quality of an actor's emotional expression, but also prevents psychological fatigue caused by long-term emotional investment.

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