

Trauma and the Actor: A Healthy Approach to Staged Violence and Aggression

In a high school production of *Little Shop of Horrors* the Dentist yells at Audrey, and pushes his stilettoed, apologetic girlfriend to the ground, to the audible gasps of the audience. This scene elicits precisely the response it is meant to from the audience, but what no one seems to recognize is that the young woman playing Audrey is fighting a genuine fight-or-flight response due to childhood abuse. Will she start to cry, and curl up in a ball on the floor, or perhaps lunge at her unsuspecting scene partner? Because this is a seemingly simple, small act of violence the director did not call in a specialist, and was unaware of the struggle this teenaged actor was experiencing. This is not a unique scenario. There have been numerous studies done on the immediate and long-term effects of violence and aggression on stage, or screen on an audience, but there has been little, or no attention given to the effect it may have on the performers either acting as the aggressor, or the victim.

In 2014 Statistics Canada reported 369, 359 violent crimes in Canada in that year alone¹, and an Ontario study found that 31% of males, and 21% of females experienced physical abuse during childhood.² A surprisingly large percentage of the population will have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime, and this can result in trauma. The Toronto Psychology Centre breaks trauma down into two categories: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex Trauma. PTSD can be experienced directly (if you are assaulted, or mugged, for example), it can be witnessed (seeing someone hurt or killed, or witnessing the atrocities of war), or experienced indirectly (first responders

¹ Statistics Canada, Crimes by type of violation, statcan.gc.ca

² Jack, Munn, Cheng and MacMillan, 2006, Child maltreatment in Canada: Overview paper.

dealing with the horrific details of traumatic events after the fact, or a family member's suicide). Complex Trauma is a repeated trauma taking place over time such as childhood abuse, or an abusive partner. Complex trauma, in particular, can be deeply ingrained, and difficult to treat.³

This can become problematic for actors, and other performers approaching themes of aggression, or violence in their work, as this subject matter often produces triggers that many people who've experienced trauma avoid. A psychological trigger is a sound, visual, smell, or situation that elicits a flashback, or feelings related to the trauma.

According to Bessel Kolk,

“The intrusive responses are hyperactivity, explosive aggressive outbursts, startle responses, intrusive recollections in the form of nightmares and flashbacks, and re-enactment of situations reminiscent of trauma”.⁴

This scenario sounds significantly like that of the young woman mentioned previously. Given the statistics, and the findings of researchers like Kolk, it is reasonable to assume that many actors, both professional and amateur, will have experienced trauma, and that this past trauma can have a lasting impact that would hinder an actor's ability to perform in aggressive or violent scenes on stage. As fight directors, and instructors, we have dedicated our study to the creation of believable, powerful, and often impressive aggressive and violent acts on stage, and in film. We are responsible for keeping our actors safe from physical harm, while giving them the tools to perform these scenes. We also bare the responsibility of building scenes that have the desired effect on the audience without risking the emotional and psychological health of the actor. There are several

³ Toronto Psychology Centre, www.torontopsychologycentre.com/therapy-services/how-can-we-help/trauma-and-abuse/

⁴ Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., “Psychological Trauma”

ways that, I believe, we can accomplish this. We first need to create boundaries between our actors and potential triggers using deconstruction, disruption, and drills. We also need to create an environment of safety and trust in which actors can rehearse and perform.

These techniques may seem easily accomplished, and many are already employed to some degree, but there are a lot of contradicting philosophies regarding the role of violence in the theatre, and many misconceptions as to its effect. The misunderstood palliative effect, often affiliated with Aristotle's concept of Catharsis has become a deeply problematic one. Aristotle believed that mimicking life in a way that heightened and purified it would cleanse the audience. That through Catharsis audiences purged their negative emotions through the tragedy of the characters. Many people in the theatre believed that this was also true of the actors on stage; that by "pushing through" the feelings related to the trauma, or by letting them use the scene as a therapeutic re-enactment the actor was exorcising their demons, so to speak. This idea seemed to find validation in evidence that avoiding "trauma-related memories, feelings, thoughts, and situations...ultimately perpetuates symptoms and interferes with natural recovery".⁵

Polish director Jerzy Grotowski believed that if he worked the human body to exhaustion he could free that person's emotions, mind and soul, while playwright Sarah Kane forced her actors to access physical pain and sex.⁶ They had little concern for the psychological ramifications of this type of exploration, and like many directors and acting teachers, seemed to believe the damaging myth that the actor is a tool for their art, rather than a person performing a job. This type of exploration may be something an individual actor

⁵ Toronto Psychology Centre, www.torontopsychologycentre.com/therapy-services/how-can-we-help/trauma-and-abuse/

⁶ Jordan M. Walsh , "Stage Violence, Power and the Director: An examination of the theory and practice of cruelty from Antonin Artaud to Sarah Kane"

can choose to do for themselves if they feel comfortable with it, and many may find it useful, but when referring to actors who have experienced trauma Kolk states,

“Because they respond with hyperarousal to emotional or sensory stimuli, many traumatized individuals have difficulty controlling their anxious and aggressive feelings”.⁷

This can be dangerous for both the actor, and their scene partner, as no one can be sure just how they’ll react, and those present (including the traumatized actor) may not even be aware there is a problem. Neither the director, nor any present fight director is likely to be a qualified psychologist, so while this concept of “exorcising demons” is not a solution in the best case scenario, we’ve now created the worst scenario. Furthermore, Kolk states that even if one has no memory of the past trauma they “still have a tendency to react to subsequent stress as if it were a recurrence of the trauma”. This person may not be aware any trauma occurred, or they may not recognize a past occurrence as trauma. When exploring violence and the practice of cruelty on stage, director Jordan Walsh discovered a tendency very common among actors, especially those trained in a style known commonly as the “method”.

“One last danger that I came across in rehearsal this week was a tendency in all of my actors to attach the victimization of their characters (especially during the violent sections) to themselves as people in a very personal way. For instance, during the electroshock scene my actress playing Grace had a memory recall of her own personal experience with seizures. My actor playing Rod had a breakdown in rehearsal while rehearsing the scene in which Rod has to watch Carl be dismembered, presumably attaching it closely to his own life. There are at least a few other examples of this. This has highlighted for me the importance of my task as the director to keep my actors safe in every way, physically, mentally, and emotionally”.⁸

⁷ Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., “Psychological Trauma”

⁸ Jordan M. Walsh , “Stage Violence, Power and the Director: An examination of the theory and practice of cruelty from Antonin Artaud to Sarah Kane”

He immediately began to explore ways to distance his actors from the actions on stage, but while this is difficult enough for someone with a past trauma, it becomes more difficult when they are misusing an acting approach that asks them to employ techniques such as emotional memory. This is further compounded by the illusion that they are helping themselves by re-enacting their trauma rather than talking about it in a controlled environment. As Konecni found in a study exploring the performance of aggressive actions, “if certain conditions are met -- the principal among these being that the aggression is motivated by anger, that it is physical, and that it is directed at the anger-instigator...-- the execution of aggressive actions has a palliative effect”, meaning that the anger is reduced, however, this is only temporary. He found that it actually increases the chance of a violent response to the next anger-inducing event.⁹ This means that rather than helping actors purge their trauma in a Cathartic way, this method of ignoring, or pushing through their traumatic reactions can actually harm them, and their ability to cope with future trauma-related events, making them more vulnerable to hyperarousal, and potentially quick to violence. Hyperarousal and intrusive re-experiencing also persist long after other symptoms of trauma have stopped, so though an actor may have received treatment, it may not have been long-term enough to eliminate this response should they become triggered. This dangerous combination of our theatre culture’s tendency to erroneously view re-experiencing trauma as Cathartic, and the true complexity of the effect this actually has on the actor is why it cannot be a fight director, or director’s job to treat these problems, but to create boundaries between our actors and triggers using specific, and formulaic physical techniques.

⁹ J.E. Hokanson and S. Shetter, “The Effect of Overt Aggression on Psychological Arousal Level” Konecni, “Annoyance, Type and Duration of Postannoyance Activity”, pp. 76-102, and Konecni and E. B. Ebbesen, “Disinhibition Versus the Cathartic Effect: Artifact and Substance”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34 (1976), pp. 352-65

It is difficult to analyse how to help actors not stumble into these pitfalls without acknowledging the acting system that has informed so many actors, particularly in North America. In Stanislavski's system actor's focus on their character being internally motivated. Actors are expected to explore their own experiences to "arouse feelings analogous to those required in the part".¹⁰ His actors begin with emotion, and then physicalize it, rather than the formalist way of creating actions meant to portray an emotion, which may, or may not affect the actor, but is designed to affect the audience. Actor's in Stanislavski's system are also expected to find physical actions that can stir their "emotional memory" well before the rehearsal process, and he acknowledges that physical actions could act as "keys" to people's emotional memory, though this "external, or physical characterization" is often ignored by contemporary method actors and teachers.¹¹ This realization that even a physical action can affect a person's emotional memory is a difficult one for fight directors. According to Konecni, as two people interact around anger they begin engaging in "offensive and defensive countermeasures". This "feedback loop" of emotion feeds the emotion until violence occurs.¹² However, when an actor connects an emotional memory of their trauma with physical actions it can create a psychophysiological response that forces the actor into their own feedback loop. An example of this is screaming. I don't need to feel tortured, or afraid, to let out a tortured, blood-curdling scream; I have been trained vocally to accomplish this, but that doesn't mean that my body doesn't immediately begin to respond to this physical cue. My mind immediately tries to assess if I am being threatened, what my surroundings are,

¹⁰ Robert Lewis, Introduction, in Konstantin Stanislavsky, "Creating a Role", trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), p.v.

¹¹ Vladimir J. Konecni, "Psychological Aspects of the Expression of Anger and Violence on the Stage"

¹² Vladimir J. Konecni, "Psychological Aspects of the Expression of Anger and Violence on the Stage"

why this scream is happening. This is an aspect of psychophysiology: just as you can measure a person's facial movements, pupil dilation, heart rate, and breathing to see what emotional state they are in, your body may read these physical cues and place you in that emotional state. So how do we create a barrier between an actor's physical actions and the emotional memory of their past trauma?

Deconstruction is one method that is easy for fight directors to employ, as we already use it when training actors in the art of stage combat. What separates an actor from the violence of a punch, for example, is that a stage punch is not a punch. It isn't a violent action inflicted on one person by an aggressor, but a cooperative movement that has many safeties in place that the actors need to be conscious of at all times. There needs to be eye contact, and an acknowledgement from the "victim" that they are ready for what is about to happen. There needs to be a physical "cue" from the "operator", and the timing between the action and the reaction has to be precise. Their angle and distance need to be precise to ensure physical safety, and so that the sightlines work for the audience. The knap needs to be well-timed, and audible. Now matter how many times this has been rehearsed, some small part of the actor's mind must still be calculating all of these things every single time this punch is performed. This means that even the most religiously "method" actors must remove themselves just slightly from the embodiment of the character in that moment in order to perform that technique safely, and believably, thus creating a disruption in a potential feedback loop. Everything from the deconstruction of every single move into repeatable, formulaic techniques, to the use of the word operator rather than aggressor helps create boundaries between actors and real-life aggression. Between the psychological effects of violence, and the illusion of violence that is taking

place on stage. While actors may be playing violent characters, or be acting in “violent” scenes, actors cannot see stage combat as violence; that is the audience’s job. An actor needs to treat stage combat with the same discipline and respect with which they treat dance choreography. There have been actors and directors who have attempted to use Stanislavski’s method as an excuse to improvise violence, to not deconstruct and rehearse stage combat using proven, safe methods because they want to “feel in the moment”, but that isn’t stage combat, that is just violence, and does not belong in a professional, or even an amateur setting, as it endangers actors physically, emotionally, and mentally. It also often has the opposite effect on an audience than Stanislavski wanted. If an actor is genuinely in danger on stage, or seems genuinely afraid, the audience is taken out of the story and is no longer engaged in the character, but instead becomes upset because they are worried for the actor. We want our audiences to feel empathy for the character, not sympathy for the actor.

Another deconstruction method involves breaking down the psychophysiological cues of aggressive or cruel behaviour itself. When teaching students about intimacy on stage intimacy choreographer Tonia Sina has students break down the physical habits that are tied to attraction, and reconstruct them on demand,

“The students discuss and observe what happens to their bodies when they are attracted to someone, and apply this breath and movement when interacting with any scene partner with which they get paired”.¹³

This deconstruction of our physical cues can be very useful when portraying aggression, anger, cruelty, or fear on stage, but the problem, as previously stated, comes when an actor internalizes these actions, and their mind reads the physiological cues as a genuine

¹³ Tonia Sina, “Safe Sex: A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer”

emotional response. While our deconstruction of the physical actions created the first barrier between actors and potential triggers, in order to break down this psychophysiological response when no actual violence is taking place directors have had to employ various disruption tactics.

Walsh had his actors run the scenes with just the blocking, and lines, and without any acting at all to try to disrupt the feedback loops actors had already created within the scene, and prove to his actors that the scene itself doesn't cause a breakdown or flashbacks.¹⁴ Konecni looked to the work of Brecht, whose actors speak of their character in the third person, and consciously self-monitor. They act as a witness, focussing more on their reaction to the text than on trying to embody it. "Emotional memory is replaced by the (distancing) memory of first impressions. In short, there are no 'events' to start the emotional episode sequence"¹⁵, and therefore no feedback loop. Though not all actors and directors are looking for something as distancing as Brecht, Walsh did observe a Peter Brook staging of "The Screens" that blended ideas from both Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre that deeply affected audiences, while proving to Walsh that,

"It is possible to neglect 'reality' in search of truth. This...can create an audience-actor relationship that is honest and effective. It is the truth of the fire that matters, not that it actually burns".¹⁶

This is doubly true when referring to the realities of performing violence on stage, or screen, where investing too fully in the "reality" of the aggression and violence, rather than the "truth" of it can lead to both physical and psychological injury. Disruption of the

¹⁴ Jordan M. Walsh , "Stage Violence, Power and the Director: An examination of the theory and practice of cruelty from Antonin Artaud to Sarah Kane"

¹⁵ Vladimir J. Konecni, "Psychological Aspects of the Expression of Anger and Violence on the Stage"

¹⁶ Jordan M. Walsh , "Stage Violence, Power and the Director: An examination of the theory and practice of cruelty from Antonin Artaud to Sarah Kane"

feedback loop then becomes a key tool for directors and fight directors that allows actors to externalize aggression, cruelty, and fear, and only internalize them more as they feel they are ready.

The final of the three boundaries between our actors and potential triggers is drilling.

While all fight instructors drill to some degree in order to help actors embody the movement more fully and naturally, and to ensure that each move is performed safely and precisely even under unforeseen circumstances, Sina uses drills in her Intimacy for Stage classes for another reason,

“When we drill...the desensitization of the exercises causes the students to treat the scenes as choreography, not sex”.¹⁷

This is as important for fight directors as it is for intimacy choreographers. The desensitization of a punch, a hair pull, a stab, so that actors see them as choreography and not violence is of the utmost importance for any actor, especially those who have experienced trauma. The more they can categorize stage combat separately from any past experiences with violence the easier it is to avoid hyperarousal, re-experiencing, or other PTSD-like symptoms.

Drilling is also a way to build safety and trust between partners. In each drill both partners should be aware who is leading the action at any given moment. Unlike in real-life situations, in stage combat the victim often has far more agency. In a hair pull, the victim holds the operator's hand to their head and maintains the attachment. If they ever feel unsafe they simply let go, and the illusion is broken, as the operator was never actually grabbing hold of the victim. This can help an actor feel safe, even in a situation that is made to look like they aren't. This is a form of cognitive psychology; the appraisal

¹⁷ Tonia Sina, “Safe Sex: A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer”

of physiological information, and interpretation based on emotion-relevant situations.¹⁸ You will experience many of the same physiological reactions if you've been surprised by friends for your birthday than if you've been surprised by a mugger, but your appraisal of the situation will let you know whether you should interpret those physiological cues as excitement, or panic. Because many shows do not use fight directors for scenes containing violence, and much of it is put together by a director on the fly many actors don't receive any information on how to deconstruct, disrupt, or drill the choreography in order to create boundaries between themselves and potential triggers, and this leads to a further breakdown in the safety, and trust they need to feel in order to be able to approach the work, or embody their role in a way that is not emotionally or psychologically damaging. This means that when their scene partner suddenly comes at them on stage, or they are supposed to attack their partner they do not interpret the accompanying emotional-stimulus as excitement for their work, but genuine fear or anger. This interpretation is neither necessary, nor safe.

Kolk found that “many people remain fairly intact after psychological trauma as long as their environment restores a sense of trust and safety”.¹⁹ This means that if we can create a safe, trusting atmosphere, actors are more likely to interpret the physiological cues that accompany acted aggression, or fear as part of the excitement of their job, and not as genuine anger or fear. This becomes more difficult the fresher the trauma is, as “after traumatic events...we may start to view ourselves as powerless and weak or bad, and others as harmful or unhelpful and therefore not to be trusted or relied on”²⁰, but this is only one of many methods employed to help actors, and in some ways, is one of the most

¹⁸ Vladimir J. Konecni, “Psychological Aspects of the Expression of Anger and Violence on the Stage”

¹⁹ Bessel A. van der Kolk, M.D., “Psychological Trauma”

²⁰ Toronto Psychology Centre, www.torontopsychologycentre.com/therapy-services/how-can-we-help/trauma-and-abuse/

instrumental in bridging the gap between the distancing techniques some trauma-inflicted actors may need to use to protect themselves, and the open, realistic acting style audiences and directors have come to expect from their actors.

To build this trust, clear boundaries and expectations must be set prior to working on any violent choreography, and improvisation by the actors should not be permitted. When working on “Cleansed”, Walsh experienced some of the problems that may arise from this lack of clear boundaries while rehearsing the rape scene.

“The first crack at staging the scene was very intense (maybe too much so), and this was not from the reactions of my actress playing Grace (the victim) but rather from the vicious, over-the-top zeal which my actors playing the Voices brought to the table”.²¹

This is a problem that should never occur, but often does due to a lack of clear communication, and the desire of actors to be believable often at the expense of their own, and others’ safety, and once this trust has been broken, it is all the harder to rebuild it.

Another rule for maintaining a safe environment is never having the actors rehearse the violence together alone. It is one thing for actors to run their own choreography alone, or for experienced fight directors, or even high level actor combatants to rehearse alone together, but without knowing the specifics of every actor’s background it is unreasonable to expect that no problems will arise, and that if they do, their partner will have the expertise to deal with it appropriately. The scenario that Sina experience back in university is an all too familiar one:

“Then one day the director told us to rehearse on our own to “fix” the kiss...We trudged into the lobby and decided the only way to make this kiss scene better was to ultimately pretend it was real...unfortunately

²¹ Jordan M. Walsh , “Stage Violence, Power and the Director: An examination of the theory and practice of cruelty from Antonin Artaud to Sarah Kane”

because neither of us approached it with the professionalism and outside eye of a choreographer, we now had crossed a line into reality that intruded on our scene”.²²

This problem is as true for violence as for attraction. Imagine if Walsh had left Grace and the Voices to rehearse after setting the choreography, and they decided to see how far they could push the characters. What if that triggered Grace, or one of the Voices? Would they now feel safe to do that scene again, even under supervision? It is unsafe, and unnecessary to rehearse together without a fight director, director, or stage manager present, and an appropriate amount of time needs to be set aside in the rehearsal process for this. They are not practicing a drill, they are rehearsing choreography for an aggressive, violent scene, and while actors should be encouraged to run their choreography on their own, they should not be required to rehearse violent scenes outside of the safe environment we are attempting to create.

There are many ways in which actors, acting teachers, and directors have attempted to use their craft to reach an audience, and though many of these methods are effective, it is important, when approaching themes of violence, anger, and aggression to not only employ techniques to keep actors healthy and safe, but to engage those people who have dedicated their study and their careers to creating this safe environment for actors.

Through the study of trauma, and its psychological effects, my knowledge of safe stage combat techniques, and the acting methodologies used in today’s theatres, and in the past, it is abundantly clear to me that fight directors have, and must become key allies in any theatre that wishes to create both a safe, secure work environment for the actor, and dynamic, powerful, believable moments for the audience. By using deconstruction,

²² Tonia Sina, “Safe Sex: A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer”

disruption, and drills to create boundaries between our actors and potential triggers, and by creating an environment of safety and trust in which actors can rehearse and perform, actors; who are willing to throw themselves into a role, will be able to perform believable, aggressive, violent scenes on stage without risking their emotional and psychological health. These actors have a responsibility to their own health, and psychologists agree that victims of trauma need to address these issues directly, however, it is a fight director's profession, and privilege to help them approach their work without having to fight through the flashbacks, nightmares, or other feelings related to their past trauma.