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Kelsey Burke
kburke20@lesley.edu

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**Whatever It Takes: A Literature Review Exploring the Psychological Cost of Actor
Training and How Drama Therapy Can Help**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Kelsey Burke

Drama Therapy

Dr. Jason Frydman

Abstract

This review examines the literature as it relates to the psychological and emotional impact of professional training programs for student-actors. Special attention is paid to student-actors' developmental stage, mental health and trauma history, possible exposure to sexual harassment in rehearsal or classroom settings, specific acting techniques taught, and power dynamics between student-actors and acting teachers. Also examined is data on the potential effects that the application of trauma-informed drama therapy approaches could have on this population. This is followed by a proposed outline for a supervision-style class for student-actors led by a drama therapist intended to introduce drama therapeutic principles to begin to address this population's potential distress. Included in this outline are possible benefits from the instruction of de-roling exercises, providing psychoeducation on the impact of trauma and the importance of healthy coping skills, and furthering the student-actor's understanding of dramatic tools from the therapeutic perspective of drama therapy.

Keywords: mental health, trauma, drama therapy, student-actors, actor training

Author Position Statement: I recognize I am a straight-passing bisexual cis gendered White, middle-class able-bodied woman and that this positionality has inherently informed my perspective. To attempt to broaden that perspective I paid attention to the voices of the researchers whose work I cite and made an effort to include the voices of more diverse backgrounds.

Whatever It Takes: A Literature Review Exploring the Psychological Cost of Actor Training and How Drama Therapy Can Help

Introduction

Since its birth in ancient Greece, theatre has been a space to embody and bear witness to grand stories that span the vast spectrum of the human experience (Grange, 2014). Over the years, this writer has been in awe of the power of dramatic work in theatre, film, and television to challenge commonly held ideas and values, elicit strong emotions, encourage political change, provoke a sense of community, or a combination of these things.

In recent decades, prominent actors have made headlines for their struggles with their mental health (Carey, 2016; Markel, 2019; O’Kane, 2021). Dramatizations of certain famous performers have even been made attempting to explore the relationship between that actor’s mental health and their profession (Goold, 2019; Kail & Levenson, 2019; Perry, 1981).

Where do these struggles arise and what can be done to alleviate them? Are people who choose to be professional actors more susceptible to mental health struggles naturally, is it their professional landscape that thrusts that on them, or a combination of both? Some prominent voices in the field of theater education, like Seton (2010), have made the argument that many of these struggles appear in professional acting training programs, and when left unchecked, continue to wreak havoc on actors’ emotional and mental wellbeing as well as their relationships. Seton (2010) also argued that student actors have often been overlooked in previous research in favor of professional performers, like dancers, on the grounds that the dancers’ symptomology is typically more physically pronounced.

Due to the reasons stated above, this paper will examine the existing pool of empirical data on the relationship between the training practices of professional actors and their mental

health as well as what can be done to address those concerns. The following pages will outline the ways student-actors specifically suffer in terms of their mental and emotional health. This will include examining their unique experience as college-aged students given that the majority of those entering these undergraduate programs are also entering the emerging adulthood developmental stage (Cuijpers et al., 2021). Then, the potential suffering this population can develop further into their careers will be looked at, followed by an investigation into the psychological and emotional toll of engaging in specific acting techniques common to the contemporary professional acting classroom. Trauma will also be considered and its possible impact on these student-actors in the classroom. Additionally, although little empirical data was found showing attempted interventions to treat this population's suffering, this paper will examine what has been undertaken. Finally, given the shared use of theatrical and dramatic tools between drama therapy and the training of professional actors, the potential ways the application of drama therapy principles can begin to address the problems facing this population will be discussed. This will be accomplished by reviewing the benefits of trauma-informed drama therapy approaches, the fundamental core processes in drama therapy as described by Frydman et al. (2022), and how the integration of these concepts into a supervision-style class for student-actors led by a drama therapist could effect change.

Literature Review

College Students' Mental and Emotional Suffering

For new college students, transitioning from high school to college usually involves a series of expected but major changes to their daily lives. Palmer et al. (2014) discussed the cognitive advantages adolescents experienced in high school by having stronger external structure enforced on them as well as how the sudden lack of that structure can negatively impact

them as new college students. “Nutrition, sleep hygiene, structure and task management are often early victims of the new found freedom of college life – resulting in quickly accumulating physiological and psychological stress” (Palmer et al., 2014, p. 198-199). Palmer et al.’s (2014) study found that college students were negatively impacted by the presence of stress and fatigue on a cognitive level. However, while this study did not specifically look at the impact of trauma in college-aged students, in a longitudinal study conducted at a university in the American Midwest, researchers did find a relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and college-aged students’ mental health (Karatekin, 2017).

When considering Palmer et al.’s (2014) research on the increased strain experienced by college students, it is possible that there could be a connection between that finding and Karatekin’s (2017) claim that many individuals’ long-term mental health disorders and struggles begin to form in college. Adverse childhood events are negative life events experienced to varying degrees throughout childhood until the age of 18, and can include instances of any kind of abuse, neglect, parental struggles, and more (Karatekin, 2017). Instances of ACEs are not uncommon among the general population with about a third of adults experiencing at least one, and an increased number of ACEs in an individual’s history has been linked to multiple mental health disorders (Karatekin, 2017). Additionally, results from a study conducted by Logan-Greene et al. (2014) have even shown that younger generations are reporting higher numbers of ACEs. This might indicate that researchers will see an increase in mental health distress as those younger generations age (Karatekin, 2017; Logan-Greene et al., 2014).

The significance of ACEs when examining the mental health of college students is a crucial one. Karatekin (2017) also found that not only were students with ACEs more susceptible to anxious and depressive symptoms over the course of a semester, but also described the

number of students reporting anxiety, depression, and suicidality as “disturbingly high” (p. 40). This research is also supported by more recent data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) that reported the number of young adults who have received treatment for symptoms related to anxiety or depressive disorders is currently on the rise.

Professional Actors’ Mental and Emotional Suffering

While there is still a great deal of research needed to properly understand the professional actor’s struggles, the literature as it currently stands has much to say. External symptoms of possible distress that actors carry often show up as maladaptive behaviors. For instance, there was an online study conducted in 2013 in Australia that involved the Australian actors’ union, The Equity Foundation, that produced multiple articles analyzing its results (Szabó et al., 2019; Szabó et al., 2020). This study used the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test, which is a quantitative assessment to determine a possible alcohol use disorder (Szabó et al., 2020). The researchers found that a significant number of respondents were using alcohol at higher-than-average rates and were citing job stressors as a cause for that drinking (Szabó et al., 2020). Additionally, “a weak but statistically significant positive correlation,” demonstrated a connection between actors who had received a higher education and their higher level of alcohol use (Szabó et al., 2020, p. 77). The researchers also noted that even though the respondents were reporting significantly higher instances of heavy drinking within the last year than the general population, only 10% of those respondents reported the possibility of having a problem with alcohol consumption (Szabó et al., 2020). The researchers attributed this to possible denial of a serious problem on the part of the respondents (Szabó et al., 2020). This piece of data prompted Szabó et al. (2020) to suggest that more awareness around hazardous drinking and healthy alternative ways of coping should be more readily available for professional actors.

Another concerning byproduct of being a professional actor may be a higher risk of disordered eating (Szabó et al., 2019). The same online wellness survey discussed above also included the Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale, which is an assessment intended to measure symptoms found in multiple eating disorder criteria in the DSM-5 (Szabó et al., 2019). Results indicated that when using the BMI scale to determine weight health, respondents had healthier weights than the general population, but did not necessarily view themselves that way (Szabó et al., 2019). Researchers found that especially for female actors, they viewed themselves as “fat” even when they were of a healthy weight, viewed their body weight/shape as a significant factor in their sense of self-worth, and reported fears of weight gain (Szabó et al., 2019, p. 174). These three areas were of concern to the researchers because they are closely associated with risk factors for developing anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), or binge eating disorder (Szabó et al., 2019). The researchers pointed out that given the pressures particularly feminine presenting actors are under to be youthful and extremely thin, it is no wonder they are seeing results like this (Szabó et al., 2019). Upon examination, there did not appear to be any questions in the survey that indicated specific causation of these results. The researchers did provide statistics demonstrating that when comparing the general population to the actor population broken down by gender, female actors are at a significantly higher risk for developing AN or BN than their general population counterparts (Szabó et al., 2019). However, further research into more substantially establishing and defining the relationship between disordered eating symptomology and professional actors could be beneficial.

Trauma

Another factor that must be taken into account when defining actor suffering is trauma history. As previously mentioned, the amount of those in younger generations already entering

college classrooms for the first time with one or more traumatic experiences in their past appears to be growing (Karatekin, 2017; Logan-Greene et al., 2014). Given this information, it is warranted to look closer at the relationship between actors and trauma; specifically, actors embodying their characters' trauma, and the possible lasting effects that can have.

Stories of trauma being played out for the purposes of dramatic entertainment is nothing new. Actors on stage, television, and film frequently are required to act out in brutally realistic fashion graphic acts like murder, sexual assault, suicide, torture, and more, as seen in works like *Game of Thrones*, *Outlander*, and *Joker*, to name just a few (Benioff & Weiss, 2011-2019; Moore, 2014-present; Phillips, 2019). The prevalence of this is perhaps why some researchers like Robb et al. (2016) have called for further research around professional actors and secondary trauma. A key component of the diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder in the DSM-5 includes repeated exposure to details of other people's trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Seton (2013) pointed out that actors are often at-risk for exposure to secondary trauma not just because of the repetition of the traumatic details, but also because of the embodiment of them. Seton (2013) stated that because the body cannot necessarily tell the difference between a pretend scenario being acted out in a play or film and real life, the potential effects are the same.

While the possibility of vicarious trauma through the embodying of traumatic stories by actors has yet to be more fully studied and understood, it is important to include work that actors themselves have written reflecting on this phenomenon. For instance, actor Jane Montgomery Griffiths (2015) wrote a piece discussing the feeling of identity dissociation while watching a recording of a production in which she and her costar took turns playing the perpetrator and victim of extreme acts of physical and sexual violence on stage in Melbourne, Australia.

Griffiths (2015) described the difficulty establishing clear boundaries between themselves and their character as well as the extreme distress the content of the play caused them both on stage and long after the run of the show had ended.

Dissociation

Dissociative symptoms can be characterized as “unbidden intrusions into awareness and behavior, with accompanying losses of continuity in subjective experience,” or the “inability to access information or to control mental functions that normally are readily amenable to access or control” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 291). It could also be of note that the DSM-5 acknowledged an association between dissociation and trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When examining studies that looked at dissociation and actors, researchers hypothesized that a profession in the creative arts would call for a certain level of dissociation but that the participants would score within the normative dissociation scales on the Dissociative Experience Scale – II (Thomson & Jaque, 2012; Thomson et al., 2009). While Thomson et al. (2009) did find that the majority of actors who participated in their study fell within that normative scale of dissociation, a scale that indicates the use of typical displays of dissociation that have not reached maladaptive levels like fantasy proneness, Thomson and Jaque’s (2012) findings did not fully support that. It should also be noted that while the majority of the participants in the Thomson et al. (2009) study were actors, other creative artists were included as well.

In the study conducted by Thomson and Jaque (2012), upon analysis of the responses of both the control and sample groups to the Adult Attachment Interview, researchers found that the actors were better able to stay regulated when discussing past trauma but also displayed “greater lapses of monitoring of reason and discourse” (Thomson & Jaque, 2012, p. 366). Thomson and

Jaque (2012) attributed this result to possible unresolved mourning and connected it to the theory put forward by another study. In that study, Berntsen and Rubin (2006) proposed that the more central an individual considers their trauma to their identity, the more posttraumatic stress symptoms they are likely to experience. What Thomson and Jaque (2012) suggested is that in focusing on their personal trauma, perhaps due to their profession, actors may be at risk to experience more trauma-related distress.

Overexcitability, described by Martowska et al. (2018) as different kinds of overreactions to any type of factor may also be connected to literature around actors and dissociation. For instance, in their study researchers found that actors scored higher than the control group in multiple different types of overexcitability, including imaginal (Martowska et al., 2018). Researchers connected this result to Thomson and Jaque's (2012) findings and speculated that an actor's tendency to exhibit imaginal overexcited reactions may contribute to role confusion.

Student-Actors' Mental and Emotional Suffering

Structural Issues of Actor Training Programs Impacting Mental and Emotional Health

Sexual harassment and sexual violence have become a highly prevalent issue, particularly for feminine-presenting individuals entering their first year of college in the United States (U.S.) (Carey et al., 2015; Shaw & Read, 2021). According to the statistical data available from Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization, college-aged students are at a particularly higher risk for sexual victimization (RAINN, n. d.). Approximately 26% of undergraduate women and 6.8% of undergraduate men will experience sexual victimization (RAINN, n. d.).

This is important to note when discussing student-actors because it speaks to a culture of sexual victimization in which these programs are operating. Sexual harassment has become such

a staple of these programs and the acting profession; that it has largely just been expected and accepted as the price to pay to be an actor (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). A study examining sexual harassment across creative arts industries found that while sexual harassment was a feature of most of these industries, it was in the acting industry that this kind of behavior was normalized earliest in training settings (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). Some common reasons cited by participants in this study for the mostly silent endurance of this behavior was attributed to fear of retaliation, a sense that this is just the price of admission into the industry, and an understanding that they weren't alone in their experiences (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). These sentiments appeared to be confirmed in recent years with the #MeToo movement and the #TimesUp campaign which made several instances of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment within all levels of the industry more widely available for public scrutiny (Harris, 2020; Langone, 2018).

This issue of structurally normalized sexual harassment within the training program and the industry settings is further complicated by the existence of staged intimacy. Hennekam and Bennett (2017) stated,

Intensely physical work can obscure the line between work and sexual harassment, and ambiguities between institutional policy and practice may leave workers unsure of which behaviours should be considered sexual harassment. The likelihood of reporting these behaviours is hence decreased. (p. 421)

This passage could be interpreted to be inclusive of the staging of intimacy on stage, film, and television which can take the form of simulated acts of physical intimacy included in love scenes as well as depictions of physical and sexual assaults. Fight choreographer Adam Noble (2011) has written about instances of confusion and gray areas when it comes to student-actors working

on scenes involving sexual intimacy and/or violence. In his article he discussed student-actors expressing discomfort in rehearsing staged intimacy with little to no supervision of a director and at times having to carry out these rehearsals in university housing or other private residences (Noble, 2011).

While no empirical studies centered on effects of staged intimacy were found, there have been increased efforts on the part of SAG-AFTRA, to normalize the use of accredited stage intimacy coordinators (SAG-AFTRA, 2022). After reviewing the official website for Actor's Equity Association, one webpage was found discussing the contents of a Zoom meeting in which the purpose of an intimacy choreographer was discussed and that did not include any official endorsement on the use of those intimacy choreographers on the part of the union (Actors Equity Association, n.d.). Some training programs, like Yale, have made available a set of guidelines for rehearsing content containing sexual material (Yale College, n.d.). However, given the nation's professional actors' union's lack of a strong stance on this matter or their own set of guidelines, it is clear more work needs to be done.

This information is relevant when discussing student-actors because it highlights a solidification in the culture of silence that is introduced in the training setting. The expectation that student-actors are to endure harassment and harsh conditions was discussed by Seton (2010) when examining the embodied dynamics between acting teachers and student-actors. Seton (2010) opened his article by referring to a metaphor used by an acting teacher that he found disturbing as it evoked images of sexual assault. When he questioned a female student about her response to such imagery, Seton (2010) recounted that the student was not only unphased but viewed the metaphor as appropriate. In the student's eyes, the stakes of her training and future career really were that high (Seton, 2010). While Seton (2010) interpreted this behavior as

indicative of the rigidity of the hierarchal culture of the teachers versus the student-actors, the inclusion of a sexual assault metaphor could also be an example of the normalizing of a toxic sexual harassment culture.

This question of power in the dynamic between teachers and student-actors in the acting classroom poses some potentially important ethical questions. Seton (2010), who was a participant-observer in these classrooms, reported that they “were not being informed and validated by a text or a system. Rather our formation emerged through our interactions with our teachers who would tell us when we *got it* and when we did not” (p. 13). Seton (2010) observed teachers exercising a great deal of influence over the student-actors’ talent, perceived success and viability in the field, but little room was left to acknowledge or discuss that influence. McFarren (2003) also expressed concern of the power teachers held over students which could take the form of “grades, recommendations, or even employment; noncompliant students may rightly fear the repercussions of their unwillingness to be obedient to an authority figure” (p. 179). Seton (2010) worried that given the inherent inequities of the real and perceived power acting teachers hold, that student-actors would suffer if not given a space to discuss and negotiate that dynamic.

Another structural element to actor training settings that possibly contributes to student-actor suffering is the persistence of structural racism. Dunn (2019) discussed what the impact of moving through a professional training program that treated the White voice and body as the standard had on her as a student-actor of color. Dunn (2019) reflected on institutional failures of programs still pulling from predominantly White playwrights, and employing ‘colorblind casting,’ and she also recounted instances of being asked by her White teachers both implicitly and explicitly to set aside her race. This experience of repeated implicit, negative, or judgmental

directions based on false stereotypes about certain marginalized communities could be considered racial microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2019). Recent studies have not only shown a positive correlation between racial microaggressions, and symptoms related to mental health disorders like trauma, but have also shown that this is especially true in workplace and school settings (Nadal et al., 2019).

Curriculum-based Mental and Emotional Suffering of Student-Actors

A crucial component of professional training programs that impact student-actor mental and emotional suffering are the specific acting techniques, and approaches that are taught. According to Panero (2019) there has been a great deal of confusion about what is defined as specific to Strasberg's System and what is strictly Stanislavsky's Method; two famed acting teachers frequently associated with what is considered 'authentic' acting. While both are often mislabeled as simply 'method acting' Panero (2019) argued that elements of both approaches have become so ubiquitous in training and practice, it is difficult to distinguish them from the more general concept of modern American acting. Stanislavsky advocated for the possibility of actors attempting to experience the emotions their characters experienced but only as a last resort, while Strasberg's Affective Memory would require students to relive past experiences of extreme emotion in order to utilize those emotions in their work (Panero, 2019). Strasberg's Affective Memory exercise called for the acting instructor to lead their student through an initial sensory relaxation followed by the recalling and reliving of an extreme emotional past event with the instructor specifically prompting the student to focus on sensory aspects of the memory instead of narratively recounting it (McFarren, 2003).

Given the limited information in the promotional materials found online breaking down the specific techniques currently being taught in some of the top actor training programs, it is

difficult to specifically ascertain the full extent to which these practices are in use today (Boston College Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, n.d.; David Geffen School of Drama at Yale, n.d.; Julliard School of Drama, n.d.). However, since Panero (2019) and McFarren (2003) have asserted that the use of aspects of Method acting and Affective Memory in professional training programs have essentially become synonymous with the idea of American acting, it is perhaps reasonable to conclude that they are still being practiced in some form.

For example, under the class descriptions section on the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute's website, the authors seem to conflate Lee Strasberg's system and Stanislavsky's Method as one and the same as well as talk about using the student-actors' personal experiences to fuel character work (Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, n.d.). Given their description of relaxation and sensory-based exercises that "slowly progresses towards more complex, emotional stimuli," it appears likely that Affective Memory continues to be taught even if it is not named out-right (Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, n.d., para. 4).

Now that it has been established what Method and Affective Memory acting techniques are and that they continue to live on in some form in training programs today, the question remains: what is the harm? It should first be noted that Robb et al. (2016) drew a connection between Stanislavski's 'magic what if' question which is intended to put an actor more fully into the life of their character, and the question, "yes, but what if...?" which is often associated with a tendency to catastrophize and ruminate in generalized anxiety disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While Robb et al. (2016) acknowledged more research is needed in this area, a closer look at the relationship between these questionable acting techniques and trauma is warranted.

A study done in 2006 found that recalling positive memories led to positive moods and negative memories led to negative moods regardless of whether the individual intended to affect their mood or not (Gillihan et al., 2006). While Gillihan et al. (2006) did not look at long-term effects of positive or negative memory recall on mood, it is reasonable to consider that it begins to refute Strasberg's claim that the actor is able to maintain control over their emotions because it is based in their past (McFarren, 2003). McFarren (2003) also proposed that given the structure of the guidance provided by the acting teacher utilizing Affective Memory, it is perhaps more likely that traumatic memories will be recalled. As stated above, in Affective Memory, teachers instruct students to stay away from narrative accounts of the memory being used and prompt students to focus on sensory and emotional components of the memory (McFarren, 2003). Given that past traumatic memories tend to be recalled in more fragmented ways with a focus on sensation and emotion, this perhaps sets these memories up to more readily fit into what is called for during an Affective Memory exercise (McFarren, 2003). These exercises are intended to produce a catalogue of memories that can be used repeatedly over a career and therefore need to contain highly potent emotions (McFarren, 2003). The requirement to continually relive intense moments of past trauma in order to perform could explain why actors scored higher than the general population in terms of experiencing unresolved trauma (Thomson & Jaque, 2012). Not only does it appear to be a requirement at times to potentially relive personal trauma in order to be considered a good actor, but there is also a real danger to constantly revisiting past trauma. In his book, van der Kolk (2015) specifically warned about the dangers of reliving trauma, even in an actual therapy setting, at the risk of reinforcing "preoccupation and fixation" (p. 61). This also puts into question whether an actor's emotional and mental wellbeing can be in direct conflict with their success as an actor. It is then worth considering if in order to continue to be a 'good'

actor, student-actors are perhaps unwittingly being taught that their traumatic experiences are more valuable if they remain unresolved.

The continued focus on these potentially traumatic memories can cause long-term harm to student-actors as well. Berntsen and Rubin (2006) found that the more an individual focuses on their past trauma, the more likely it is that they will experience symptoms of posttraumatic stress and other stress-related disorders. It is also important to note that once a traumatic memory is being relived, the brain cannot tell the difference between the past event and the present moment (McFarren, 2003).

Possible effects of what it means to witness these exercises must be examined as well. A recent study found that actors scored higher levels of empathy than the general population and this was viewed as a positive (Panero & Winner, 2021). However, what if that openness to empathy might also be a vulnerability to actors, particularly when studying in training programs? Actors' heightened empathetic experiences (Panero & Winner, 2021) combined with what is known about emotional contagion (Barsade, 2002) certainly warrant further research into this topic. van der Kolk (2015) also highlighted the existence of mirror neurons, their role in empathetic processes, and how they allow us to intuit on unconscious levels and to various degrees the emotions of those around us. McFarren (2003) expressed concern that given the heightened tendency to empathize, the student-actor who bears witness to these exercises in a classroom setting may be more vulnerable to experiencing secondary traumatic stress. Seton (2013) made similar points when talking about the actor's overall sensitivity to extreme levels of vulnerability. When discussing the actor's body, he wrote, "its capacity to affect and be affected by another - enables not only experiences of delight and pleasure, but also the corollary of

encountering pain” (Seton, 2013, p. 30). Although no studies were found specifically examining or measuring the impact of witnessing these exercises had on others, such research is needed.

Acting Teachers

While Strasberg and Stanislavsky were admittedly interested in aspects of psychology, they were not mental health professionals, nor are the vast majority of acting teachers in professional training programs (McFarren, 2003; Panero, 2019). Some acting teachers like famed American instructor Uta Hagen, cautioned actors of the dangers of confusing acting and therapy, however the potential for harm has continued (McFarren, 2003). As discussed in the section on college students, it is becoming increasingly less likely to encounter a class of students with no mental health history (Karatekin, 2017; Logan-Greene et al, 2014). However, as McFarren (2003) pointed out, it is neither within the professional purview of the acting teacher to determine the extent of that potential mental health history, and how it might interact with the class activities, nor does their position as an acting teacher even give them competence to assess their students’ mental health state at all. McFarren (2003) repeatedly cited concern for the lack of preparation an acting teacher has in the event of a student experiencing traumatic symptoms in a classroom setting and even if they were to be noticed, an acting teacher is not trained on proper containment for such an event. This acknowledgement of the unpreparedness of those overseeing actors was also noted by Panero (2019), as well as their lack of education in mental health. Seton (2013) observed a shared mentality among acting faculty at the institutions he visited. This mentality gave the impression to Seton (2013) that faculty believed the student-actors were in control of whether they were truly affected by the volatile emotions brought up in classwork, which as stated previously is not always the case (McFarren, 2003; Seton, 2013).

Why are acting teachers so unprepared for the effects of the exercises and techniques often employed in their classrooms? Aside from the reality that these teachers are not trained mental health professionals, they are often lacking in an educational background (Omasta & Chappell, 2015). Omasta and Chappell (2015) reported on a survey conducted by the National Association of Schools of Theatre that found only 1.8% of their accredited schools were offering masters-level degrees in theater education. This lack of education around building a theater curriculum and modern, appropriate teaching practices in favor of hiring acting teachers solely with field experience may also explain a tendency for these teachers to rely on more antiquated methods of teaching that were used by their teachers (Heilman, 2022).

Drama Therapy and Student-Actors

When it comes to the mental health of student-actors, a simple but possibly effective starting point would be to increase the student-actor's accessibility to mental health services. While many undergraduate-level programs include some kind of mental health counseling services, the demands of a student-actor's class and rehearsal schedule often makes utilizing those services difficult (Faith, 2021). This lack of flexibility in schedule combined with the finding that professional actors appear to have low insight into the dangers of their unhealthy coping habits (Szabó et al., 2020) are certainly concerning. However, a study conducted at a university in Alaska that tracked the mental wellbeing of a cast of student-actors working on a play about child sexual assault found that the majority of the student-actors reported minimal negative emotional effects (Burkhart, 2017). The reasons the student-actors cited for this was the psychological expertise and group activities offered by those running the study (Burkhart, 2017).

As previously discussed, the issue of the potential emotional and physical harm that can occur when staging intimacy is becoming a more seriously considered piece of actor training and

professional spaces (SAG-AFTRA, 2022; Yale College, n.d.). While more research is needed in this area, it is warranted to look closer at the work being done by trained intimacy coordinators/choreographers who have been referred to those “protecting the psychological safety of actors” when discussing the mental and emotional health approaches being used with this population (Mackie-Stephenson, 2021, abstract section). For example, Mackie-Stephenson (2021) described their organization’s “Five Pillars for rehearsal and performance practice: Context, Choreography, Consent, Closure, and Communication” (para. 6). Establishing a shared language around consent and a commitment to honoring where people’s boundaries were are fundamental to the Five Pillars (Mackie-Stephenson, 2021) and could be a useful tool in an acting classroom.

While there has been very little research into specific mental health interventions that have been conducted with the student-actor or even the more general professional actor populations, it is essential to consider the common language that already exists between the fields of professional actor training and drama therapy. According to the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) “drama therapy is the intentional use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals” (NADTA, n.d., section 1). The shared foundation in understanding theater as a powerful tool in both the drama therapy and acting realms holds great potential for an alliance.

Consider the current efforts by drama therapy researchers to operationalize the core processes used in the field (Frydman et al., 2022). Many of the core processes described by Frydman et al. (2022) like distancing, dramatic play, and dramatic projection are already being used in the acting classroom; the difference, it could be argued, is in the intention and impact behind their uses. Dramatic play in drama therapy is described as “engagement in a co-created

improvised relationship with reality, utilizing imagination and spontaneity” that also includes “a sense of experimentation” (Frydman et al., 2022, p. 8). Professional acting classes also involve the regular use of improvisation, spontaneity, and imagination when learning how to build roles and scenes (Faith, 2021). Distancing was described by Frydman et al. (2022) as when a participant moves, or is guided, through a spectrum of “feeling and thinking” (p. 8). This process appears to potentially have some observable similarities to acting techniques like Affective Memory as detailed by McFarren (2003). Considering that McFarren (2003) explained Affective Memory as an exercise that involved recalling the emotional and sensory memories of intense past events and embodying that in the context of a scene, there may also be a connection between acting exercises like Affective Memory and the drama therapy core process of dramatic projection (Frydman et al., 2022). Dramatic projection in drama therapy is illustrated by an externalizing of internal processes which can include the use of role (Frydman et al., 2022). However, it also is characterized by a “dialogue between internal material and external expressions” (Frydman et al., 2022, p. 8). As McFarren (2003) pointed out, this potential dialogue is often actively discouraged by acting teachers leading students through Affective Memory.

When comparing just a few of these drama therapy core processes described by Frydman et al. (2022) to typical exercises encountered in an acting class, not only does there appear to be a common language, but perhaps also an understanding of how impactful dramatic tools can be. Providing student-actors a space possibly led by a drama therapist with an understanding of these core processes could expand this populations’ inner resources and benefit them greatly.

This yet-to-be-fully-realized partnership between drama therapy and professional acting training is already being fleshed out in such projects like workshops currently being hosted by

New York University's graduate drama therapy department run by Dr. Nisha Sajnani for student-actors focused on their unique mental health needs (NYU Tisch, 2022). Some specific advantages of the use of drama therapy with this population not only included stress reduction and healthier self-care habits, but also to “recenter and appreciate the joy that comes from theater” (NYU Tisch, 2022, para. 2).

Taking into account the heightened risks to traumatic stress student-actors can face as both a participant and observer (McFarren, 2003; Panero, 2019; Seton, 2013; Thomson & Jaque 2012), it is important to consider the benefits of trauma-informed drama therapy work as well. Both the drama therapist and the acting teacher can use the life experience and emotional vulnerability of the student-actor in an embodied way. The difficulty for the acting teacher is in their unpreparedness if a student-actor experiences an instance of re-traumatization or vicarious traumatic stress (McFarren, 2003; Seton, 2013). In drama therapy terms it might be described as the student-actor experiencing under-distance, or a flood of sensory and emotional input (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). A drama therapist, however, is trained to help guide their clients safely along the path between their logical thinking self and their emotional feeling self to achieve insight, reflection, and catharsis (Johnson & Sajnani, 2014).

This use of aesthetic distance and containment are key components to drama therapy (Johnson & Sajnani, 2014) and appear to be lacking in the acting classroom. Gaines et al. (2015) also argued that having theatre educators gain a better understanding of concept of aesthetic distance to help steer student-actors in that direction would bring no harm to the quality of the work being done and would potentially help maintain “a healthy psychic boundary that is neither too personal nor too hollow” (para. 28).

An aspect of containment within drama therapy is the act of de-rolament. As Seton (2013) pointed out, along with Bailey and Dickinson (2016), there is a great deal of focus on actors ‘getting into’ a character but next to no attention put on ‘getting out’ of character. De-rolament describes the intentional setting aside of, or separating from, a role or character through verbal or physical actions at the conclusion of a role-based exercise or scene that demands the actor’s awareness (Lassken, 2017). De-rolament or debriefing has been used in other fields like nursing and has been shown to be effective in helping participants leave an exercise or activity with minimal adverse effects (Lassken, 2017). De-rolament can take a physical form like having the actor ‘shake it off,’ which would ask the actor to physically shake their limbs to mark the transition from role to self (Lassken, 2017). They might also engage in verbal de-rolament which could include the actor saying their own name aloud as well as a few characteristics that make them different from their character (Lassken, 2017).

When discussing the use of de-rolament in acting classrooms, Bailey and Dickinson (2016) described the Alba Emoting technique which was a method developed to help researchers gain a deeper understanding of how emotions are experienced in the body but in an ethical manner. In “Alba Emoting, real emotions are generated solely through physical manipulations; actors do not need to use their personal emotional memories to create their characters’ emotions” (Bailey & Dickinson 2016, p. 9). In response to the experiencing of these strong emotions, the Alba Emoting Step Out method was developed by Susana Bloch, which involves a series of physical steps the actor would go through moving different parts of their body and taking intentional controlled breaths to bring their body back to a state of regulation (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016). The inclusion of Alba Emoting and the Step Out method as described by

Bailey and Dickinson (2016) could significantly elevate the student-actor experience in their training.

Application of Theory Into Practice

For The Teachers

As previously discussed, given the similarities in the activities in both drama therapy exercises and acting classrooms, a more thorough and intentional application of drama therapy principles in acting curriculums could be of great benefit. For instance, the inclusion of workshops led by drama therapists for acting teachers could markedly improve the quality of their classrooms. As stated previously, the majority of acting teachers in professional training programs are likely teaching from their own experience in the field and not necessarily from a theater education background (Omasta & Chappell, 2015). Seton (2010) and McFarren (2003) both voiced concern over the lack of acknowledgement of the power in the hands of teachers over their students. Leading workshops for these teachers that focus on building an awareness around the importance of multidimensional relationships, a core process described by Frydman et al. (2022) from drama therapy, could begin to foster a deeper sense of insight into the role that the teacher plays in the classroom. Employing activities like the social atom (Giacomucci, 2021) could be a helpful way to further the teachers' understanding of their positionality and social environments. Assisting teachers in understanding the power of their influence on their students as well as the ways in which their students can impact them could lead to more healthy and productive interactions in the classroom.

These workshops could also be a place for teachers to play with different roles. Since, as explained by Omasta and Chappell (2015), most of these teachers are not necessarily trained as teachers, it would be understandable if some role confusion was also taking place for them as

well as their students. Perhaps teachers could be asked to name and explore these two distinct roles separately as described in role method (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). It could be productive to help them create awareness around when they are stepping into the role of the actor versus when they are stepping into the role of teacher.

For The Students

After reviewing the literature, a great deal needs to be addressed regarding the mental and emotional suffering of student-actors. A potential way to begin this is not through a limited series of workshops, but instead through a supervision-style semester-long course led by a trained drama therapist taught with a trauma-informed lens.

Trauma-Informed Approaches and Tools

Student-actors entering training programs are at risk from traumatic harm whether that be from re-traumatization and reliving past traumatic events through acting exercises like Affective Memory, or potentially experiencing trauma-related symptoms due to the traumatic nature of the scenes they are required to work on in their classes (McFarren, 2003; Seton, 2013). It is also crucial to keep in mind that while these students are in college, they may also be facing increased risks of new traumas outside of the classroom (RAINN, n.d.). It is for these reasons that the application of drama therapy principles of “safety and resource-building” to all activities carried out in this supervision-style class could be a favorable one (Redfern, 2014, p. 366). The way in which this sense of safety is built would require explicit techniques like providing psychoeducation perhaps around how trauma impacts the body, as well as more implicit techniques like the drama therapist working to develop the student-actors’ trust (Redfern, 2014).

Some examples of how that sense of trust can be developed would involve the use of tools like the social atom as described above as well as the spectrogram (Giacomucci, 2021). The

advantage of using something like a spectrogram especially early on in this supervision-style class is that it would create an opportunity for students to begin having conversations about their identity as an actor as well as other aspects of their identity they also value or perhaps struggle with. These early assessment tools could also help foster open communication between the students and the drama therapist-teacher about power dynamics at play within the classroom and the institution of the program. This open and honest communication has the potential to lead to a sense of safety for all students and especially those who may feel like they are struggling with stressors related to racial discrimination as Dunn (2019) described or those related to sexual harassment as discussed by Hennekam and Bennett (2017).

Starting this course off with theater-game type activities could also be a helpful way to begin a discourse with students about healthy coping skills, encourage help-seeking behaviors, and engage in discussions around body image. As noted earlier, actors often employ higher levels of substance use to deal with the stress of their work and are less likely to seek help which perhaps may be due to their lack of awareness around how much more they use those maladaptive coping skills than the general population (Szabó et al., 2020).

Later in the semester once a sense of trust and safety has been established among the student-actors and the drama therapist leading the course, space could be made for students to take the time to be more intentional in the staging of intimacy. Perhaps through the utilization of tools like the pillars of stage intimacy, students can gain a vocabulary for articulating their comfort level and consent when staging intimate scenes (Mackie-Stephenson, 2021). In taking the time and space in a classroom setting to engage in discussion around intimate staging, hopefully students will also develop clearer boundaries around their personal feelings and the

feelings of their characters. This could potentially lead to healthier interpersonal relationships among classmates and future castmates.

Other ways safety can be scaffolded into the class structure would deal with teacher feedback, grading, and student accommodations. As discussed by both McFarren (2003) and Seton (2010), acting teachers in a typical acting class are not necessarily grading and giving feedback based on any set standards or texts, but rather are speaking from their own positionality on whether they think their student-actors are bringing successful acting work into the room. Considering that this work will inevitably bring up past trauma-related stressors or new stressors as a result of embodying traumatic roles as highlighted by McFarren (2003) and Seton (2013), it will be highly important for the drama therapist leading this class to be mindful of how they are grading their students. For instance, it could be more productive in building trust if the drama therapist leading the class gives out grades and feedback based on attendance and student participation. However, it should also be clearly communicated to the students that accommodations, such as extensions on assignments when needed and requested in a timely manner, individual feedback from the instructor, and the ability for students to take breaks when needed, will be available to them.

Throughout this supervision-style class, it will remain important for the drama therapist leading it to maintain a trauma-informed lens when utilizing other drama therapy core processes as outlined by Frydman et al. (2022). For example, when using the tools of distancing, Glass (2006) suggested starting participants off in an over-distanced place to continue building safety and trust, which could be an appropriate way to approach early classes. For example, a way to utilize that sense of over-distance while helping the student-actors become aware of and build their inner resources might be to have them embody what they feel their strengths are as actors

and as people. This activity could also lead to strengthening their sense of self which could help with role confusion (Thomson & Jaque, 2012).

In later classes, student-actors could be invited to bring in scene work from their other classes or department shows they are in that they are struggling with in terms of their personal connections to the material. For example, if a student-actor were to bring in a scene in which their character is dealing with intense grief from a sudden loss, the drama therapist could have the student-actor pause while enacting the scene, have the student-actor step out of the scene, enrole another student as the first student-actor in their character, and ask the first student-actor to make observations about this new perspective. This use of distancing (Frydman et al., 2022) could help the student-actor gain insight into what is coming up for them as well as give them an embodied way to practice noting where their boundaries are.

Continuing with this hypothetical example, the drama therapist guiding this process could invite the student-actor to spend time noticing what their boundary feels like to help the student-actor internalize that feeling and be more able to recognize it when it comes up again in class. The drama therapist might then ask the student-actor to use the core process of embodiment (Frydman et al., 2021) and invite them to act out what it might look like if they were to ask for their boundary to be honored in their acting class or rehearsal.

Using another student-actor, or even an empty chair to represent an aspect of the student-actor as outlined in the above example could also be considered an example of dramatic projection (Frydman et al., 2022). As McFarren (2003) pointed out, acting exercises like Affective Memory are already asking students to relive potentially traumatic memories, but are also actively stopping the student-actors from processing those memories. As Frydman et al. (2022) framed dramatic projection, it is a conversation between the participant's cognitive

process and emotional experiences. Since these trauma responses are already occurring in classes, it could be beneficial for a drama therapist in this supervision-style class to use dramatic projection to allow the student-actor a safe space to investigate that connection between the thinking and emotional selves instead of shutting it down.

Glass (2006) also discussed the use of systematic desensitization in drama therapy work with trauma survivors which could also be an appropriate tool to use in this supervision-style class. Glass (2006) described systematic desensitization as leading a participant through relaxation techniques when revisiting distressing memories to increase tolerance. Given that students are being taught techniques like Affective Memory, introducing systematic desensitization could be a good way to introduce balance and offer students a way to build that tolerance to stressors.

This supervision-style class could be a great way to introduce student-actors to the drama therapy core process of active witnessing (Frydman et al., 2022). McFarren (2003) worried that student-actors witnessing their fellow classmates enacting difficult or traumatic material could negatively impact their mental health. Providing student-actors with psychoeducation around the power of witnessing and the function of mirror neurons (van der Kolk, 2015) could be a helpful piece of this class. The drama therapist leading this course could also implement tools like asking student-actors in the audience to conduct regular body scans and include the student-actors in the audience and their experiences in the processing of their classmates' work to build on the idea that the witness is an active participant in the dramatic work.

The last major component to this supervision-style class to be discussed is containment. As stated previously traumatic material is almost unavoidable in the acting classroom but very little – if any - guardrails have been put in place to ensure that the effects of those traumatic

stressors are contained (McFarren, 2003; Seton, 2013). In using this supervision-style class, the drama therapist could implement clear structure to each class that will include time for processing and closure to help students return to a regulated state before leaving the classroom. Adherence to this structure also helps to ensure that the “real-life consequences” remain limited when engaging with dramatic play during class (Frydman et al., 2022, p. 8).

De-rollement will also be a key part of containment in this supervision-style class. The inclusion of a de-rollement process at the end of an acting class or exercise could help student-actors begin to create stronger boundaries between their own identities and their work (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016). As previously established, an acting classroom can be a risky space for a student-actor, especially one with existing mental health struggles. Incorporating de-rollement at the end of each exercise or rehearsal can provide some containment for what that student-actor experienced in-role. As Lassken (2017) noted, “de-roling can be seen as a safety net, deployed to avoid tangling fiction with reality” (p. 167). Lassken (2017) went on to describe the dangers of not properly de-roling as potentially unconscious desires of the student-actor interacting with aspects of the character that was played that then can implicitly inform the student-actor’s thought, feelings, or behaviors. Some examples of how that de-rollement process can look individually is the ‘shake it off’ method, or verbally naming distinctly differing characteristics between the student-actor and their character as Lassken (2017) suggested. The drama therapist leading this class could also introduce the Step Out de-roling method developed by Susana Bloch as a part of Alba Emoting (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016). In a classroom setting, the process of leading student-actors through the Step Out method would include:

a series of slow, deep breaths synchronized with sweeping arm motions that are begun from a forward bend position with arms above the head, hands clasped, to above and

behind the head and then forward again. The actor breathes in while standing and bending backward, then breathes out and bends forward. This takes the actor back to a neutral emotional and physical state. (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016, p. 10)

Limitations and Future directions

It should be emphasized that these recommendations for ways drama therapy principles and processes can be incorporated into a professional actor training program are just the beginning of this discussion. The intention behind the outline for a supervision-style class for student-actors led by a drama therapist is to offer new more constructive and therapeutic perspectives on the dramatic tools already being used in their training. It can also be a space to learn skills and techniques to not only directly combat the potential mental and emotional harm that may arise in their line of work, but also become more resilient with a healthy and robust approach to help-seeking.

However, the potential blurred line between what is therapeutic and what is therapy must be acknowledged; an important issue pointed out by Gaines et al. (2015) and Butler (2017). It would be essential that this class remained a space for students to develop new skills they can take with them in their personal and professional lives, but it should not serve as a replacement for individual therapy work.

The review of the current literature also left additional questions that could potentially be answered through further research. For example, on the subject of staged intimacy and staged violence: more research needs to be done in furthering understanding the psychological and emotional effects of that kind of embodiment in an acting classroom setting as well as the effects it can have on student-actors who are witness to it. Mackie-Stephenson (2021) referenced an overall lessening of workplace harassment by including all cast and crew in their intimacy

trainings but did not cite anything outside of their own observations. This writer would be very interested to see studies examining that question particularly in training programs. Lastly, there were multiple authors who commented on the difficulties that stem from student-actors' struggles with role confusion and blurred lines between the self and their roles (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016; Lassken, 2017; McFarren, 2003; Seton, 2013; Thomson & Jaque, 2012). However, no empirical data was found related to understanding the acting teachers' perspective. Are acting teachers having difficulty separating their identity as actors from their identity as teachers and if so, what are the consequences of that?

Conclusion

The profession of acting certainly has gone through a significant number of changes since its early days in ancient Greece, as has its impact on those individuals who participate in it. The literature shows that the playing field a student-actor must navigate is filled with potential pitfalls to their mental health due to myriad factors, but what it often doesn't show is where to go from here. The psychological and emotional price student-actors can be asked to pay is steep and should no longer be ignored. Offering workshops to acting teachers and implementing a drama therapist-led supervision-style course for student-actors is perhaps a good place to start. One of the main attractions to this field for this writer has been that drama therapy holds that drama can be a powerful and transformative tool. Who better to appreciate that sentiment of drama's awesome power for change than actors?

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Student's Name: Kelsey Burke

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: ____ Jason S. Frydman, PhD, RDT/BCT, NCSP ____