

# Acted Emotion: a performance experiment in psychology and actor training

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Robert Harnish's 'narrow construal' of cognitive science envisages the mind as a kind of computer, a model that is closely related to efforts to build artificial intelligence. His 'broad construal' expands this definition to incorporate, in addition to computer science, philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience, psychology and linguistics. Each of these disciplines approaches the human mind from a different perspective, generating a wide range of theoretical models. It seems that the mind is such a complex topic that efforts to understand its workings tend to transcend the limits of a single discipline. Recent studies of brain architecture suggest that it is not just disciplinary boundaries that are collapsing under the weight of new discoveries. Hard and fast distinctions between cognition and emotion are also under threat. The work of neurologists Joseph LeDoux and Antonio Damasio demonstrates not just the interaction of thought and emotion, but also the role of the body in both cognition and feeling. Emotion and the body, therefore, must be welcomed into the fold of cognitive studies.

The explosion of interest in emotion research over the last twenty years has generated a host of ground-breaking accounts which place the emotional process in an ecological and somatosensory context. Moreover, new technology and research methods have developed to facilitate the investigation and understanding of the topic. These developments create an ideal climate for a reassessment of the specialised function of emotion in acting and performance and for addressing some key questions of long-standing theoretical and practical interest: what is the nature of acted emotion? Is it different from spontaneously occurring emotion? Do actors feel the same emotions as their characters?

This paper offers a timely response to this propitious moment for addressing the area of acted emotion. It outlines some of the influential theories that dominate discourse in the scientific and performance research communities, thus establishing the context for

an investigation of the topic. I describe an innovative 'Performance Experiment', a term

which deliberately combines the language of science and performance. Using video documentation, I discuss the experiment in terms of its two principle aims: firstly, comparing two strategies for arousing and expressing emotion, (Method Acting and Alba Emoting) and secondly, integrating research methodologies drawn from psychology and actor training. Student actors engage with a series of exercises and I assess their impact using a range of techniques, including both self-report and external observation.

Finally, I present the results of the data analysis and consider a number of related questions: which technique has a greater impact on the actors from a phenomenological, physiological and observer's perspective? Is there a difference between actors' perception of their emotions and the unconscious evidence provided by the body? Can such interdisciplinary investigation bring us closer to an understanding of the nature of acted emotion? Can performance practice inform science as much as science can inform performance practice?