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Vladimir Mirodan
University of the Arts London (GB)
ORCID: 0000-0003-4680-2327

Temperament and the Roots of Interpretation

Abstract

Adopting the perspective of recent findings in psychology, this article examines the complex ways in which the personalities of individual actors and directors affect their interpretations of dramatic material. The article asks: How is it that in the crucible of the rehearsal room certain interpretative decisions "feel right" and others do not? What are the forces that shape these pre-reflexive processes? When taking interpretative decisions that can shape a performance or even an entire production, where does the balance lie between deliberate reflection, enculturated habits, and non-conscious processes? Are the latter rooted in our personalities? In search for answers, the article outlines the considerable effect genetic and epigenetic factors ("temperaments") as well as inherited "tribal attitudes" have on the formation of personality. The article concludes by asking whether we need to look again at actor training in the light of advances in the psychology of individual differences and suggests a way for the practices of our training studios to renew themselves so as to reflect the findings of the new psychology.

Keywords

acting, theatre directing, acting psychology, personality, interpretation, temperaments

Abstrakt

Temperament a korzenie interpretacji

Przedmiotem artykułu jest przeprowadzona z perspektywy najnowszych ustaleń psychologii analiza złożonego wpływu osobowości aktorów i reżyserek na ich interpretacje materiału dramatycznego. Ogniskuje się ona wokół następujących pytań: Jak to jest, że w laboratorium sali prób pewne decyzje interpretacyjne „pasują", a inne nie? Jakie siły kształtują te przedrefleksyjne procesy? Gdy zapadają decyzje interpretacyjne mające wpływ na dane wykonanie, a nawet całą produkcję, w jaki sposób równoważą się świadoma refleksja, nabyte poprzez enkulturację nawyki i nieświadome procesy? Czy te ostatnie zakorzenione są w naszych osobowościach? Podejmując próbę odpowiedzi, autor przedstawia znaczący wpływ czynników genetycznych i epigenetycznych („temperamentów"), a także dziedziczonych „postaw plemiennych" na kształtowanie się osobowości. Na koniec stawia pytanie o potrzebę przemyślenia treningu aktorskiego w kontekście postępów w psychologii różnic indywidualnych i podpowiada, jakiego rodzaju odnowa naszych praktyk szkoleniowych pozwoliłaby im odzwierciedlać ustalenia nowej psychologii.

Słowa kluczowe

aktorstwo, reżyseria teatralna, psychologia aktorstwa, osobowość, interpretacja, temperament

Before we get going, dear reader, please indulge me in a simple experiment. Would you be kind enough to consider what the following sentence means:

The doctor examined Emily's growth.

What was your first, intuitive reaction? Did you understand it to mean that Emily had discovered a worrisome growth and went to the doctor to have it checked? Or did you perhaps think that little Emily was a bit on the short side for her age and daddy took her to the doctor to be measured?[1] Was your intuitive reading pessimistic or sanguine, apprehensive or comfortable?

A different conundrum: many years ago, I asked my father, the Romanian-Israeli playwright Alexandru Mirodan, why he had shaped a very funny scene in one of his comedies in a particular way. He was a writer of sound craft as well as natural talent, yet all he could do was smile bashfully and say: "It just came out that way." His answer has stayed with me . . .

To try and unpack these puzzles, could I now ask you to join me in a bit of theatrical daydreaming? Let us imagine that you and I are currently in rehearsals for a production of *Three Sisters*. A widely respected director guides our company and you (please ignore age, gender or any other restrictions) are playing Irina, the youngest of the sisters. Our rehearsals have reached the end of act two. Natasha, the busy-body sister-in-law, has put a stop to the promised Shrove Tuesday revelries. The house is silent and Irina, exhausted from her day's work at the post office, finds herself alone. Suddenly, she is startled by the unexpected entrance of Captain Soliony, a man who is strongly attracted to her, but whom she dislikes. A short scene ensues, during which according to the text and the stage directions Soliony makes an awkward pass at Irina, only to be interrupted by Natasha's unexpected entrance.

How are we going to stage this? You and your partner have a first stab: you organize an awkward lunge by Soliony, followed by an indignant turning away by Irina, capped by Soliony's gruff exit line: "That matters very little to me. Good-bye."[2] (I have seen at least a dozen productions in which it was done in this way.) But today, our respected director has a different idea: impatient with Victorian decorum, he decides to turn Soliony's hesitant pass into fully

Some of the text of this article was first presented at two conferences: *The Makings of the Actor* (Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, Vilnius, September 6–9, 2019) and *Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities 2023* (University of Warsaw, July 12–16, 2023). I am grateful to the participants for their insightful comments and observations.

[1] Faced with the same question, one of the participants in the Warsaw conference even suggested that our doctor might in fact be a psychoanalyst, examining Emily's *personal growth*: a telling reaction, in light of what follows.

[2] Anton Chekhov, "Three Sisters," in *Plays*, trans. Michael Frayn (London: Methuen, 1988), 237.

fledged molestation. Your partner is to grab you and throw you on a couch, with the implication that were it not for Natasha's entrance, an attempted rape might ensue. You are, to say the least, startled by this new and to all intents and purposes "un-Chekhovian" interpretation. Intrigued nonetheless, you give this staging a go. And you find that, whatever its own merits or demerits, it leads to novel and startling interpretations of the two scenes that follow: Natasha's blackmail regarding the sisters' sleeping arrangements, followed by Vershinin's, Olga's, and Kuligin's entrances. The latter's inane chat about school politics feels like agony, frozen as you are by the horror of what has just happened. With his "You spoilt child," Kuligin adds insult to injury. Above all, Olga's impatient indifference to your distress is unbearable: those famous lines ("my head aches, my poor head"), ostensibly about being exhausted by the drudgery at school, as well as the subsequent revelation that, far from moving to Moscow as you had hoped, she has accepted the position of headmistress in the town, now come from a self-centered, detached Olga. The director's unconventional decision seems to be paying off: the power dynamics between the sisters are radically re-evaluated and the production throws a hard, unsentimental look at a text with family relationships at its heart. So, despite your initial dismay, you can see the rationale for playing your scene with Soliony as an attempted rape.

One week later, you return to rehearsing that rough staging: you and your partner have by now worked out in detail the logistics of the grab, the forced kiss, the flinging on the couch, etc. You both give it all you have, but the director is absentmindedly scanning his notes. "Nah," he says, "I have another idea: instead of rejecting Soliony, Irina ought to return his kiss, passionately." "But, but, but . . ." you say, "this goes completely against the run of the text and of the interpretation on which we have so painstakingly worked all week." Nonetheless, since you are all still exploring, you give it a go. And to your amazement, the consequences for the meaning of the play as a whole are just as startling as those of the attempted rape: this time, the play is no longer an unsentimental look at relationships between siblings, but turns into a proto-feminist text about female sexualities. Masha's affair, Olga's desperate desire to be married, Irina's eventual acceptance of the Baron's proposal, are now revealed in a new and startling light.

Your problem is, you have now experienced *in your bones* three, radically different yet equally attractive interpretations. How are you going to choose? Do you have a personal preference and will you be content to subsume it to someone else's vision, however odd this might feel? Is, as it were, Emily's growth sinister or benign?

(By the way, these examples are not my brainchildren, but were taken from two actual productions of *Three Sisters*: the attempted rape was in a Declan

Donnellan production with an excellent Russian company; the returned kiss was in Lev Dodin's production at the Maly Theatre.[3] And, incidentally, Dodin cut the Olga/Kuligin entrance altogether, as surplus to the requirements of his interpretation.)

On one level, the answer to your doubts about the three interpretations can be reached consciously and objectively: ideally, you and your company share a point of view, what Brecht used to call a *Haltung*—an Attitude, a posture, a *prise de position*, a view of the world and of the role of theatre within it, which will inform this and other interpretative decisions. Yet, however much you may subscribe to the company's Attitude, there is still something inside you (us) that goes on nagging. One way of doing the scene and the play *feels right for you*; the other *not quite*. One *works for you*, the other *doesn't*. At home, in bed, with the blankets drawn over your head, you try to work this out. You say to yourself: "My preferences are due to my upbringing, to the books I've read, the plays I've seen, and the social outlook I've absorbed from these"—to so-called enculturated habits.

Without doubt: the company's Attitude as well as your own enculturated habits play a significant role. Yet, just as in the diverse intuitive readings of 'Emily's growth', there is something else, something visceral, something non-conscious—in scientific jargon, pre-reflective—that inclines us to lean toward one rather than the other of these choices. I think that this something else cannot be explained simply in terms of sociology or aesthetics. Tennessee Williams once observed that a writer (by extension, any artist) "is crafted from biography *and* biology."[4] The balance between deliberate reflection and pre-reflective processes plays such an important part in defining the ways in which individual actors and directors interpret dramatic material that I think it merits further and careful consideration.

During what has been called "the long Stanislavskian century,"[5] Stanislavski's dictum "through the conscious to the unconscious"[6] acted as a beacon guiding mainstream Western as well as Russian-inspired schools of acting. Upon the

[3] Donnellan's production premiered in 2005 in Moscow and toured throughout the world until 2013, https://www.cheekbyjowl.com/productions/three-sisters/; Dodin's production ran in Saint Petersburg and in London in 2019, https://nimaxtheatres.com/shows/three-sisters/.

[4] James Grissom, "Interview with Tennessee Williams," https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/folliesofgod, accessed May 5 2023, (emphasis V.M.).

[5] Cary M. Mazer, "Historicizing Spontaneity: The Illusion of the First Time of 'The Illusion of the First Time,'" in Yu Jin Ko and Michael Shurgot, eds., *Shakespeare's Sense of Character: On the Page and From the Stage* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 87.

[6] In the Jean Benedetti translation: "subconscious creation through the actor's conscious psychotechnique," Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), 18.

psychology of the twentieth century, and in particular upon the canons of psychodynamics, we have erected a mighty assembly of practices and techniques which are meant to tap the deep water-table of our creativity *at will*— purposefully and methodically. But what if discoveries in cognitive science now challenge our foundational assumptions?

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In my 2019 book *The Actor and the Character*,[7] I described how over a period of several years Jerome Kagan, the long-serving professor of psychology at Harvard, brought into his laboratory more than 450 four-month-old infants. He sat them in high chairs and, with their mothers next to them, exposed them to something benign but which they did not expect: a mobile started to turn above their heads, a tissue giving out a slight smell of alcohol was waved under their noses or a stranger's voice was heard coming from a speaker. Around forty percent of these infants sat contented, babbling away. Twenty percent of the infants, however, became agitated, and always in the same pattern: their upper-body muscles tensed, their legs and arms flailed, and they eventually started to cry. Most importantly, they arched their backs so as to lift themselves out of the chair. This is significant, because adults also arch their backs when they fear danger. In infants and adults alike, the amygdala—a small, almond-shaped structure in the middle of the brain which is heavily involved in how the brain reacts to unexpected stimuli—sends powerful signals to another part of the brain, which in turn triggers this distinctive response.[8]

The infants were then followed for over two decades, through their education experiences and professional choices. The findings were startling: those who had become agitated—the "high-reactives," Kagan called them—continued throughout their development to respond strongly to new and unexpected encounters. As a result, they developed defense mechanisms to avoid stress: they became vigilant, shy, and cautious. One, otherwise not particularly neurotic,

[7] Vladimir Mirodan, *The Actor and the Character: Explorations in the Psychology of Transformative Acting* (London: Routledge, 2019), 86–89.

[8] The remaining forty percent of the experimental group of infants displayed different, though less pronounced behaviors. For a detailed description, see Jerome Kagan, *The Temperamental Thread: How Genes, Culture, Time and Luck Make Us Who We Are* (New York: The Dana Foundation, 2010), locs. 544ff., Kindle. I should note that Kagan's emphasis on the role of the amygdala in shaping temperament has been critiqued as overly reductionist. However, Kagan acknowledges environmental influences (the combined effects of genetic, neural, environmental, and experiential factors), while continuing to prioritize biological markers when identifying early temperamental differences.

high-reactive even went so far as to declare: "I do not like spring, because the weather is so unpredictable." They also tended to avoid too much contact with other people and, overall, chose professions which could be exercised in relative isolation: writers, computer programmers, scientists. On the other hand, those infants who had reacted placidly—the "low-reactives"—turned out to be extraverts: chatty, laid-back, friendly. They were more inclined to take risks and chose professions such as airline pilot, firefighter, or entrepreneur.

These biases Kagan described as temperaments. Temperaments can even be observed in physiological reactions. They, Kagan writes,

> produce variation in the reactivity of, or sensitivity to light, a change in heart rate, breathing, gastric motility, skin temperature, or bitter taste. Children who like very sour tastes also prefer bright colors and foods with unfamiliar flavors.[9]

And please remember that the beginning of the study involved four-month-old infants, in which enculturated habits, while not entirely absent, are minimal. Enculturated habits can affect infants, even though they are in the earliest stages of development, typically indirectly through their caregivers' behaviors and interactions: whether infants are breastfed or not, whether they sleep in cribs or co-sleep with their parents, whether they are carried in slings or in strollers, etc. In particular, for the purposes of our discussion, culturally influenced practices around soothing (whether emphasizing reassurance or seeking to develop self--reliance and independence) can shape how infants regulate emotions and stress. But Kagan's study involved infants who had all been selected from a relatively socially homogenous Boston neighborhood, where culturally shaped approaches were broadly similar; the sample was also large enough to allow for statistical smoothing of individual differences.

Insofar as temperament is determined by our genes, it can be seen as a form of *biological preparedness* that a child brings into the world at birth and which is revealed in differences in the neurochemical functions of our brains. Evidence emerging from parallel research has shown that there are good physiological reasons for this to occur. While we are in the womb, during birth, and then in the first hours and days after our entry into the world, fundamental interactions take place between our DNA and the environment. Our genes, which are very active until birth, normally shut down soon after as a result of a process called methylation, in which a chemical compound attaches itself to the DNA.

[9] Jerome Kagan, *What Is Emotion? History, Measures, and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 176.

However, the *rate* at which the genes shut down can vary considerably between individuals. These differences in genetic make-up and expression, it is posited, form the basis for the development of our distinctive temperaments.[10]

These innate temperaments predispose us toward certain feelings, moods, and behaviors. They make it easier or harder to be joyful, to get tense, or to feel guilty. They are the strings of the harp on which the environment then plays. "Experiences," Kagan says, "act on these biases to create personality types, such as agreeable with peers or impulsively aggressive following frustration."[11]

Temperament is not the same as personality, however. As we have seen, temperament refers to innate, biologically-based traits that determine an individual's emotional reactivity, energy levels, and mood. It can therefore be considered the foundation of personality and is present from birth. Personality**,** on the other hand, refers to the complex set of characteristics, patterns, and behaviors that emerge from the interaction of temperament with environmental influences, experiences, and learned behavior; it develops over time. Temperament constitutes an innate propensity, but this only points towards a general direction. The environment will always play a crucial role in determining how temperament eventually expresses itself in personality. In summary, temperament is the biologically-based *core*, while personality is the refined, complex outcome of temperament interacting with life's circumstances. Temperament provides the *baseline* or raw material for behavior, influencing how a person reacts to stimuli and stress. Personality governs how the person expresses themselves, makes decisions, and interacts with the world, often based on their temperament and learned coping strategies.

The concept of temperament (or rather temperaments, as it is assumed that there are many, perhaps hundreds of temperaments, most yet to be studied and described) is far from being settled in psychological theory.[12] Nonetheless, there is relatively little challenge to the observation that certain fundamental behaviors

[10] Sue Carter, Frances Champagne, et al., "The Development of Temperament Symposium," The Philoctetes Centre, New York, January 23, 2008, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kɛu-az-NzTc.

[11] Kagan, *What Is Emotion?*, 176.

[12] Kagan's research on temperament, particularly his work linking early temperament to later personality traits, is considered foundational. However, like any influential body of work, it has faced challenges and critiques over the years. The reliance of Kagan's studies on Western, middle-class populations has been critiqued on the basis that in other cultures behavioral manifestations such as shyness, for example, have significantly different cultural connotations. Critics have also argued that Kagan's findings may oversimplify the relationship between early temperament and later personality, underplaying the role of parenting styles, peer interactions, and cultural influences. In response, Kagan acknowledged the fact that environmental factors can modify or override early temperamental tendencies, but continued to emphasize biological predispositions as a foundation. Current research often builds on Kagan's findings by incorporating these additional factors into a more nuanced view of temperament and personality development.

appear so early in an infant's life that the only explanation is that their origins are either genetic, pre-natal, or immediately post-natal. From the earliest stages of development, temperament acts in the way a filter operates on a camera: it emphasizes certain colors on the spectrum while excluding others. Once born, if all "goes well" for the child, that is if the temperament is reinforced by a sympathetic environment, then strong biases (a very active baby, for example) will be compensated and the person will end up balanced and integrated. However, Kagan posits, no matter how positive the environment, a person with one type of temperament will never reach the other extreme. The shy will not become bold nor the lively docile.[13]

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A further influence on our inherited characteristics may be of even greater consequence to my examination of the roots of interpretation: the genetic effects of the historical, collective experiences of the populations and societies in which we are born.

Over a lifetime of going to the theatre, I must have seen at least two dozen productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. These typically follow a pattern exemplified by such influential renderings as Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 sun-drenched 'Italian' film or Trevor Nunn's very 'Shakespearean' (i.e., steeped in English theatrical tradition) 1976 RSC production, starring Ian McKellen. The established model is to emphasize the innocent charm of adolescent love, spiced with a good dose of youthful exuberance and some showy swashbuckling: the tragedy is ultimately "optimistic." In consequence, these productions universally end with a sincere embrace between the two bereaved fathers, who in their grief willingly submit to temporal as well as to heavenly authority: the tableau of their sorrowful union a signifier of the confident expectation that, as the result of their unbearable loss, mercy is certain to be granted by both.

I have to confess that, as the heir of generations suffused with Eastern European pessimism, I never quite warmed to this interpretation—it simply did not 'sit well' with me. How satisfying, therefore, to learn about a different ending offered by a celebrated, if unconventional production directed by the Russian director

[13] The issue of the stability of temperaments is still a matter of debate: some studies have shown that temperament could change over time, especially with strong environmental influences or therapeutic intervention. Kagan's work does allow for some change but emphasizes that biological predispositions create a foundation for certain behavioral tendencies and that these remain dominant.

Anatoly Efros.[14] In Efros' production, the role of the Duke as an instrument of divine mercy was also acknowledged. However, *this* Christian prince, Efros said,

> must look like Christ, who, if you could imagine it, is sixty years old. Tired and hopeless, Christ looks at his handiwork. However much he prays, however much he appeals, however much he pleads, there are almost no results. Therefore, he is full of weariness and unfriendly contempt for this crowd of people who are breaking each other's bones. The guard pushes apart those who are fighting, and the Duke enters with a tired and painful gait. An earthy countenance. Disgusted and angry, he looks over the bloodstained faces. . . . Then he threatens them with his fist for a long, long time, demanding that they remember who is to blame for this misfortune.[15]

Moreover, at the very end of Efros' production, as soon as the Duke's back is turned, Capulet and Montague break sharply out of their stiff, enforced embrace, take two steps back and draw their daggers. The stage lights then slowly dim over this tableau which screams: authority is neither legitimate nor benign, but must be obeyed, however begrudgingly; humans are intrinsically evil, force reigns, and mercy is for the birds!

Where did this radically different interpretation come from? And why does it feel so "unusual" to the Western viewer?[16] In *The Joy of Rehearsal*, his "collage" of director's notes and musings on the art of making theatre, Efros offers some thoughts on the scene I described above; these are framed as his response to a contemporary review of his production. They are worth citing at some length:

> According to the reviewer, this interpretation contradicted not only early, but also late Shakespeare, who always wrote that love and hope exist even in the most terrible conditions. . . . Maybe because of this review's quiet tone, I tried to take a detached critical view of myself. Is it true, as many have said, that I am a pessimist—are they correct? . . . Reconciliation, even though it is too late, is in the final analysis a victory of reason over animal passion and instinct. All the same, this belated reconciliation is at the same time very bad, for it has come. . . . at the tomb of Romeo and Juliet. . . . In general, it seems to me that an optimistic treatment of late reconciliations is sacrilegious. And not only for

[14] At the Malaya Bronnaya Theater, Moscow, premiered May 1970.

[15] Anatoly Efros, *The Joy of Rehearsal: Reflections on Interpretation and Practice*, trans. James Thomas (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 191.

[16] Bernard Gwertzman included: "Russians Stream to New 'Romeo'," *New York Times*, May 28, 1970, 28.

> psychological reasons, that is, because half a minute ago both fathers saw the corpses of their children. More likely, the sight of these corpses only muted their hostility, and face to face with each other, they ceased exposing their "egos". They are depressed, dead, paralyzed. How something more optimistic can be extracted here, I cannot imagine. The price of reconciliation is already too great. After all, they have killed their future.[17]

Modern psychology has found that history carves deep runes into the psyche of entire populations. The Dutch social psychologist Gert Hofstede defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another."[18] Hofstede surveyed over 88,000 employees in IBM subsidiaries from 72 countries and arrived at a framework used widely to describe cultural differences. Hofstede's framework is built around four core dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity. His initial survey as well as subsequent research showed that people in the West tended to be more individualistic, less deferential, and less inclined to obey authority. In turn, Joseph Henrich, professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard, linked such findings to the fact that for over 1,000 years denizens of what he christened WEIRD populations (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) have been relatively protected from tyranny by the rule of law as well as by certain cultural restraints, notably Catholicism, to which he assigned significant weight in the development of the Western psyche.[19] By contrast, Rus-

[17] Efros, *Joy of Rehearsal*, 183–184.

[18] Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors and Institutions Across Nations*, 2nd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 12.

[19] Joseph Patrick Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020). I follow Henrich's description of "the West" as a primarily cultural and psychological concept, rather than one defined by geography or history. For Henrich, WEIRD traits include individualism (prioritizing individual goals and autonomy over group goals and relationships), impersonal prosociality (trusting and cooperating with strangers based on shared norms and institutions rather than kinship or personal connections), and analytical thinking (a focus on categorization, logic, and breaking problems into components, as opposed to holistic thinking). While "the West" generally aligns with Europe and its cultural descendants (e.g., North America, Australia, and parts of Latin America), Henrich emphasizes that the concept encompasses societies profoundly shaped by the psychological and institutional legacy of changes brought about by the Catholic church during the Middle Ages. This nuanced definition challenges the idea of "the West" as a static or purely geographical concept, highlighting its dynamic evolution through cultural, religious, and psychological transformations. Actors and directors who are shaped by this tradition share its core attitudes, regardless of geography. As to the R in the acronym WEIRD: it does not, alas, mean that all theatre people are "rich" in material possessions, only that they share in the psychological attitude that goes with the overall Western feeling of relative affluence. I think that, observed from this perspective, Central and Eastern European cultures, shaped and reshaped over hundreds of years through the clashes of Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, and Islamic traditions, constitute a peculiar case. My contention is that the communal experience of surviving violent and prolonged oppression has become foundational to these cultures.

sians scored a rating of 93 out of 100 on Hofstede's Power Distance dimension. "What this means in effect"—comments the British essayist Matthew Syed—"is that whereas most people are suspicious of power and steep hierarchies, Russians have been socialized into accepting them, if only as a way of surviving dictators."[20]

I would also argue that another mindset has become just as ingrained: an inbuilt despondency regarding attempts at rebellion. Efros' production premiered in 1970, hard on the heels of events—in Paris, Prague, at Kent State, and elsewhere—that aspired to change things through direct action. These were often led by the Romeos and Juliets of the time amid societies that, as Efros saw it, also "killed their future." No 'optimistic tragedy' for this Russian director—his internalized history of violent repression supplied only one answer: rebellions and revolutions, however admirable their heroism, are destined to fail. One's only choice is to keep one's discontent secret, and survive. The British-Polish art historian Waldemar Januszczak once remarked: "If you come from Poland, you're used to pain and invasion and uproot. It's all you've ever known. So you tell your children what my mother told me: 'Keep quiet and get on with it.'"[21] Efros' interpretation "came from history, not from a few years at acting school," as Richard Eder, a distinguished drama critic of *The New York Times*, once said about the performance of another East European, the Czech actor Jan Triska.[22] It is this aspect of his *cultural psyche* that contributed decisively to Efros' directorial choices—just as their membership from birth of the WEIRD tribe contributed to Zeffirelli's and Nunn's.

Genetically transmitted 'ancestral wisdom' as well as temperament therefore play a major role in shaping our personalities. In psychology it is now generally agreed that mature personalities are stable over long periods of time. The so-called 'dispositional' perspective, arguing that we possess relatively stable inclinations (or dispositions) and that these cause us to act consistently and fairly predictably in different situations, is now dominant.

Personalities are therefore usually described by means of psychological traits: resilient or resigned; impetuous or deliberate; gregarious or restrained; etc. Over

[20] Matthew Sayed, "Prigozhin's Progress Is No Surprise in a Nation with Stockholm Syndrome," *Sunday Times*, June 25, 2023, https://www.thetimes.com/uk/article/yevgeny-prigozhins-progress-is-no-surprise-in-a-nation-with-stockholm-syndrome-7vordgzjm.

[21] Waldemar Januszczak, "For 66 Poles, Windrush Was the End of a Terrible Odyssey," *Sunday Times*, June 25, 2023, https://www.thetimes.com/comment/article/for-66-poles-empire-windrush-terrible-odyssey-comment-ztlstsk36.

[22] Richard Eder, "Theater: Serban's Workshop *Master and Margarita*," *New York Times*, November 21, 1978, https://www.nytimes.com/1978/11/21/archives/theater-serbans-workshop-master-and-margarita-the-devil-in-moscow.html.

the past quarter of a century, a consensus has emerged around a system of trait classification called the Five-Factor Model or FFM.

> An easy-to-remember acronym for the five factors is OCEAN. This stands for scales of:
> **O**pen/closed to experience
> **C**onscientious/non-conscientious
> **E**xtrovert/introvert
> **A**greeable/non-agreeable
> **N**eurotic/stable

These five factors are then further refined through bipolar and unipolar adjectival scales which reflect each of the overarching factors. The FFM model has been tested for reliability and stability in large populations and is considered to provide a credible tool for assessing personality in a variety of contexts, from the clinic to the workplace.[23] The vocabulary of the FFM has also been tested across diverse cultures, and rating scales translated into German, Japanese, or Chinese found similar factor structures. The five super-traits also predict real-world behaviours: the factors have been shown to weigh heavily on cognitive abilities, the likelihood of success or failure in marriage, performance at work, and even the likely outcomes of heart conditions—all supporting the validity of the model.

Like temperaments, traits are considered to be biologically determined, permanently embedded in our personalities, and very difficult to change through life experiences. I am particularly attracted by the way recent thinking builds on such observations in order to revisit the question: What do personality traits actually do? Polish psychologist Małgorzata Fajkowska claims that the main function of personality traits is to control the way in which we process external stimuli. As living organisms, we are constantly exposed to sensory, emotional, and cognitive prompts and have to react—we are aroused by them, experience cognitive, motor, and motivational changes as a result of this arousal, and are moved to act on these changes. Our temperaments and traits are particularly suited to regulating our reactions. They define what Fajkowska calls the *style* of our behaviors, their "intensity, energy, strength, speed, tempo, fluctuation, mobility."[24] Individuals

[23] Robert R. McCrae and Oliver P. John's, "An Introduction to the Five Factor Model and Its Applications," *Journal of Personality* 60, no. 2 (1992): 175–215 offers a comprehensive view of the evolution and main features of the model. See also Jerry S. Wiggins, ed., *The Five-Factor Model of Personality: Theoretical Perspectives* (New York: Guilford, 1996).

[24] Małgorzata Fajkowska, "Personality Traits: Hierarchically Organised Systems," *Journal of Personality* 86, no. 1 (2017): 36–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12314.

should therefore be described not by whether they possess one or the other of these traits but by their relative intensity. "Cocktails" of traits give each of us our own, unique personality "taste"; in artistic terms, they give individual artists their unique, recognizable "signature tune."

The conclusion of all this seems to be: I am who I am and any changes I might undergo are likely to be superficial and short-lived. This immutable *I* determines how I react to Emily's growth, which interpretation of Irina's character "feels right," and ultimately how I feel about the meanings and import of plays. Agreed, a significant element of deliberation also comes into play. However, it seems that deliberation only goes so far and that the distinctive "voices" of individual actors or directors are shaped just as much, if not more so, by innate traits.

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The accumulation of evidence derived from cognitive science and evolutionary psychology is fast becoming a major disruptor of established understandings of the mechanisms which underpin current mainstream Western acting practice. Granted, there is nothing new in the actual observation that interpretations rely on a mixture of deliberation and intuition. What I think *is* new is the challenge the new psychology poses to our traditional means of accessing and developing that part of the cocktail which we assign to an artist's talent, personality, voice, or taste. If I may return to my starting premise: the act of interpretation involves a balance between pre-reflective processes and deliberate reflection, yet our current practices tend to ignore the first and heavily favor the second.

Historically, in order to describe the choices being made in the rehearsal room, theatre people have used the tools and languages of philosophy, literary criticism, or sociology. From the turn of the last century onward, in order to understand that which was hidden from view and was seemingly inexplicable in our reactions and decisions, we turned to the metaphors of psychodynamics. With its emphasis on early relations as generative of personality, psychoanalysis proved very fruitful in explaining the roots of interpretation. Its seductive message was: "The child is father to the man: by delving into my early experiences, I can understand myself; by extension, I can analyze dramatic characters and situations by constructing coherent backstories for them." To a greater or lesser extent, even the movement-based approaches of, for example, Copeau-Saint-Denis-Lecoq, Laban, or Suzuki eventually turned to the old psychology when questions of motivation and intention arose.

And lest you might think that such approaches have by now become old hat, here is the well-known actor Hayley Attwell,[25] speaking about her practice as recently as the winter of 2023:

> I think my entry point . . . is [to ask] what is the core wound? I find that the core wound that is established early on in life, in those formative years, does . . . set the trajectory of the choices that we make and the relationships that we build in our adult life. And that can give me an internal struggle, an inner conflict which I find makes the character come alive and also gives the character a foundation from which choices can be made. [26]

Attwell's is but one example amongst myriad actors, directors, and screen writers relying on psychodynamic tropes to explain and create character. There is nothing wrong with this approach in itself. Regardless of the challenges posed to the use of psychodynamics in the clinic, fictional characters are artificial constructs and we may profitably continue to dissect them with the instruments bequeathed us by Freud, Jung, and Fromm: concern ourselves with the significance of General Gabler's pistols, with how many children Lady Macbeth might have had, or with the impact a domineering, successful actress and her lover, a famous writer, might have on a young, sensitive aspiring playwright. The established ways through which, in the Stanislavskian rehearsal room, we routinely explore the *character's* unconscious desires, motivations, and sense memories will continue to be useful; as in the examples with which I introduced my topic, open artists will assay a variety of interpretations, even if these do not 'sit right' with them.

At the same time, we also need to take into account the fact that different people can react very differently to otherwise similar 'core wounds' (separation, trauma, parental neglect, sibling rivalry, etc., etc.). What if the basis on which choices are made—for character and actor alike—is not the Freudian core wound but certain fundamental features of the personality which precede it? The core wound is a feature of the play: To go back to Irina and her siblings, the actors might consider that, as Chekhov's text strongly indicates, their core wound was inflicted by the pressure of measuring up to the expectations and aspirations of their ambitious father ("Andrey: Thanks to Father my sisters and

[25] A well-known British-American stage and screen actor, Hayley Attwell may be more familiar to international audiences as agent Peggy Carter in several Marvel films and an eponymous television series, and as the female lead in *Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning* (2023).

[26] Hayley Attwell and Jesse Burton, "Creating Character: Hayley Atwell and Jesse Burton's Artists on Artists," discussion occasioned by the Frans Hals retrospective at the National Gallery in London, YouTube, https://youtube/PzgsexqB604, accessed January 15, 2024.

I know French, German, and English. Irina knows Italian as well. But what it cost us!"[27]), damning them to lead the life of outsiders and crave escape from their barbarous provincial town. Yet one actor playing Irina will decide that that same core wound inflicted in childhood has caused the adult woman to become soft, vulnerable, shy, and diffident; another that, on the contrary, her Irina will be tough, confident, outgoing, bossy, and imperious. Why? The answer lies not in the text, but in the personality traits of the actor and director. I am arguing, therefore, that we also need to enable artists to recognize early in their development that the obdurate tug of temperament and personality will draw each and every one of us toward one of these interpretations, though not necessarily forsaking all others. I do not think such a recognition is a limitation; on the contrary, to be able to recognize one's unique artistic *voice*, develop it, and expand it is a source of profound satisfaction. But one must first be enabled to recognize it. Yet when it comes to selecting, training, and guiding actors and directors in the light of recent discoveries in evidence-based psychology, our established approaches are likely to prove lacking.

What are we to do about this challenge? One, very popular, reaction is simply to ignore it. As one often hears, the theatre and screen industries are thriving, and training institutions that serve them do an excellent job, so let's not mess with what we have. Yet others, without negating the evident successes of our profession, are equally justified in pointing to the somewhat haphazard nature of the processes to which artists are subjected. We often make mistakes in the casting, training, and guidance offered to actors, directors, and writers. When it comes to an artistic formation, we give enormous weight to *experience*—it is experience that we can understand and upon which we can draw. But we now know that our psychological make-up includes experiences which have been filtered through genetically-based force-fields, such as temperaments and historical influences, and that these in turn shape our artistic decisions in ways we find impossible to discern with the tools to which we have become accustomed. I felt I should share these thoughts because I think our rehearsal rooms and training academies have reached an impasse in their core endeavors—interpreting dramatic material and educating the interpreters.

The question before us seems to be whether to ignore the new psychology altogether, or strive to establish new terminologies and concepts in line with today's science. Should we acknowledge the genetically-based aspects of personality and their role in shaping both early talent and life-long artistic development?

[27] Chekhov, "Three Sisters," 207.

If so, should we, for example, alter the way we think about which actors may be suited for what type of acting—not least in the choices they make between 'personality' and 'transformation' acting—and thus adapt both our training and our casting processes to be more individualized? What of the implications for educating writers and directors?

It is now almost 20 years since cognitive insights were introduced into the discourse on traditional acting methodologies. During these years, the literature on cognition and acting has grown steadily. Yet the impact on our training institutions remains negligible: cognitive-based approaches are either confined to academia or, if understood in the conservatoire at all, set to one side for pragmatic reasons. Moreover, the contemporary psychology of individual differences is both complex and continuously evolving. I cannot see it being easily reduced to a few core metaphors and thus assimilated, half-understood, into artistic practices in the way in which certain core concepts of psychodynamics have been. There is still a lot to do before temperaments or the Five Factor Model become as entrenched in our acting schools as sense memory or 'actioning' are.[28]

This leads me to a scary thought, with which I will conclude: the solution may be that institutions dedicated to educating and training artists will need to involve expert psychologists in their work. I know how contentious this thought will be. In the current climate, resistance from those running training institutions will be fierce, and nowhere more so than in the conservatoires of the Anglo-Saxon West, on both sides of the Atlantic, in which at present sociological considerations have overwhelmed all other attempts at innovation and change, and where psychology-based approaches to acting have come to be treated with forbidding mistrust. Dare one hope that the acting academies and theatres of Eastern Europe, whence historically so much innovation and renewal originated, might be the ones to rise to this challenge? I am not naïve enough to think that calls such as these, in academic journals, will carry a lot of weight. Yet I feel that if there is a reed-thin chance, then we ought to grasp it. I and like-minded colleagues certainly hope to flesh out the arguments in *Stanislavsky and Psychology*, the book I am currently editing for Routledge.

[28] To the best of my knowledge, the Five Factor Model, for example, is yet to make any impact on the analysis of theatre characters. It would be interesting to see what results its application in this area might yield. It will be said that some of the terms used by the FFM are more suited to the clinic or the HR department than the stage. But its proponents are keen to emphasize the strong kinship that exists between their scientific terms and everyday concepts. Neuroticism need not mean psychiatric disorder, only nervousness, Extrovert is simply another word for energetic and enthusiastic, O might just as well represent originality, and A stand for affection. The model appeals because it dovetails with everyday experiences. The easy-to-grasp associations of its core terminology have given it considerable communicative power and have contributed to its popularity.

Having said that, a—potentially even more difficult—objection is likely to be raised by the very psychologists we would seek to co-opt. The concept of personality described through traits is currently being challenged. Ezequiel Di Paolo's oft-cited phrase about personalities having more in common with a hurricane than with statues encapsulates the skepticism evinced both towards a view of personality as linear, and the tools, principally self-reporting through questionnaires, that are used to describe it. This is not the place to engage in this complex debate. But it *is* the place to say: in our practical endeavors we crave certainties; if we are to turn current approaches on their heads with the lever of cognitive science, we need to anchor our fulcrum into some solid ground. We will need to take sides!

Beyond the resistance from administrators of art schools and conservatoires on which I touched earlier, I do not underestimate the reluctance of both educators and psychologists to engage in such partnerships. Cross-domain fertilization may look seductive, but its charm is likely to fade when faced with the undoubted effort needed to accommodate people who think differently.[29] I also want to be clear about what I am saying and especially about what I am not saying: I am arguing for the involvement of specialist psychologists, in particular those working on creativity, *in support* of those educating and training artists. I am not arguing, however, for relinquishing the educators' responsibility to guide emerging artists onto the often-arduous path to self-knowledge and artistic accomplishment. The creative process is too complex and too intuitive to be reduced to scientific nomenclatures and models; experienced teachers will have to remain at the helm. At the same time, to continue to ignore scientific advances in the psychology of personality is an act of solipsism just as absurd as that of scientists ignoring our creative insights.

Simply ignoring the new science remains tempting! However, I would suggest this is a counsel of despair. Alternatively, we could embrace the science, make allies, and reset our thinking about who we are and how we function as artists. ■

[29] When I raised this point at a recent international conference (*Stanislavsky and Psychology*, The S-Word and University of Malta, November 13–14, 2024), the neuropsychologist Steven Brown made the interesting observation that a useful way to attract more psychologists to collaborate with acting schools was for the latter to consider phenomena of role-playing in everyday life—what he called "proto-acting"; see Steven Brown, "Proto-Acting as a New Concept: Personal Mimicry and the Origins of Role Playing," *Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.3390/h6020043.

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VLADIMIR MIRODAN

PhD, FRSA is Emeritus Professor of Theatre, University of the Arts London. Trained on the Directors Course at Drama Centre London, he has directed over 50 productions in the UK as well as internationally and has taught and directed in leading drama schools in the UK, the US, France and Israel. His research interests revolve around issues of acting psychology, in particular as this relates to the neuropsychology of gesture and posture; while most of his published work is concerned with cognitive approaches, he returns occasionally to his first interest—psychodynamic views of the acting process.