

Walking in Hamlet's Shoes: A Qualitative Study of How Empathy Shapes Actors' Experience

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Abstract--Empathy is regarded as a 'double edged sword' in the acting profession. While essential for helping actors portray their roles authentically, actors who empathize too much with their stage characters may experience adverse psychological consequences such as burnout. This qualitative study explores the role of empathy and how it shapes acting experiences among actors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Malaysian actors, and a thematic analysis of the accounts yielded three major themes: 1) empathy facilitates actor transitions to their stage character, 2) actors consciously empathize with their stage character during acting, and 3) empathizing affects post-acting emotional and psychological experiences. Results from this study adds knowledge to the field of acting psychology and highlights the subjective experiences of how actors manage empathic processes while acting.

Keywords: *empathy; acting; burnout*

I. INTRODUCTION

The authenticity of acting is strongly dependent on how well actors master the manifestations of emotions portrayed during acting [1]. There is an on-going debate on whether actors should align their own emotions with that of their characters, and the extent to which they should do so [1]. Renowned French playwright, Diderot stated that an outstanding actor should not feel the emotions of the character since feelings fluctuate and will affect the consistency of their acting performance [2]. Diderot further posits that feeling the character's emotions could potentially lead to emotional exhaustion, in part due to emotional overload [2]. Diderot, Coquelin and Brecht, propose the technique approach in which the actors emphasize emotion creation from the "outside in" [3, 4]. Via this approach, the first step for the actor is to fully comprehend the external physicality of the character, such as the way the character moves, dress, and speaks [5]. A thorough psychological analysis of the character is not needed for these technique actors, as most of the actor's understanding of the character would derive directly from the script [6].

Conversely, method acting refers to an "inside out" form of acting developed by Stanislavsky, a Russian actor and director [3]. He upholds that display of genuine emotions contributes to realistic acting, and actors need to be able to search for emotional truths internally, such as from personal experiences [7]. Stanislavsky also suggests that good acting highlights the ability of an actor to understand and create all aspects of the character's inner life, such as the mental states

and intentions of the portrayed character [7]. Based on Stanislavsky's ideas, Strasberg developed Method acting, which encourages actors to associate their affective memory with the emotional state of the characters [8]. Method actors strive to become more and more similar with their characters while performing through constant analysis of the character's thinking, and frequently questioning themselves (as the character) "Who am I?" and "What do I want?" [9]

These disputing views among acting experts lead to 'the actor's dilemma', which questions how much should an actor immerse him or herself, or keep a distance from the character's emotions [1]. In other words, to what extent should an actor empathize with the character in order to produce authentic acting?

Empathy

Empathy is defined as the process by which individuals feel other's emotions and understand the motivation behind their actions [10]. According to Deutsch and Madle, empathy can be divided into two dimensions, namely affective and cognitive empathy [11]. Affective empathy refers to the visceral response towards others' emotional state [12]. Cognitive empathy, in contrast, denotes the ability of perspective taking – a process that allows one to perceive others' mental states, motivations, and intentions [13, 14].

In attempting to personify the characters, actors need to transform themselves physically and emotionally into their characters. Before portraying a character, actors will strive to analyze the motivation behind the character's actions and words based on the script they received [15, 16]. Empathy, in this case, aids actors to understand and feel their characters. By empathizing with their characters, actors are able to portray the characters' thinking and feelings via spoken words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language [13, 17].

Empathy in Acting

Despite the majority of the past studies indicating that actors have higher empathy, Goldstein, Wu, and Winner reported that actors are only better at cognitive empathy but not affective empathy compared to non-actors [3, 13, 15, 18, 19]. Such results are explained by linking it to actors' regulations of

empathy, which prevents them from emotional exhaustion while constantly empathizing with the character [13]. A study conducted by Goldstein and Winner yielded showed that professional actors reported being able to distinguish between empathizing and “studying” their mental states simultaneously [20]. This suggests that, actors regulate the extent of empathy by not fully immersing themselves into the character’s emotions. By doing so, the actors take a preventative step to avoid confusion between their own emotions and the characters’ emotions [21, 22]. Actors may also refrain from feeling intensely for their characters to prevent themselves from being emotionally exhausted [13].

The explanations above are in-line with empathy research among care-giving professionals, such as teachers and nurses. Individuals working in these professions were more prone to compassion fatigue [23, 24, 25]. Compassion fatigue is a type of burnout an individual experiences due to caring for others; it is related to an overuse of affective empathy that happens when one spends a prolonged period attending to other’s emotions [23, 24]. Based on these researches, it is possible for actors to be emotionally exhausted, or experience burnout related symptoms due to consistently empathizing with their characters.

Supportive findings on the detrimental influences of over-empathizing on actors are also found in Thomson and Jaque’s study related to the psychological health of actors [26]. Thomson and Jaque report that when actors form a deep emotional connection with the character, they tend to experience an increased self-awareness [26]. This increased self-awareness, in turn, intensifies actors’ risk to re-experience past traumas and losses, which might eventually cause development of posttraumatic stress disorder’s symptoms [26, 27].

Research Gap

Despite acknowledging that empathy is vital in acting and possess several pros and cons to actors, existing literature does not provide a comprehensive understanding to the makeup and subjective experiences of actors involving in the process of empathy [28]. Hochschild posits that empathy tends to enhance job satisfaction [29]. However, it is not unusual to get news about actors ‘losing themselves’ due to over-empathizing with their characters. Thus, empathy can be equated to a ‘double-edged sword’ in acting. Although empathy facilitates authentic acting, it might lead to unwanted consequences when actors over-empathize with their characters. Whether empathy is a positive or negative element in acting relies heavily on actors’ perception and regulation of empathy. As such, a further study is required to further understand actors’ experiences while acting, and the role of empathy is shaping such experiences. Hence, the current qualitative study aims to bridge the research gap by providing a deeper understanding of empathy in acting. The central research question that guided this qualitative study is “How do actors perceive empathy in relation to their acting experiences?” The subsequent research question is “What kinds of process do actors engage in to regulate empathy when acting?”

II. METHODS

A. Participants

The current study recruited both professional and non-professional actors from stage play, film and television acting. Seven Malaysian actors aged 18 years old and above were recruited for this study. A pilot study was conducted with one of the seven participants in order to form more pertinent interview questions. Additionally, only actors who have acted at least once in the last one year were recruited to ensure higher accuracy of episodic memory recall [30]. Purposive sampling via personal contacts was used to recruit participants, as this study requires specific participants who can provide answers related to the research questions.

B. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews consisting open-ended questions were conducted for data collection. Upon obtaining the participant’s consent for interview and audiotaping, a 45-60 minute interview was conducted with each actor. Audiotaping during the interview was necessary for reference during the transcribing process. Physical and facial expressions of the participants were observed throughout the interview and incongruences were noted. Further explanation on the reasons for such incongruences was then sought for.

The interviews began with a brief rapport building whereby the researcher asked questions like “How many years have you been involved in acting?” The brief rapport building session helped to reduce the uneasiness of the participants, as most of the participants do not know the researcher prior to the interview and are not used to being interviewed [31]. The actors were then asked various open-ended questions, such as “What strategies do you use to understand the character’s thinking?” and “How would you feel after acting?” Field notes were taken for reference during data analysis. At the end of each interview, the recording was transferred into a laptop, with access only available to the researchers.

The first interview was used as a pilot testing to identify any flaws in the structure of interview questions. Minor amendments to the phrasing of several questions were made prior to conducting the study proper. Nevertheless, data collected from the pilot interview is congruent with the data gathered from actual study, hence the data of pilot interview was included in data analysis for the current study.

C. Data Analysis

Verbatim transcripts were made from the interview recordings, followed by thematic analysis. The researchers analyzed the participants’ narrations, accounts and descriptions. Open coding was first conducted, prior to axial coding. Upon completing axial coding for the all seven interview transcripts 11 categories (subthemes) were formed. These 11 subthemes were then subsumed under three main themes germane to actors’ acting experience (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. MAIN THEMES AND SUBTHEMES, (X) NUMBER OF STATEMENTS FROM OPEN CODING RELEVANT TO THIS SUBTHEME

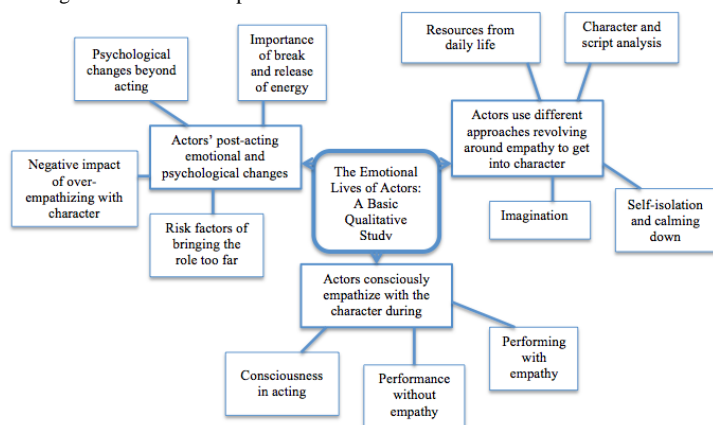
Main theme	Actors use different approaches revolving around empathy to get into character	Actors consciously empathize with the character during acting	Actors' post-acting emotional and psychological changes
Subtheme	Resources from daily life (10)	Performing with empathy (10)	Risk factors of bringing the role too far (10)
	Character and script analysis (14)	Performance without empathy, (14)	Negative impact of over-empathizing with character (16)
	Imagination (7)	Consciousness in acting (9)	Importance of break and release of energy after acting (10)
	Self-isolation and calming down (13)		Psychological changes beyond acting (9)

In order to increase the validity of data, triangulation was conducted by interviewing a Performing Arts Lecturer a local performing arts academy. Member checking was also adopted by sending transcripts to each of the participants. To increase the study's reliability, an audit trail was kept throughout the study [32]. Details recorded in the audit trail included methods, procedures, field notes, reflections, and decisions made throughout the study. Kurasaki suggested inter-coder agreement as a way to ensure the validity of the constructs emerged from data analysis [33]. Hence, a single inter-coder arrangement was adopted for this study. After reading and discussing the themes and categories, a high inter-coder reliability of 80% was achieved between the inter-coder and the researcher in codes categorization and themes formation [33].

III. RESULTS

Three themes delineating the process of pre-acting, acting and post-acting were formed from the data analysis (see Fig. 1). Excerpts of participants are provided below with 'P' refers to 'Participant'.

Figure 1. Thematic map of results.



Theme 1: Actors use different approaches revolving around empathy to get into character

Resources from daily life

Participants mentioned 'a pool of resources' where they store all the observations and personal experiences from daily life, coined as 'library in mind' by Participant 1. It is vital for actors to be observant towards people and events that happen around them, especially regarding the emotions involved in it. These observations, regardless of towards himself/herself or another party, will then contribute to the library of actors for acting purposes. Hence, the 'library in mind' acts as a resource centre for actors to search for relevant information that they can use to understand (empathize) the character. As mentioned by one of the participants:

"...at first I will of course to go into the library in my mind, to find for that particular person that can be related to this character. Secondly, I will find one experience in my life that might be relevant with the portrayal of this character." (P1)

We can think of the 'library in mind' as a real library with lots of books, and each personal experience and observation in daily life makes up the collection of books in the library. Thus, when an actor is assigned with the role of Hamlet who is grieving upon his father's death, the actor searches in his 'library in mind' for personal experience of grieving, or observations of a close friend mourning after the death of a loved one. By reading the book of 'grieving experiences and observations', the actor will be able to understand the mentality and feel the emotions of someone in grief, hence portrays an authentic role of Hamlet.

Such accounts were triangulated by the acting lecturer (henceforth referred to as "Dr. W"). Similar to what the actors mentioned, Dr. W too advocates that observation is the most 'fundamental exercise' for an actor to practice.

Character and script analysis

Another way for actors to empathize with their characters is via character and script analysis. Techniques to analyze the character and script differ among actors. This step provides actors with an intricate understanding of the character's motivations and intentions, apart from the character's physicality and background. Thus, allowing actors to have a more holistic view of the character. While analyzing the character by reading the script, some actors will attempt to create a profile for the character, and also do further research regarding the character to obtain a better grasp on how to portray this particular character. For instance, Participant 4 stated,

"I will write up a profile of that person that I will be acting, say if that person is a slightly depressed personality, I will look up on what are the causes of all these depressing emotions".

Besides, Participant 3 and Participant 5 shared that they tend to consult the director after conducting character analysis to ensure the accuracy of their interpretation on the character and script. Additionally, the actor can bring character analysis a step further by interviewing someone similar to the character in real life in order to ready themselves for their acting role.

Imagination

The subsequent method raised by the participants is usage of imagination in acting to empathize with the character. All the participants cited 'putting yourself in their (character) shoes' as a necessity to get into the character. Participant 7 explained that, to achieve that actors need to

"...think of what if I am the character, what will I do, I mean what will they do, from their history, their personality".

Apart from mentally picturing themselves as the character, actors also used 'outside-in' strategies, such as adjusting posture according to character's way of positioning body and 'self-hypnotize' to aid in imagining themselves as the character. By synchronizing the actor's posture and physicality to that of the character, actors will be able to produce a more genuine performance as they can really feel the character. Another participant, P5, shared that she tends to do deep breathing to prepare for acting, she considered it 'the hypnosis that I do to myself':

"...when I take in deep breath, I imagine that as I exhale, I exhale X (her name) out, and as I inhale, I inhale the character."

Such comments reflect the usage of 'self-hypnosis' in aiding the actors to empathize and align their emotions with the character's emotions.

Self-isolation and calming down

Participants captured the importance of self-isolation to calm themselves down before acting. Self-isolation is the key in order to attain the clear actors' mind, which in turn enables actors to empathize and enter into the states of mind of their characters. Often, actors do not interact with others while warming up before acting because:

"...if I interact with others or communicate with others, I have my own emotions, and not the character's emotions that I'm supposed to have." (P7)

Besides, calming down does not only refer to becoming calm and prevents emotional fluctuation, it also refers to leaving the emotional burdens from daily life behind, as stated by one of the participant:

"I think as an actor, when you are playing a role, you should not have any worries, you don't think about your bills, you don't think about I parked my car at illegal place and worry about that... you just need to like empty yourself, so that you can go through the journey of that particular character." (P1).

In short, self-isolation and calming down enhances actors' ability to empathize with their characters.

Theme 2: Actors consciously empathize with the character during acting

Performing with empathy

Empathy is considered as the core of acting, it creates a more believable and genuine performance. With the presence of empathy, actors are able to give life to their characters, as one participant put it:

"When you watch them (actors) do a role, you believe they are going through the thing' (P1)."

The ability to empathize with the character is especially important when it comes to playing the role of an antagonist, who could be a ruthless and selfish person. Actors can only 'transform' into their characters provided that they are able to fully understand and feel the emotions of the character. Once actor's emotions are in sync with that of the character, the actor will feel a lot for the character. As shared by a female actor who acted for a public service announcement about objectification among women:

"I realize that I feel a lot from it because it's as if I can feel how these women who are really in the real world feel, like when a man objectify you, when a man treats you like that, and you have to smile, you have to smile because he's your husband...and it's not a good feeling" (P4)

It is also common for actors to feel as if they have grown after acting as a certain character if they were able to immerse themselves in the portrayal of the character. This is especially true for projects with a particular social mission behind, such as stage play aimed at promote awareness of a particular issue to members of the public.

Performance without empathy

Performing without empathy hinders actors to get into character, which leads the act to appear fake and unconvincing. As a result, audience would not be able to understand the character the actor is trying to portray, let alone feeling touched by the character. Dr. W agreed by suggesting audience will find the performance fake if actors are not able to empathize with the character, and this will become a hurdle to build up the imaginary world among audiences. As for actors themselves, they considered the acting a weak performance if they are not able to empathize with the character, and they will find themselves 'seeping' through the character – the audience will see that the actor is still playing himself/herself instead of the character.

Characters that actors find it challenging to empathize with are usually those that are very different from them, or a character that is out of their comfort zone. A young male participant gave an example of acting as a father in a play, who is always waiting for his son to return home. He found it challenging because he does not have a son and it is distant from whom he perceives himself as. An English-speaking actor echoed this view. She found it hard to get into character when the role she acted required her to speak Malay, which is very different from her since she does not usually speak Malay.

A heterosexual female participant shared an experience about not being able to empathize with the homosexual character she is assigned with. She was required to perform an intimate scene with her co-actor, yet she was not able to get into character due to being uncomfortable with the

character's sexuality. Deducing from the interviews, language, age and sexual orientation of the character can potentially decrease actors' ability to empathize with the character. These in turn cause actors to portray only surface emotions to the audience, as they are not able to align their feelings with the character's feelings.

Consciousness in acting

Despite the importance of empathy in acting, actors need to be aware that the feelings they are experiencing while acting are fictional emotions originated from playing the character. Most of the participants mentioned the '30-70 rule' of acting, which refers to 70% into character but 30% conscious that it is merely acting.

When asked what will happen if the actor is 100% into character, the same participant said 'You will siao (go crazy)!' He explained if an actor is 100% into character, it is likely for the actor to experience negative emotional changes, or even hurt himself/herself. Another participant shared her experience of over-empathizing with the character while portraying a suicidal role that required her to slap and hurt herself:

"I did not feel anything because I was really inside the character already, so I didn't feel any hurt or any pain".

She only felt the pain after the performance is over, and realized that she actually hurt herself while acting. Hence, as advocated by Dr. W, maintaining a certain degree of self-consciousness in acting is important to ensure the well-being of the actor. Actors also agreed that it could sometimes be hard to draw the line of division between the character and the actor himself/herself, yet actors have to be aware that acting is make-believe, not be it. This is in-line with Dr. W's view, which states that actors should become the character by 'playing' it instead of transforming into the character. By 'playing' the character, it means actors know it is fictional and are always aware of their own identity as an actor.

One way for actors to remain conscious of their own identity is to consciously create a distinction between the character and themselves. This can be achieved by wearing something that the actor would not wear in real life, yet it is aligned with the character's style. Actors can also create a specific behaviour that could distinguish them from the character.

Theme 3: Actors' post-acting emotional and psychological changes

Risk factors of bringing the role too far

In the context of acting, the phrase 'bringing the role too far' refers to actors facing detrimental negative emotions due to over-empathizing with their portrayed characters. A few risk factors contributing to this phenomenon have been identified. Firstly, usage of past experience in relating to character could potentially lead actors to experience carried-over emotions from acting in real life. A participant with four years acting experience shared that she used to relate the character's encounter with her own past experiences to produce more believable performance, yet the refreshing memories of

negative past experiences lead to her being constantly emotionally affected outside theatre.

Secondly, a lack of willpower to get out of character after acting might cause actor to bring the role too far. Dr. W posited that the ability to get out of character depends on whether the actor is willing to do so. One participant suggested phenomenon of actors bringing their roles too far could be because of the own psychological issues of the actor. According to him, actors might be reluctant to come out of character in order to utilize the character as an excuse for his/her personal behaviour. He gave an interesting account:

"I think everybody wants to do bad things, everybody likes to do bad things, experience bad things, but in life you don't have reason for that, but during acting, we have a reason for that, all these people who have low self-esteem... that would be a very good reason for them to do whatever they want to do." (P1)

An experienced actor stated that it is hard for actors to get out of character, but they have to force themselves to do so in order to move on from the character. Indulging in the character might lead to actors 'victimizing' themselves when they are acting the role of a depressing character, which causes them to experience adverse emotional effects after acting.

The third risk factor of actors bringing their role too far is they ignore the negative emotions they are feeling after acting a sad character. When asked what would happen if the actor ignores such emotions, a participant said,

"Then you might become a depressed person in life, yea, because you have experienced like seven loss (the show last for seven days)...people only experience that once in their lifetime if they live 70 years" (P1)

Hence, it is recommended for actors to acknowledge any negative feelings after acting as a character instead of merely shoving it aside, so that they can figure out ways to deal with these feelings. A few participants mentioned cases of bringing the role too far usually only happen to amateur actors, as they do not have the skills to handle negative emotions after acting.

Negative impact of empathizing with character

Actors frequently mention feeling mentally tired, especially after performing emotionally intense scenes. Actors needed to go through a lot of emotions while acting, and this sometimes leads to an emotional overload among actors. This finding is in-line with Dr. W's view, as in acting could be exhausting for actors because it requires a lot of energy in empathizing with the character to perform an authentic show. The transition of emotions between empathizing with the character during the show and de-empathizing with the character after the show could also be arduous for actors.

Other actors echoed that empathizing with the character might lead to actors feeling vulnerable as it requires actors to open up to see the sides that they do not want to see in themselves and show it to the audience, as one of the participants put it,

“You essentially are showing all your most vulnerable parts to the audience, and this is like complete strangers who may or may not pass judgment on you.”

Besides, getting in sync with the character’s emotions while acting could potentially causes actors to ‘lose themselves’ if they get carried away. Portrayal of a sad character might affect actors’ thinking and emotions, leading actors to think and feel negatively even after the performance is over.

Importance of release of energy and break after acting

Actors refer to the connection built with the character while acting as ‘energy’. Once the performance is over, it is important for actors to consciously know they need to dispose the energy. Disposing the energy, or getting out of the character after the show takes time since the feelings for the character have developed across time. A participant who often takes up depressing character suggested actors need to unleash and drain out the energy, and one possible way of doing it is through crying.

Additionally, it is vital for actors to take a break before taking up another role in order for them to ‘rejuvenate and detox emotions’ as one of the participants put it. An example of a break after acting is taking a few days off to rest, or pursue a hobby outside acting to ensure work life balance. However, if actors are still bothered with the character’s emotions after attempting to release the ‘energy’ and taking a break, help from the director is recommended.

Psychological changes brought by acting

The main task of an actor is to empathize with the character for the purpose of acting, and this has several implications on the actor’s psychological states. Actors are able to gain a better understanding of the world and become more sensitive towards people and things that happen around them. Another participant shared through acting, he learnt to become more aware of others’ emotional states.

Subsequently, participants cited that they have become less judgmental and self-centered upon embarking on acting, whereby they need to constantly empathize with their characters. The different types of characters assigned to the actors enable actors to realize that there are different people in the world, each with different motivation and behaviour. Therefore, instead of being judgmental towards others’, actors are more like humble observers wishing to learn more from others.

Lastly, participants shared that their emotions management skills have become better ever since they started acting, as they have to constantly switch their emotions according to characters and also when they need to get out of character.

IV. DISCUSSION

Key Finding 1: Actors use different approaches revolving around empathy to get into character

In line with past research, it is found that actors use various ways revolving around empathy to get into character before they act [13, 17]. All of the strategies used require actors to relate their own experiences or personal experiences in daily life, and through their creativity and imagination, put themselves into their characters’ shoes. Stanislavsky coined such strategies as ‘the magic if’, which urges actors to ask themselves what would they do if they were the character in that particular situation [34]. Asking ‘the magic if’ provokes actors’ affective empathy by allowing them to feel their character, hence lead to actors having a better idea of what they can portray and how to do it [34].

Besides, character and script analysis is the technical procedure that all actors from the interview mentioned as a step for them to get into character. Pritner and Walters explained this step allows actors to understand the conflict, objectives, and given circumstances in a play, which refer to the ‘who, what, where and when’ in a play that inform an acting choice [35]. Character and script analysis is more related to cognitive empathy as it aids actors in understanding the motivation of their character. Another interesting finding from the interviews is the role of self-isolation among actors during warm up session before acting to assist them in getting into character. This finding is echoed by Murphy and Orlick’s research that examines actors’ mental strategies in getting into character [36]. Murphy and Orlick explained actors find it relaxing to spend time alone before acting [36]. The current study also showed how self-isolation allows actors to distant themselves from distractions and enter into the realm of acting, and their characters’ mental states easily.

Key Finding 2: Actors consciously empathize with the character during acting

During acting, actors are required to consciously empathize with the character to ensure an authentic performance. Performing with empathy is regarded as more realistic because audiences are able to see the character on stage instead of the actor himself/herself. On the contrary, when actors are not able to empathize with their characters, the performance will be regarded as inauthentic. However, it is important for actors to regulate how empathetic they are towards their characters, as participants from the interviews suggested that over-empathizing with the characters would lead to detrimental psychological effects, such as getting a burnout after acting. This could be due to boundary blurring among actors, whereby actors who do not practice a 3:7 ratio of self-character consciousness when acting fail to make a clear distinction between the character’s emotions and their real life emotions [22]. This ratio of self-character consciousness has been cited by most of the participants in the interview as a strategy to guarantee the quality of performance while maintaining the psychological health of actors.

Konijn mentioned about ‘double consciousnesses among actors in her study, which supports the 3:7 ratio of self-character consciousness found from the interviews [1]. To elaborate, Stanislavsky quotes a renowned Italian actor, Salvini, who says “an actor lives, weeps and laughs on the stage, and all the while he is watching his own tears and smiles. It is this double function, this balance between life and acting that makes

his art” [37]. This shows that for actors to be themselves whilst being in a character is a more recommended way of acting instead of completely transform themselves into the character.

Key Finding 3: Actors’ post-acting emotional and psychological changes

When the 3:7 ratio of self-character consciousness is not practiced, actors are more likely to be affected by the risk factors of bringing the role too far (burnout), and experiencing negative impacts of empathizing with the character, as actors fail to strike a balance in maintaining the self and character consciousness. Results from the interviews show that while empathy is important in acting, too much empathy could lead to development of burnout like symptoms among actors. Such findings are supported by empathy research among nurses and caregivers [23, 24, 25]. This is especially true when actors relate what the character is going through with the negative past experiences in their life. An explanation for this phenomenon is when actors look into their emotional memory for similar negative experiences with that of the character, those negative feelings might resurface and hence lead to actors feeling emotionally down [22, 38]. Yet, interestingly, participants also pointed out that this phenomenon is more likely to happen to amateur actors compared to seasoned actors because skills to regulate empathy in acting takes time to develop.

Furthermore, participants mentioned the importance of break and release of ‘energy’ after acting. ‘Energy’ is the emotional connection an actor creates with the character in order to portray the character authentically. A break after ending a production is necessary to allow actors ample time to release the energy, or in other words, get out of their character to prevent prolonged empathizing with the character. Additionally, the job requirement for actors to empathize with characters causes them to become more aware and less judgmental towards people and things that happen around them. Orzechowicz called actors ‘the privileged emotion managers’, as they possess the flexibility to manage their feelings onstage and offstage [39]. Actors’ emotions management skills are likely to be improved since actors need to run the gamut of emotions while acting.

V. IMPLICATION

Past research on acting predominantly comprises quantitative studies, and such studies do not explicitly explain actors’ perception on how empathy is central to the actor’s experiences. Hence, the current qualitative study explored actors’ perception of empathy in acting. Results from this study contributed to a deeper understanding in actor’s acting experiences, and added insights to the novel field of acting psychology regarding the role of empathy in acting, and ways to regulate empathy to prevent burnout among actors.

Results from this study provides some practical considerations for actors’ psychological well-being. Based on the results, empathy is indeed a ‘double-edged sword’ in acting that can lead to high quality performance among actors but also causing burnout in actors. Hence, it is important for actors to regulate empathy by practicing the ratio of self-character consciousness of 3:7, as suggested by most of the participants.

Actors would then be able to channel the benefits of empathy in acting, while preventing themselves from taking their roles too far.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DISCUSSION

One of the limitations of this study is the inability to assure the quality of participants. The acting industry in Malaysia is still at its initial phase of development and hence limited amount of actors are available in Malaysia, let alone professional actors who earn a living through acting. Therefore, the criteria of participants had to be more lenient in order to ensure sufficient sample size to conduct statistical analysis for the quantitative part of the research. Actors who have acted at least once in stage play, film or movie in the last year were recruited for this study, yet majority of the participants are not professional actors and might only have received minimal acting training, or none at all for those acted in short films video assignments to fulfill course requirements. Participants in the latter case might not have high engagement in the acting process they were involved in, and hence affect the validity of the data provided. Future studies should address this issue by striving to recruit only professional or part-time actors in order to increase the validity of data.

Since years of acting experience is suggested by the participants to be associated with regulation of empathy in acting, future research should consider studying a particular sample in long term, and using various data collection methods at different point of time. Such design enables a more extensive understanding of the role of years of acting experience on empathy, which in turn might impact the ratio of self-character consciousness and burnout among actors across time [40].

VII. CONCLUSION

The current research addressed the lack of research examining the subjective experiences of actors and the role of empathy in shaping their acting experiences. By utilizing a qualitative approach, new insights were gained in ways to regulate empathy in order to prevent burnout among actors. Actors need to be aware that acting is fictional, as mentioned by Stanislavsky, acting does not equate to life but merely resembles it when the performance is good [7]. Despite how deeply an actor probes the psyche and feelings of a character, the truth is the actor is still pretending to a certain degree [7]. It is thus vital for actors to accept they are a separate entity from the character, and maintain self-conscious in acting as a way to regulate empathy.

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