

Mental Strategies of Professional Actors.

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Abstract

The understanding and application of sport psychology principles have moved beyond sport to many other high performance domains. For example, Talbot-Honeck & Orlick, (1998) studied psychological performance enhancement strategies used by some of the world's top classical musicians. An extensive review of the literature revealed that no research has explored the mental strategies used by professional stage and film actors. The purpose of this research was to begin to explore and better understand the mental strategies used by professional actors. Twelve professional actors from Canada and the United States were interviewed using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide. Inductive analysis revealed that these actors gained from seven key mental strategies: character preparation, focus while performing, pre-performance routines, imagery, confidence, optimal energy level, and performance evaluation. These elements of excellence are discussed using specific examples of application cited by professional actors.

Imagine that it is the opening night of a play in New York City. A young lead actor takes his or her place on center stage on Broadway for the first time. In the crowd are newspaper critics, talent agents, family, and friends. This is the most important night of his or her young career. How did the actor mentally prepare for this moment, this performance? Where is his focus as he steps on stage? What is running through his or her head? How does she deal with potentially negative thoughts or distractions? What does he or

she need to focus on to have a best performance?

Over the past twenty five years, leading applied sport psychology researchers have addressed these questions with Olympic and Professional athletes (Orlick, 1980; Orlick & Partington, 1988). In more recent years, Orlick and his graduate students at the University of Ottawa took the lead in applying the Sport psychology paradigm to understand excellence in a variety of other

high performance domains (for example, with surgeons, astronauts, top classical musicians and professionals in the corporate workplace).

Literature and research regarding the mental strategies of “performing artists” exists to a very limited extent (e.g., Conroy, Poczwardowski, & Henschen, 2001; Marchant-Haycox & Wilson, 1992; Poczwardowski & Conroy, 2002, Talbot-Honeck & Orlick, 1998). The term “performing artist” usually includes actors, singers, musicians, and dancers. Research of actors regarding their memorization of lines (Noice, 1991; Noice, 1992; Noice & Noice, 1997), the effect of hypnosis on character development (Fowler, 1998), the change in personalities over the course of the production of a play (Hannah, Domino, Hanson, & Hannah, 1994), their experience of flow (Martin & Cutler, 2002), and their experience of stage fright (Steptoe et al., 1995) has been conducted, however, no research has explored the mental strategies used by professional stage and film actors.

The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the mental strategies used by professional North American actors. The general research questions that guided this research were the following: What kind of mental strategies do stage and film actors engage in? What are the specific strategies they employ before, during, and after performances? How effective are these strategies? How do they implement these mental strategies? These research questions allowed us to explore the mental strategies used by professional actors to achieve best performances and to better understand the specifics (when, how, and why) of the use of these strategies before, during, and after performances.

The term “professional” actor in this study meant that the actor being interviewed currently or recently earned a majority of their income through acting. For simplicity of writing, the term “actor” includes both males and females. Twelve (n=12) professional actors from Canada and the United States were interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide. The interviews consisted of a “specific grand tour type question” where the participant walked us through a recent production run that they considered to be one of their best, while the typical grand tour question had them discuss a typical day of a stage and/or film performance (Spradley, 1979).

Results and Findings

Inductive analysis revealed that the actors used seven major mental strategies including: character preparation, focus while performing, pre-performance routines, imagery, optimal energy level, techniques to build confidence, and performance evaluation. These seven major strategies were further separated into ‘Sub Strategies’ and ‘Specific Techniques’ and are summarized below (see Table 1). The specific techniques represent the physical and/or mental actions that the actors engaged in to achieve the higher level strategies or goals.

Character Preparation

Mental and physical preparation has been found to be a source of sport confidence (Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998). Orlick and Partington (1988) found that Olympic athlete’s preparation greatly influenced their mental readiness for an optimal performance. The 12 actors interviewed in this study supported the importance of preparation and the

Mental Strategies of Actors

<i>Major Strategies</i>	<i>Sub Strategy</i>	<i>Specific Technique</i>
Character Preparation	Internal Exploration and Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - approach it as an organic process - approach it as their own process - open to exploration - use intuition - relate character to self - fall in love with character
	External Exploration and Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - investigate/ask questions - do background research - develop character's history - allow text to inform them about character
		- over preparation
Focus While Performing	Focus On Other Actor(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on listening (receiving message) - focus on speaking (delivering message) - focus on process in between listening and speaking.
	Focus On the Process of Acting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on being in the moment - focus on circumstances of scene - focusing on the character they are portraying - letting go while on stage
	Distraction Control	Distraction control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engage in strong character preparation - help fellow actor - deal with distraction immediately - decide to keep going and focus in the moment
Pre-performance Routine	Focus on Becoming Character	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus on costume/make-up - run lines - focus on character's nuances
	Getting Ready to Perform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engage in physical warm-up - relax and be alone - focus on performance - follow the same routine - arrive early - prepare during the day
Imagery		Imagery used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in character preparation - when entering a scene - for technical preparation - other uses
Confidence		Ways of increasing confidence: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engage in positive self-talk - act confident - leave confidence on set/stage
Optimal Energy Level		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engage in positive self-talk - ask 'Why am I here?'
Performance Evaluation	Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - constant process of assessment - question performance - engage in different methods - deal with critics
		- define purpose for evaluation

findings of Hannah et al. (1994) and Noice (1992) regarding the importance of character exploration and understanding. One of the actors, David, summed up the importance of preparation by saying, “If you are not prepared, you cannot listen and if you are not listening then you cannot invest in the scene.”

In essence, ‘character preparation’ for these actors is best described as a personal process of comprehension and exploration of the character and integration of themselves into the character. The actors used different approaches to explore, to the point where they could best understand their character. Essentially they used both internal/personal methods and external methods.

Internal Exploration and Understanding of Character

All of the actors felt that the internal process of exploring and understanding their character was vitally important for their performance. They each went through their own personalized process of character preparation including: (a) having the process be organic, open and their own; (b) using intuition in making choices; (c) relating to the character; and (d) respecting the character they were portraying.

Their own, ‘organic’ and open process.

Most actors discussed how their best character development came through their own personal exploration and when it was not overly influenced (by the director or by another actor who had played the same character previously). The actors used the terms ‘organic’ and ‘being open’ when discussing the process. Essentially, the actors who referred to it as an organic process described it as a process of finding the character from within. Christine described her struggles during one play, where she felt the director overly influenced her preparation and did

not allow it to be a personal process, she said:

She [the director] kept saying ‘I don't want to see any vulnerability in this character.’ Well of course, when it was reviewed it said I had done a good job with the character but it lacked vulnerability. I felt uncomfortable because I hadn't gone through the exploration. I may have come out at the end and said there is not going to be any vulnerability but if somebody tells you that at the very beginning, what are you exploring? Nothing, you are simply moving through trying to achieve their end but it is not an organic process. So you find it in your own way. The worst thing a director can do is try to push something on you at the beginning, because that is going to cloud everything.

Other actors discussed this idea of having a process that was either open, organic or their own:

It does require openness. It does require an understanding that there will be epiphanies, like punches in the stomach or to your head. Surprises...but there will have been and I will be ready when they are, that is the only preparation I think you need. (Stan)

There is sometimes a bit of a trap of watching the movie, in watching somebody else's performance because if you watch it too much you can get locked in to trying to copy that. And that won't really help you find your way to it. You always have to find the character within yourself. (Sheila)

Be open. That is probably the best advice I can give to anyone - to be open to possibilities. Be open to the 360° of interpretation, of the analysis, of inter personal relationships. Pay attention to what is going on. (Sheila)

It is doing a little homework, but not having so many preconceptions. I mean, you can have some but really allowing the process to be more organic. (Daniel)

Use of intuition in making choices.

Preparation involves a personal open minded (yet not overly influenced) exploration and understanding. But how do the actors make specific choices about their character? All 12 actors interviewed either had difficulty describing this or attributed it to various subconscious terms, of which some called “intuition”. The actors found that the choices they made about their character (i.e. how to say a line, how to enter the stage) came to them freely and they went with whichever one felt best. This use of intuition was imperative for the actors to have what some of them called an ‘organic process’ in character preparation. The actors’ best production runs came when they trusted their intuition in the character choices they made.

To be good is to understand the meaning of what you are saying or doing. If it rings true in your own mind, call it intuition...call it what ever you want, your own intelligence will tell you if it is true or not. Once you have discovered without question, the meaning of the line and delivered it enough times that it resonates correctly to your ear, then you are there. And you can't make it any better. That gives you that little bit of an extra jolt of adrenaline or emo-

tional energy where you deliver that line, whether it is loud or quietly, but just that much more conviction. And in that conviction is the line. At that moment when you were doing it, you know you are doing it right. (Stan)

You know, a lot of what I try to do is...I don't even know how to describe it, which is not helpful to you. It is like how you are going to use your personal process, how you're going to be open to that and to what is happening in that. Both in what you are bringing to it and what the other people are bringing in. I don't know, it is hard to explain. I guess the reason it is hard to explain is because it is not an entirely cognitive process. (Cathy)

To me, for the most part it is really an unconscious effort that I make in terms of acting. I know what I need to do and I just do it. I don't know what I would call it, instinct maybe, and common sense. It sounds metaphorical or something, but as it comes into me, as I start to find the voice, the posture, and the emotional life of the character, then it starts to take over. It starts to become something other than I thought it would be when I started. (Sheila)

Relating to the character.

In terms of exploring and understanding their character, some actors explicitly discussed how they would relate their character to themselves. They found this was an easy and realistic way of understanding the person they were portraying. The actors described it as relating the character to themselves or to relating to certain situations/emotions.

The only hands that can make it better are the mental hands that speak to comprehension, understanding, and profound feeling. If you want to describe it in a breakthrough way, we all understand certain things from the neck up, intellectually. But to render it as though it is coming from your heart, your guts, your heart, your soul - that is different. And what is that difference? Well, maybe, you have to experience it. (Stan)

Fortunately, I was playing an old cop, retiring, really run down tired beat up guy. And there is no subtlety of it. Most of it was me. (Ben)

And I have to be just enjoying it, watching this person die. And that is where you kind of transpose situations. That is not like me, I'm not evil. But there are aspects of one person's personality that one can access. It is all about pretending. (Lyle)

Respecting the character.

Lastly, in terms of internal preparation, some actors noted how they thought it was essential to enjoy and respect the character they were playing. Stan gave an example of the famous actor Lawrence Olivier who called it 'falling in love with your character'. Even if they did not fall in love with their character, these actors noted that it was at the very least imperative to appreciate their character and to not negatively judge them. In the absence of appreciation, they found they could not fully embrace the character and thus never be fully comfortable with the person they were acting. These actors felt they had to explore and understand their character enough to come to a point where they found their character was valid and could be loved.

So that is a vital element too - to love, embrace or feel that the character has validity. (Stan)

For this character it is about finding the whimsy and the joy of him. (Michael)

I think you should like your character. And really know what is going on in the character's head. It gives you all sorts of motivation and subtext that you might not have otherwise. (Tara)

External Exploring and Understanding of the Character

The second area of character preparation was through external exploring and understanding, including: (a) investigation of their character and their character's motives, (b) background research on the character or time period, (c) creating a character history, and (d) allowing the script to inform their exploration.

Investigating and asking questions.

Most actors noted that in preparing for their character they would ask themselves questions revolving around who, what, where, when, why, and how in terms of the character and their motives. The actors discussed different ways of doing this. Essentially they were asking as many relevant questions as they could about their character to further explore and understand the person they were portraying. The following quotes illustrate their investigative approach:

It is all about investigative work. Why is the character not walking off and going on with their lives? What keeps them in the story? What do they want ultimately? So it is called their spine - their main objective.

Every little moment in the play is like their vertebra, so many small and short term goals that are ultimately leading to one thing. (Lyle)

I did a movie where my role was a bank guard and within the first few minutes I get shot and died. I thought 'That is really cool. I could just be in the moment. I can be the best bank guard I can be.' What does a bank guard do when he is closing up at night? How does he feel? How does he walk? How does he handle his keys? How does he talk to people when he is in the bank? (Ben)

I think the challenge of good acting is to continue to feed into different parts of the character. Meaning, you sort of get something about somebody, but to keep going. (Cathy)

Background research.

Another method that some of the actors used to explore and understand their character was research about the person/type of character they were playing or the time period/event the story took place during. Some actors, including Ben, Lyle, and Michael emphasized this more while others, such as Cathy and David said that they did not need to do such research because the text usually informed them enough. Thus, the choice to do background research was a personal one. Ben, for instance, went so far as to track down a historical Canadian figure he was portraying and interviewed him. When asked if that helped his performance, he responded, "It textures and colors it. It gives me the back story and the subtext of it. I had a sense of how I related." Much of the actors' background research was through reading, use of the internet and watching films.

My hardest work happens in the first and second week of rehearsal. That is when I work the hardest because I'm scrambling, I'm always thinking about it, I'm constantly taking notes, watching stuff, researching, after the rehearsal going to the library or a video store getting old documentary on World War I, or going to the library and getting a book. (Lyle)

If it has a historical background in terms of Shakespeare, like the Richards and the Henry's, I look at who the actual true character was in terms of historical truth, that might not always be in terms of the playing of it, but it certainly helps. (Henry)

Creating a character history and using the text to inform the actor.

Similar to background research, some actors also enjoyed creating a 'character history'. Often plays and film scripts do not offer information about the character prior to when the story began. Thus actors like to create a first meeting with a love interest or the first time they met a good friend, often times the actors used imagery and imagination to create this history. For this reason, this type of character preparation will be discussed in the imagery section.

Some actors emphasized how reading the text over and over gave them insight into their character. The more the actors felt they understood the text, the further they felt they understood their character.

Generally if you read the text over and over again, and read it out loud, the character will begin to surface, to take some kind of control. The text will take you there. I'm talking now about well written scripts. You will begin to discover things about the

character and what other characters say about the character and how that character responds to other characters. You may find the voice. (Christine)

Part of the preparation is really reading the script over and over, looking for cues. It is almost like a puzzle. A good play is like that. And every day, you discover...it is like, where is Waldo. Every day you discover another Waldo, it is like being an investigator. (Sheila)

Over Preparation

As with athletes who over train, there is the possibility of actors over preparing or over researching. Some actors noted that finding a balance in preparation was essential to a good performance and over preparing did not make the performance feel like their own.

There is a danger in over preparing and overanalyzing, as you start to play your research and not be the guy. My advice to people, do all that work, but leave it somewhere else. Don't try to play it. Don't try to be the guy that grew up in the ghetto and pulled himself out by the bootstraps, just play the guy. Just be there. (Ben)

So that is always that strange tight rope that you are walking of preparation, of homework, of work, and then letting the work go. Because the minute you try to make it happen, nothing happens. It is like saying, I am going to fall in love this week, you know? (Sheila)

Focus While Performing

Focus is where one becomes totally immersed in the moment and the performer and performance become one (Orlick, 2000). David noted, “As an actor you are only remembered for what happens after ‘Action’!”, thus the focus an actor has while performing in front of the camera or on stage is vitally important to their success. The importance of focus was discussed by every actor. Optimal focus on set/stage occurred for the actors when they focused on one or both of the following – on the other actor(s) or on the process of acting. These two areas are discussed in further detail below, outlining the specific focusing strategies and techniques of the actors.

Focus While Performing – On Other Actor

Each actor noted optimal focus while performing occurred when they focused on the other actor(s) they were interacting with on set/stage. Ben summed it up clearly by saying, “The focus that works in any scene, unless you are in it alone, and even then there might be some unseen person there that you are dealing with, is on the other person.” He noted that this made the experience more real for him because he was able to focus on what the other person was going through and then his “emotion will be exactly what it is supposed to be”.

I think it has to do with focusing, in a funny way, on the other characters in the play or movie. (Cathy)

The emphasis is on the opponent or the scene partner. And so any time you are being really successful in Shakespeare it is because you're putting all of your emphasis on your arguments and the scene partner. (Michael)

I think your focus has to be very much on the other actors. (Christine)

So I guess your focus should be on the other character or characters out there. (Tara)

If I felt myself becoming stale, the way to get back in was to always re-connect with the other person on stage. (Gary)

The best performances are also where you are most connected to the other actors. (Sheila)

The actors discussed three methods of specifically focusing on the other actor(s) – (a) focus on listening (receiving message); (b) focus on speaking (delivering message); and (c) the combination of both (the process in between).

Focus on listening (receiving message from other actor).

Several actors specifically discussed listening as the key to focusing on the other actor(s) and to making their performances feel as real as possible. David noted “I have to be talking to you and I need to be listening to what you are saying in order to stay with that conversation.” When asked how important listening was to him in the scene he replied “Completely. That is acting”. The following are quotes that highlight the importance of listening when performing:

The big key, and that is the word, is listening. They always say acting is reacting and acting is listening. To really listen to what is being said to you is what makes it improvisational every night and makes it alive and real. You really play the scene and have that interaction – new things happen. (Sheila)

Listening forces you to be very attentive and that is what gives good acting. (Lyle)

The most important thing to do is to listen to what the other person is telling you. (Michael)

Listening is terrifically important because somebody is going to give you something different every night. (Christine)

Focus on communicating (delivering message).

Another component of focusing is communicating a message. While most actors defined acting as listening, Gary, Cathy and Sheila also emphasized the importance of ‘telling the story’ or communicating to the other actor. Gary noted:

Entirely, it is all about, what you are trying to convey to the other person. That is really Acting 101. Why is it urgent that you say what you are trying to say? Why do they need to understand you? It is ‘I want you to hear what I have to say, because I need something from you’...the focus is conveying information through the filter of the character that I'm playing. Whatever it is that makes it for that character to express themselves in this urgent way to one particular person.

Process in between listening and speaking.

Some actors focused on the connection between listening and communicating. For Gary, Henry, and Tara it was important to focus on the “in-between” moments, the cognitive process where they were making a connection between what they heard and what they wanted to say.

Somebody will say something which spurs an idea, there is a connection between what they say and what you will say – a train of logic. Sometimes I would have inspiration on the spot, but often times I would have to literally think about it and really work it out. I had to create the bridge between somebody else's dialogue and my response. So why I was saying what I was saying made sense. (Gary)

You have to be able to listen and react accordingly, otherwise you are not going to be in the same play, and you're not going to be on the same page. (Henry)

You are listening to them and then hopefully, if you react in accordance to what ever they said or did, you will be doing what is correct for the piece and for the character. (Tara)

Focus While Performing – On the Process of Acting

Actors also mentioned that their focus was on the ‘process of acting’. They felt it was linked to believing in and connecting to what they were portraying – essentially making it feel real. David spoke of 14 months where he experienced extreme anxiety when performing which often included getting the ‘shakes’ in his hands and legs. He spent time reflecting on why this was happening. One day he realized where the problem was. He stated:

It became so painfully obvious to me – if I would just believe in what I'm doing. Because as kids we were always taught that acting is just believing. It's true, in its simplest form that is exactly what it is.

David’s anxiety subsided and his performance improved when he focused on believing in what he was doing. Henry also discussed this notion of believing. He said that when entering a scene he pretends that it is the first time it is happening. When asked how he does that he replied, “It is just a matter of believing it in your own mind.” As film actors,

Lyle and Ben emphasized focusing on the process and not the outcome. Film actors have no influence on the outcome or final product that viewers will see because several camera shots of the same scene are taken. The final decisions are made by the director and editor. Lyle stated, “It is all about the process, so as I am getting more experienced I'm learning about how the process is so much more important than the results”. Ben discussed this theme as well, he said, “I never focus on the product, I don't care what they do with the performance after I am done with it because I can't influence it.”

The theme of ‘focusing on the process’ includes four areas of focus – (a) on being in the moment; (b) on letting go/being open; (c) on the circumstances of the scene; or (d) on the character they were portraying.

Focus on being in the moment of the performance.

Some actors discussed their approach to focusing on the process of acting as simply focusing on being in the moment while they performed:

I think there is a degree of being there. Actors talk about being in the moment and all that - it is being present. You allow yourself to be there, with everything you have. You are not holding back some other thoughts that you are having about something else. If you allow yourself

to be completely present, you will be impacted. (Cathy)

It is making your response to them, either more vivid or more real. You are literally...being in the moment. It is clear to me what that means, it means you are listening to everybody else. It is as though you are doing this scene for the first time, and you are waiting to hear it differently. (Stan)

'Letting go' and being open while performing.

Some actors spoke of trying to 'let go' or 'be open' to what was happening on set/stage while they were performing. They felt this type of focus helped them give a more realistic performance.

One of my teachers told me, the train is going to leave the station. It is going to happen, so you have to get on that train, and once you get on the train, you just let go. You sit down and it goes for itself. That is what you want; you don't want to have to labor. You don't want to have to drive the train; the train drives you once you get on it. And once you get on it, you just let go and it takes care of itself. So once the scene starts, you just sort of sit back and relax and enjoy the ride. (Henry)

If another way of saying free is to be open, not blinkered, that is vital. What you have got to be is absolutely open to everything. Not just so much for the thrill of the surprises, but somebody is going to give you a line one night that you will hear and know is different. (Stan)

Focus on circumstance of scene.

Some actors noted that they focused either on the task or the circumstance of the scene. David said, "The focus on the task at hand is almost a distraction from the technical things going on around you". The following are short quotes from various actors describing how they focus on the circumstances of the scene:

Focusing on what the task is for each scene. (Tara)

Just focusing on the activity of whatever you are doing on stage. (Gary)

Invest in the circumstances of the scene, put yourself in those circumstances. (Sheila)

Focus on the clarity and the focus of what you are doing at that moment. (Daniel)

Focus on their character.

Some actors noted that during their stage performances they focused on who the character was that they were playing. They focused on being exactly who they were and how they should act, which helped them make their performance more real.

If you are doing, for instance, something like a Queen, you have to be focused all the time on who you are and on your son or daughter...because you are an intense person and you have to find that emotion, so that is where your focus is. (Christine)

While I was engrossed in the activity of playing this person it felt effortless and fun. (Gary)

Distraction Control

Orlick (2000) defines distractions as internal thoughts or external circumstances that pull someone out of their best focus. This following section briefly discusses various distractions the actors faced and the various distraction control techniques they used, including preparation, helping other actors and focusing in the moment. The major distraction for actors in this study were negative self-talk and focusing on evaluating themselves instead of focusing on the process of acting.

If you focus on yourself, you are focusing on the wrong part of the scene. (Ben)

In poor performances Sheila commented that, “The self-conscious part takes over and you start second guessing yourself”. (Sheila)

I think I tend to ‘watch’ myself too much, which can take me out of the moment. (Tara)

Gary noted a sort of ‘out-of-body’ experience where he would be beside himself, critically analyzing himself.

I’ve literally had moments, particularly in long runs where it is almost like I’m next to myself, nudging myself saying ‘Do you know it, do you know it?’ I literally have to tell myself in the back of my head ‘Shut up, just open your mouth!’ It is almost like a metaphorical closing your eyes and falling back and knowing you will catch yourself. Too much of performance is based on fear of failure which is self fulfilling and distracting. It is what prevents people from doing good work. (Gary)

Actors also experienced external distractions such as their scene partner not knowing their lines, people in the audience talking, and film set distractions (camera and boom mic). The actors talked about different techniques to control distractions and refocus, including: the importance of preparation, helping the other actor, immediately dealing with the distraction and focusing on the moment.

Importance of preparation.

The most important distraction control technique for the actors in this study was being well-prepared, specifically in terms of understanding their character and knowing their lines.

You would be amazed. If you do the preparation, if you know everything you need to know about your character and the situation you can paraphrase even with Shakespeare. You know what you need to say and what you want from the other person, whether it comes out the same or whether it is not exactly the same words. (Henry)

You have to know your lines so well, because there are endless distractions as well, they will pick up in the middle of the scene so you have to pick up your line right where you left off. (Ben)

Helping their fellow actor.

In the case of a scene partner not knowing their lines, two actors used the technique of supporting their fellow actor to help them remember their lines. David noted:

You try to step up and help the actor without stepping on their toes and you try to stay focused within yourself to make sure that they are not

*having a negative impact on you.
(David)*

Another actor discussed a similar strategy when they faced with the same situation. They said, “I just decided to be unbelievably giving and supportive to him. I would just be there for him whenever and however he needed.” The actor decided to be positive in the face of distraction and to support their acting partner.

Immediately dealing with distraction.

Some actors spoke of removing external distractions. For example, on a film set Ben stopped and asked the Assistant Director to move an external object that was distracting him. Henry spoke of stopping to fix a chain watch that kept coming out of its buttonhole during a performance.

I feel like, if it comes out of the buttonhole, everybody can see it and most of the time they probably don't, but it makes a difference. I find I have to fix it immediately. Otherwise it totally throws me off. Little things can throw you off very easily...it is best to get rid of it as soon you can.

Deciding to keep going and focusing in the moment.

Other techniques used by actors to refocus included deciding to keep going and focusing in the moment.

When I did this play, this guy stood up in the audience and he fainted. It was a really small theater and I could see everybody. It was like, ‘Okay I guess I'm just going to keep on going’. He was being attended to, and at that point I said, ‘You know what...you keep doing this until someone says stop doing it.’ (Cathy)

In a funny way, I made a decision that I wasn't going to pay attention to any of the distractions on a film set. It was only after I did a take that somebody would say ‘We have got to do it again, because you were not in the whole shot’. I didn't even know where the camera was. I made the decision that I didn't even know it was a close-up or if I was in the shot, I didn't care, I was just going to do the job. (Cathy)

I'm a very good improviser and I've gotten a lot better in the past couple of years, in dealing with that. I think if you're really in the moment of the play, you have to deal with what happens. (Daniel)

Pre-performance Routine

The actors also discussed their routines and approaches prior to performing. They essentially discussed two sub-strategies, first their focus shifted towards becoming their character and secondly their routine generally readied them physically and mentally to perform. As well, the issue of ‘keeping character’ was discussed regarding some actors’ film experiences.

Pre-performance Routine - Focus on Becoming the Character

The actors did not feel they could fully become their character until they had done the character preparation needed, but once that was in place, they used three main techniques to focus themselves on becoming the character prior to performing, including: (a) focusing on their costume and make-up; (b) running lines; and (c) focusing on their character’s nuances.

Focus on character's costume and make-up.

In discussing when the actors “become the character” during the time before a performance, after character preparation, actors discussed their costume and make-up as being the most important:

The makeup artist thought that she was a little bit daffy so he did some eyeliner that made my eyes look just a little bit off. It helped, it wasn't really caricature, or crazy like a lunatic, but it was something to make me look/be/feel less smart. Look/be/feel that is an interesting transition. But again, the outside in. There's something about looking at myself with the eye-brows...everything that just made her in that period of the forties and not too together. And the hair, sort of flat and up on the side, very forties. The whole putting on of the stuff is what puts you there. (Sheila)

When you come into the dressing room you are you and then you start to become whoever it is. Obviously, you are always you... but I sit down at the mirror and I put myself in the mindset of the character. I am gradually becoming that character for the hours ahead. I am always me, knowing that I am doing that. But I really try to immerse myself in who I am going to be in the next however many hours...what epitomized that character to me was that I wore bright red nail polish and lipstick that looked very kind of period. Doing my nails and putting on that lipstick was where I really became her. It gave me that character. (Tara)

On the other hand, Gary noted how he did not really have to become his character because it was always there with him:

There was no building myself into it every night and I know there are some actors who do that. But I did not have to do that. I knew him well enough. He was just there. That was one of the things that were so enjoyable about it. I didn't have to work myself up into some sort of frenzy. He came naturally. (Gary)

Running lines.

The actors also discussed running lines prior to performing. The following quotes highlight the use of this technique by the actors to focus on becoming their character:

I always read through the whole script in that hour before the show. I read through my lines from top to bottom and mentally went through everything. Usually at the end I would go back and do the first scene again. My mind is empty, it is zero. That is all I really want in it - the journey of the play. Then I go back to the beginning again, because the beginning is really all I should have in my active memory, because I don't know what is going to happen in the play theoretically. (Daniel)

Waiting to go on the set...it is the lines, completely. I will run my lines. I will sit down and just write out my lines the way I have memorized them. I will write them out and say them out loud so that again I am using so many different senses. I am writing it down, so physically I am involved in touching the words, I am hearing it, I'm saying it, and I'm seeing it – so then hopefully it be-

comes very natural. So that is my biggest focus. (David)

Focus on character's physical nuances.

Although actors spoke about a general focus on their character, Henry spoke directly about focusing on specific character nuances. For one play, he would begin speaking in his English accent when he was in his dressing room.

So even if I am backstage, it sounds pretentious, I speak to them in my accent because I don't want it to be forced. If I can get my muscle memory working the minute that I walk in there – the sooner I can start the better because I don't feel it is forced. I feel I can walk on stage and I am relaxed. (Henry)

Henry also discussed how he would attempt to enter the world of the character he was playing by sitting and posturing himself as his character would.

Pre-performance Routine – Readiness to Perform

The actors' pre-performance routine readied them physically and mentally to perform. Strategies and techniques included: (a) a physical and vocal warm-up; (b) relaxing and being along; (c) general focus on upcoming performance; (d) following the same routine; (e) time of arrival; and (f) preparation during the day.

Engaging in a physical and/or vocal warm-up.

Most actors would use their warm-up prior to performance to relax and to 'clear their mind'. Michael discussed how important it was for him to forget about his life, friends, and family. He said, "You have to shut that out, because the audience does not want to

know about that." He would attempt to clear the 'life stuff' from his mind during his physical warm-up as did others.

At the same time it relaxes you. It is about the nervous energy too and getting calm. So I do that for about a half-hour before anything else. It is basically time to shut out the world. I start lying on the floor and concentrate on breathing for a while, that shuts out...if I've had a fight with my girlfriend or something has happened in my day. (Michael)

In a way what you want to do is say, 'I am starting a new thing now.' And I personally find, for me, that physical warm-up helps to do that. It just changes the dynamic of what you are doing. (Cathy)

Focusing on upcoming performance.

Similar to the purpose of Michael and Cathy's warm-up, to shut out the outside world, other actors spoke of how they mentally focused on their performance. Daniel used a mantra before every performance.

I would lie on the floor and say, 'Let it go now, let it go now, let everything go now, let everything go. There is no place else, you can be, there's nothing else you can be doing, just think about the show, and have a good time.' It is very simple, but it is very freeing.

Stan's technique was one of emptying his mind.

If you would like me to say how I get there all I can say is, that it is a process of me eliminating, getting rid of, and stripping down – so there is nothing on my mind. Now how do I

do it? I have no ritual for doing that, simply over the years that is what I have done for myself.

Henry described his focus as being open for his performance and related it to a football player's stance:

When you see an athlete, there is a way to stand in terms of a football player when they are on the line. They are standing in a certain way so that they can go in any direction at any time. I think as an actor we have to do that mentally. I have to prepare myself that way backstage, so I can go in any direction.

Gary said that once he knew his character very well, he did not feel a need to get ready, because his character was always there.

In terms of preparation, I really didn't think about that character. I mean, I really just thought about technical things, there really is a sense (and this I've always marveled at) when you know a character well, that it is just a matter of threshold. The threshold, when you walk through the door on to the stage, you are instantly in character.

Relaxing and being alone.

Apart from warming up as a form of relaxation, some actors also found it relaxing to find isolation before a show. Michael found it relaxing to go off on his own to prepare prior to going on stage. Lyle relaxed alone in the few minutes before going on stage. To become self aware, he said: "I would ask myself, 'What am I like today? What was my day like today?' I ask myself, because that is important. You have to always be aware of yourself". The actors also liked to

do small things to be alone by themselves and to stay busy. Daniel worked on cross-words, Lyle played on his PocketPC, and Gary played Solitaire. Gary said "I would have a cup of tea and just be very restful. Sometimes I would play solitaire. I would have a deck of cards, and I would just do something to clear my mind."

Focus In Between Performances – Keeping Character

The idea of "keeping a character" surfaced in some interviews where actors discussed film experiences. The need for film actors to 'keep their character' arises due to their work schedule. As discussed before, they may have 10-16 hour days where they could be required to act for a few minutes or several hours with long breaks in between. The schedule is not always set or predictable. Most often they never know exactly when they may be called to set. Cathy discussed this topic thoroughly. For her it was important to be as involved in the filming process as she could. If her scene partner was doing a scene where only he/she was on camera and Cathy was off camera, she would be given the option of reading the lines or taking a break. Cathy would always read her lines to her scene partner. She did this for two reasons. First it kept her focused on her character and secondly it made the scene more realistic for her scene partner.

I didn't feel the need to stay completely in character the whole time, but I didn't feel like I could ever let go of her throughout the day because that was what it took to be that concentrated...it is like staying in your place. (Cathy)

David and Christine also discussed the importance of reading with their scene partner when they were off-camera.

Another challenge for film actors in terms of keeping their character was when they were on camera. Their scene may be shot once but then time is taken to adjust the lights and cameras to re-shoot the scene – resulting in delays. Cathy noted during these instances, it was important for her to ‘keep’ her character nearby.

It is like this stillness. It is like you try to keep it. Partly what I had to do was stay very quiet and acknowledge what was happening. ‘Oh, I am feeling upset, from this scene before, which I’m now going to do again, everybody is ignoring me, that kind of makes me feel upset. Which is good, I’m glad that is helping, that will help me to do this again.’ And then you are also being self-reflective. ‘Oh, I liked that last take. It was more hysterical, and I think that is right. Okay, take a note of that.’ You are just waiting for somebody to say action, and then you do it again.

Cathy used self-talk and acknowledgement of the situation she was in, during these minutes of waiting to shoot the scene again.

Imagery

Imagery is defined by Vealey and Greenleaf (2001) as “using all the senses to re-create or create an experience in the mind” (p.248). Actors used the terms imagery and imagination interchangeably. Imagery was employed by the actors at different times and in different contexts related to their performance: (a) for character preparation, (b) in the few seconds/minutes before entering a scene, (c) for technical preparation, and (d) other uses.

Used In Preparation

Some actors created a character history or background that prepared them for their

role. Most of these actors used imagery to create this background story about their character. For example, they would create and imagine their first meeting with their lover, a first kiss, or an important conversation with another character to build this ‘history’ of their character. This creation would either be done through imagery or would be physically acted out, or both. Once this initial creation was made, they would constantly use imagery to recall this creation. Henry and Tara each used imagery to further their character’s history and enhance and fine tune their preparation. Henry used imagery extensively to create a character history in one production. He described his use of imagery as “memories” that he had created with another female character.

As an actor, you have to be able to not only look at stuff on the surface, but look at the things that are underneath. So I was trying to tap into things that were underneath. That is how I use the memories, just to tap into that.

In this particular play, Henry played a man who was returning to see a woman he once proposed to. Henry and his female co-actor decided to recreate this marriage proposal during rehearsal because it was not in the script. Henry then used imagery to recreate this marriage proposal in his mind every night he was on stage with her. This imagery gave Henry a character background that he used in developing his character and when he was performing on stage. Tara also used imagery to deepen her character preparation.

For my own personal preparation, I guess I build stories, a history, an autobiography about my character because if somebody asked me something about the life that she led before this time on stage, I think I

would be able to have a pretty good answer because I think I should know. I am that person, so I should be able to tell you that stuff. I don't write it all down, I just imagine in my head how she grew up, and how many brothers and sisters she had and all of that kind of autobiographical information.

Imagery also helped actors in developing a mental picture of how their character moved, and spoke. Gary found that he used imagery to find not only the movement of his character but also the voice of his character, thus he used both audio and visual imagery.

And some of the sources (of this character imagery) I can't even tell you. I can't tell you why I heard Jerry's voice, the way he talked, or the way he moved. Some of it was just images, sort of bear like, sort of hunched shoulders and predatory but lumbering.

Used When Entering a Scene

In addition to using imagery for overall preparation, imagery was most often used by actors to direct their focus when entering a scene. Actors would imagine where they were coming from and the events that led them to enter the scene. This imagery was used for two reasons. First, it put the actor in the context of the play and made them more focused on listening. Secondly, it gave them the urgency to communicate the circumstances that brought them into the scene. Henry gave a vivid example of this use of imagery. He engaged in imagery while he was backstage during Scene 2 of an act. He was on stage for Scene 1 and it ended with him and others going off to a battle. He then was offstage for Scene 2 and returned to the stage after the battle had finished for Scene

3. The battle was discussed on stage during Scene 2, but never took place in front of the audience. The following quote demonstrates how during every show he would re-enact and imagine the battle that took place when he was backstage during Scene 2:

So you have to sort of put yourself in that situation. Backstage there was this one part where I went through the same thing every night. I physically and mentally went through what happened in the battle. I was backstage sort of in my own slow motion, going through with thrusts and cuts that I would do in battle. It was during the show, just before the scene where we found out our dad was dead. I would do that every show.

Henry used this extensive imagery to re-create the battle that had transpired. He used this technique to make his entrance for Scene 3 as realistic and as urgent as possible. Henry also used imagery before entering the scene mentioned earlier, when he was seeing a woman he had proposed to years before. He replayed the moment in his head each night he entered the scene where he saw her again.

So I almost play that little movie in my mind of what that was and remembering it. It is kind of neat. When I'm standing in the doorway backstage, there is sort of a mental preparation that I go through as the character. I kind of think about where I've been, where I am now, and where I'm going in terms of what I want.

Daniel noted that for one play where he was a doctor, in the minutes before the play be-

gan, he often imagined himself walking through the hallways of the hospital.

I would stand there with my eyes closed and I would visualize myself going through the hospital. Again, a lot of it is almost catching what ever the flavor of the pace and the world is. Yeah, that's what it is... it is capturing that because when you come on, the first few seconds are incredibly important, the audience sort of takes a picture of it. The first image is a big deal. (Daniel)

He used imagery to get himself focused on who he was portraying and he believed it allowed him to effectively portray himself as a doctor so the audience would find him realistic. Sheila discussed mentally running through her mind what she was doing before entering a scene.

In the wings, I'm literally going, 'Okay, okay, I am late and I was out with my boyfriend and I was supposed to be running errands, and I have been gone for 12 hours and people are going to be really scared of where I am. Okay so I'm going to make like nothing happened and everything is going to be okay when I knock on the door.' You have to fill yourself up with what is going on. 'What am I doing? I am covering, I lied and I don't want them to know. I just got lost for a few hours.' And then 'Okay, hi everybody!' If I don't do that work coming in, then I'm just going to come in and say 'Hi everybody' and it is going to stink. So you have to invest in the moment before, with every character you play before you enter that scene - What was I doing? Who am I? What is at stake when I enter the room?

Optimal energy level to Perform

Multiple definitions of 'optimal energy level' exist including optimal arousal, optimal activation, being 'psyched up' and motivated (Zaichowsky & Baltzwell, 2001). The choice to use the term 'energy level' was made to best reflect the language used by the actors. Some of the actors discussed various strategies and techniques they used to attain an optimal energy level to perform. Michael gave an interesting example of how he creates positive energy when performing. He used an expression from his father, called 'Flying his butterflies in circles'.

Basically, it is about focusing that nervous energy so it is not all over the place, it is exactly where you want to go. It is to take advantage of that energy and to use that to create that explosion of energy.

Lyle's approach was much more geared towards self-talk to manage his butterflies that resulted from nervous energy:

I try to reason butterflies through re-assuring myself that I'm a good person and that I've done what I was supposed to do. Of course if I've been slacking, then I get more butterflies that are harder to control. I alleviate pressure by saying, 'You did what you could do. You did everything you should be doing for this.' So you have given yourself the best chance of succeeding, and if you don't, you have to recognize so many external factors that you have no control over. (Lyle)

Tara responded commented on how closely related optimal energy level and preparation were.

If “optimal energy level” means “being in the zone where you perform best” then it sounds like preparation to me. Getting to that place is what preparation is about.

David, Michael, and Cathy also discussed the use of self-talk for attaining an optimal energy level prior to a performance. David said that he often reminds himself, “Make it all real. Swing for the fence...this is not a rehearsal anymore. Give it everything you've got.” Others noted the following:

It is to get at that excitement of - you are really going to like this. ‘I have a surprise for you and you are going to love it’. That is the way I am playing the character this year. It is getting that energy and that anticipation into my body and into my fingertips so soon as I come onto the stage, I have got this electricity. (Michael)

I think that is one of the neat things about being an actor. If you are going to perform there is a certain point at which you can feel like crap and you can feel like you look like crap, but you have to say to yourself, ‘I have to do something else and it is I have to give this performance to the people. And I have to want to do that.’ The interesting thing about that is of course by doing that you actually do feel better. (Cathy)

But if I'm on in five minutes then I get myself up and I start pacing around a bit, without getting nervous... and saying, ‘These people came here to see this show, they paid to see this show.’ (Lyle)

Discussion

Overall, the findings of this study support prior sport psychology performance enhancement research with professional athletes and Olympians (e.g., Gould, Eklund, & Jackson, 1992; Orlick & Partington, 1988). The actors' discussion of the importance of character preparation also supports the findings of Hannah et al. (1994) and Noice (1992). The actors in this study used effective preparation strategies, focusing strategies, routines prior to performing, imagery, confidence building activities, strategies to attain optimal energy level, and ongoing performance evaluation. Each member of this unique group of performers drew upon their mental strategies and focusing skills to perform closer to their capacity on a consistent basis.

The process through which actors employed effective mental strategies in their performance domain appeared to be personal. Specific focus points among the actors varied greatly. As one actor noted, there are several ways in approaching acting and each actor thinks their way is the best for them. In the end, what appears to be most important is that each actor finds a focus that works best for him or her (for preparing and performing). If they prepare well and believe in their focus, it will free them to perform their best.

This study has shed light on effective mental strategies for becoming a character and respecting the character (or role) you have been given. The issue of becoming a character is applicable to other performance domains such as singing, dancing, artistic sports, and perhaps even role players on sport or other performance teams. The actors interviewed in this study found that to ‘become’ a character they had to explore and fully understand the person they were portraying. Do dancers fully explore the character their dance is portraying? Do singers

fully explore the character their song is portraying? Is a figure skater's performance impacted by how much they identify with the character they are portraying on the ice? Can musicians, singers, speakers, athletes, and other performers enhance their performance by becoming the character their performance requires for that performance? It is possible that the methods used by the actors in this study could benefit these performers?

The issue of respecting or 'falling in love' with a character may also be applicable to the other performance domains, for example, in the case of national teams assembling players from club teams, or any team assembling for a specific mission. To perform their best as a team and accomplish the bigger mission, several players may have to take on new roles (or perhaps less prolific roles). The actors interviewed in this study felt they could never fully perform to capacity until they embraced their character, identified with that character and found va-

lidity in who that character was. Can performers in other contexts learn to find validity in their new 'roles' in the same way that actors find validity in their roles?

This study provided a preliminary look at how professional actors implement mental strategies to enhance their performance. Their insights may be of value to other professional and amateur actors who are committed to improve the quality and consistency of their performance and enhance their enjoyment in acting. Some the findings may also be relevant to other high performance domains. Clearly, when high performance people in any field, in this case professional actors, share their experiences and focusing strategies related to attaining personal excellence, everyone interested in excelling has something to gain.

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