

Thai Actors and Their Methods of Characterization

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Received 13 June 2019 | Revised 30 March 2020 | Accepted 13 April 2020

Abstract

This article discusses findings from interviews with 26 Thai actors on their methods of characterization. It was found that Thai actors have two concepts regarding their style and beliefs towards acting: (1) good acting naturally portrays normal characters in a realistic manner, (2) a major component of acting is ‘becoming the character.’ Participants reported needing a character’s actions to be logical, and therefore need to thoroughly analyze a character so they can completely transform into the character. Methods of characterization were found to be consistent with approaches in the works of Stanislavski. This is in part due from Pantoomkomol (1995)’s import of these ideas into Thai performing arts contexts. However, it was also found that participants’ methods were still flexible, and a view of characters as unique was prevalent. In sum, actors were found to focus on the characters rather than the methods as the best means to communicate with an audience.

Keywords

Thai Actors – characterization

1 Introduction

Acting is a communicative art form in which performers serve as a medium through which the thoughts and actions of characters are delivered. Acting, therefore, is also a tool through which stories are told through the body and portrayed emotions of the actors. According to Stanislavski (1936), the supreme objective of acting is not only “to create the life of human spirit, but also to express it in a beautiful artistic form” (Stanislavski 1936, 14). Good acting also helps audiences understand the plot and appreciate the message of the theatrical work. Therefore, acting also has social value in that it holds the power to guide people in understanding themselves and others. An actor who understands this broader role will approach their craft with a level of seriousness which allows them to portray a natural and life-like character (Pantoomkomol 1995, 20).

Beginning the discussion on Thai actor's methods, Pantoomkomol (1994) first explored issues related to acting among Thai actors and discovered that acting and performing arts were perceived as ‘mysterious’, ‘subjective’, and ‘vague’. Pantoomkomol (1994) further questioned Thai actors’ conception of acting and concluded that the major issue with Thai actors was the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the word ‘acting’. This led to troublesome practices and other problems regarding acting, such as questions as to whether acting could even be taught or improved. However, acting remains a popular occupation in Thailand despite some negative views in times past. At one time in Thai society being an actor could have negative connotations, but eventually actors were viewed as no different from entertainers who danced and sang to make a living (Issaraporn, 1986). Further validation of actors can be seen with the founding of performing arts departments at major Thai universities from 1971–1993, namely the Dramatic Arts Department at Chulalongkorn University, and Performing Arts Departments at Thammasat University and Srinakarinwirot University. Two other key stages of the acknowledgment of acting as art in Thailand include Pantoomkomol (1995)’s publication of *The Art of Acting* as well as the *Thailand National Film Association Awards* among many other awards for film, television, and theater (Porawan 2013). Further need for high-level acting was also signaled with Thailand’s 2013 switch to a digital broadcast system. With 24 of the 60 approved channels being entertainment

related channels, the demand for television dramas only continues to grow (Panadda 2013) and reflects the growing consumption by Thai audiences. As a result, the current state of dramatic performing arts in Thailand is one where there is competition and expectations are high among Thai actors, and there is a greater interest achieving life-like natural acting throughout Thailand's entertainment industry.

This article is a report on several interviews with successful Thai actors. Using a two-part questionnaire, the survey was conducted during 2017–2019 and aimed to investigate not only how Thai actors defined the art of acting, but how their ideas, style and practices have evolved. Based on the classical Stanislavskian conception of acting methods and early research on the Thai context by Pantoomkomol, this article aims to frame discussion of Thai actors' methods in terms within the scholarly tradition of the dramatic arts.

2 Literature Review

Stanislavski's conception of acting is based on the idea that realistic acting derives from action. The actor's task is to find a connection between the character's thoughts, feelings, and actions by being in the moment and believing a given situation so that they can naturally portray the character's behavior. Summing up the aim of this approach he says, "if you take all these internal processes and adapt them to the spiritual and physical life of the person you are representing, we call that living the part" (1936, 14). According to Hapgood (1963), it is this conception of acting which drove Stanislavski to document his practices as an actor and to systemize the process which he held as the most effective way to create a character.

Stanislavski's 'early years' (1911–1916) relay a belief that acting consists mainly of processes dependent on an actor's feelings. Therefore, he concentrated on psychological practices which would allow the actor to express a role's required emotional content. Sawoski (2016) points out that Stanislavski's focus on emotions was also inspired by the French psychologist Theodule Ribot's idea of 'affective memory'. It was not until his 'later years' (1934–1938) that we would see Stanislavski divert his training methods towards 'the actor's tools', i.e., physical actions composed through use of the body and voice. It is during this later period that he described the actor's transformation into a believable character as being established through a connection between the character's mental state and physical actions. For Stanislavski, it was only then that realistic acting that reflected the complex nature of a character could be achieved. This is especially clear in his remarks that, "external action acquires

inner meaning and warmth from inner feeling, and the latter finds its expression in physical terms" (Stanislavski 1936, 127). This realization eventually led to development of a system by Stanislavski which included notably more serious and diligent training. However, since acting is an art derived from an individual creative actor, he was keen to admit that "there are no formulas...on how to become a great actor, or how to play this or that part. It is made up of steps towards the true creative state of an actor on the stage" (1936, 158). Still though, Stanislavski's method can be described as one which focuses on both the mind and the body, and one where it is only when the actor is thoroughly in tune with his tools that they can achieve a state which allows for a realistic performance. The ultimate goal of this state is to provide a natural representation of a character who makes believable choices.

It is impossible to cover all of Stanislavski's system in the space of this article. Consequently, I focus mainly on *An Actor Prepares* (1936), *Building a Character* (1948), and *Creating a Role* (1957). Each of these works are written as dialogues between a director and an actor. In *An Actor Prepares*, the meaning of acting is discussed, while introducing oral interpretation as a first exercise for actors. The sequel, *Building a Character*, explains how actors can build up a physical characterization by expressing analytical information through voice and movement. Finally, within *Creating a Role*, Stanislavski can be seen discussing in detail how a well-rounded character can be developed. In this book he uses case studies from three plays, namely: Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Gogol's *The Inspector General* to illustrate how to apply the method in practice. Expected results for each exercise are also discussed along with excerpts from one of his biographies, *An Actor's Handbook* (Hapgood, 1963) which includes an alphabetical compilation of statements on aspects of acting.

Aiming for sincerity in acting, Stanislavski devoted himself to finding the best method for actors, and there have since been numerous articles and notes which allow the public to study his methods (Ruthel 2010). Contemporary study of Stanislavski's method can be classified into two periods: Stanislavski's 'early years' and a 'post-Stanislavski era.' The concept of 'emotional memory' is the key term which contrasts each period. Stanislavski's early years focused on how emotional memory shapes the character, whereas post-Stanislavskian writings explore how emotional memory can relate to physical actions (Sawoski 2016). Stanislavski's later writings are best exemplified in *The Method of Physical Actions* (1938).

2.1 *Stanislavski's Early Years: Psychology and Emotional Memory*

Early on, Stanislavski focused on both conscious and subconscious factors. In his own words, he frames the dichotomy as,

We find the solution in an oblique instead of a direct approach. In the soul of human beings there are certain elements which are subject to consciousness and will... this calls for extremely complicated creative work. It is called a part under the control of consciousness, but a much more significant proportion is subconscious and involuntary

STANISLAVSKI 1936, 13–14

Therefore, for Stanislavski, both conscious and subconscious tools can allow actors to analyze a character's actions. Though at first pass use of these concepts was abstract, Stanislavski further developed his ideas and cultivated a concrete practice, while providing reference to Ribot's concept of 'affective memory' (Sawoski 2016). The resulting practice was one in which exercises using emotional memories – those regenerated by past experiences and sensations – could be used by actors.

Stanislavski believed that an actor's emotions were a vital factor to a believable performance, and moreover he believed that actors could be trained to evoke emotions through memories of past events. Especially significant in triggering emotions is the role of sensation. He remarks that "Our senses of smell, taste, and touch are useful, and even sometimes important, in our art, their role is merely auxiliary and for the purpose of influencing our emotional memory..." (1936, 170). It is interesting to note with this point here, that Pantoomkomol (1994)'s research on Thai actors found that many had mistook this technique for creating a particular emotion, whereas the main aim of the approach would allow actors to intentionally stir up any needed emotion in a performance. Surprisingly, despite being based on a fundamental misunderstanding, this technique was widely accepted as widespread practice in the industry. Pantoomkomol (1994), however, claims that this is a major misinterpretation, and that emotions are results of actions and not vice versa.

Emotional memory is thought to work differently for each person. However, training for actors aims to pinpoint the source of emotions while not necessarily needing to show the emotion. Stanislavski (1936) argued that distinct emotional memories are built out of our five senses, and that actors could discover an "emotional trigger" by using sensory triggers of a past event. The method is a careful and structured observation of a past event. Basically, an actor is asked to visualize the people, places, and things associated with a memory in terms

of each of the five senses, and then use these smaller memories as a prompt for the broader emotion. In obtaining the actual trigger, actors must be careful to specify the source of those emotions, and it is helpful to be very specific, e.g., which moment, object, or scent triggered the emotion.

Being able to recall these feelings and emotions is a useful technique. But the technique alone does not mean an actor can prepare all the emotions and deliver them as such, for the bare technique itself is not acting but more so just mere recall and presentation of the emotion. Of this approach, Pantoomkomol says, "When actors resort to building those predominant emotions, or when directors coach actors to build on the emotions, it could lead the actors astray and result in overacting or emotionalism. This could destroy the art of acting when actors succumb to hysterical acting" (1994, 109). Therefore, actors must also learn to be in control of this technique, so that they can be aware of when to use it, while not overusing it.

2.2 *Post-Stanislavski: the Method of Physical Actions*

To achieve believable acting, actors must use both inner (i.e., emotional) and outer (i.e., physical) resources. Actors cannot depend only on their thoughts. They must use their physical actions to communicate or persuade audiences, or in Stanislavski's words,

To play truly means to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel. And act in unison with your role. If you take all these internal processes and adapt them to the spiritual and physical life of the person you are representing, we call that living the part. This is supremely significant in creative work.

STANISLAVSKI 1936, 14

Thus, the 'physical method' focuses on finding the connection between actors' inner thoughts and outer action. In this view, thoughts or feelings which cannot be transferred into logical actions are meaningless. Exercises in this period often focus on relaying inner factors to the outer ones through a seeking of concrete physical actions. Stanislavski pointed out that the most important aspect of learning about the character is their 'through line of action.' He states, "If you play without a through line of action, you are merely going through certain disjointed exercises of parts of the system" (Stanislavski 1936, 275). Hence, actors must be able to define the 'through line of action' of a given role to thoroughly understand the character's thoughts and portray the character as intended by the writer.

The search for a through line of action begins with reading and analyzing the character from the script. Then the actor considers the character's objective in each scene individually and then together as summing up as the through line of the character. However, actors must remain open as to not let the script confine their imagination, and instead should use it as an outline to begin a search for compelling and concrete actions. Key for the method of physical actions are the following terms/components of the system, namely: *action*, *objective*, *concentration*, *imagination*, *physical creation*, and *voice creation*. The following is a brief characterization of these components of Stanislavski's system and the language used in discussing them.

'Action' refers to making sure all actions happening onstage have a clear intended outcome. Actions stem from inner feelings based on the character's logic. Actors may sometimes mistake busyness for actions. The key point, however, is the positing of a goal. Without a clear objective, a movement is not an action, or as Stanislavski puts it, "On the stage there cannot be, under any circumstances, action which is directed immediately at the arousing of a feeling for its own sake" (1936, 40). With this conception of actions, even though an actor may be motionless, this does not mean they are without action; sometimes being still is meaningful. The key to understanding a character's action is to acknowledge the character's objectives.

'Objective' is the need which drives the character to act. Without objectives, there is no action. Although the actors may look busy, busyness itself does not necessarily communicate a clear or meaningful objective. To achieve a realistic portrayal, before making any actions, actors must articulate a concrete objective of the character so that the action is goal oriented. For example, if an actor relies on an abstract noun as their objective, such as 'a mother's love' or 'duties to one's father,' false acting may occur. Actors may indeed express an emotion, but it will be without an objective action.

Stanislavski believes understanding a character through active objective analysis (in terms of verbs) throughout the work will lead to the discovery of the through line of action; this is the core of the character. When in doubt, whether this is the right choice that the character will make, the core understanding will keep these choices in line. Finding the core of the character is compared to 'taking hold of the character's heart.' The next step is to jump in and enjoy the adventure of bringing the character to life. With a clear understanding of the objectives of the character, all behavior can be transformed into actions.

'Concentration' is important for keeping actors in the moment, i.e., focusing on current situations, partners, and surroundings. Concentration keeps the actor in the present and keeps the action balanced. It is typical for actors to want

to deliver the best performance, make the best choice and express the right tone, but these thoughts forbid the actor from being present. Concentration is key to discarding worry, stage fright, and the fear of being judged. When the actor concentrates on what is happening in front of them, they will forget to worry about everything else and deliver a sincere action with unfeigned emotions – or as put by Stanislavski, “In order to get away from the auditorium you must be interested in something on the stage” (1936, 75). Concentration anchors the actor to the given circumstances so they can receive and transmit emotions and actions genuinely. Only by concentrating on the given circumstance outlined by the script is the actor fully able to be present in the moment. Concentration assists actors in seeing and hearing as the character. This then can be integrated with imagination.

‘Imagination’ is vital in reproducing the sensations needed to create the character. Stanislavski says, “Every movement you make on the stage, every word you speak, is the result of the right life of your imagination” (1936, 71). Imagination plays a big part in creating a well-rounded and realistic character, and when an actor takes on a role, he needs to imagine the unknown, the unseen and the unheard. Imagination is applied to acting through adding a big “IF” to any details left out of the script. Actors must use their five senses to launch into the imagined circumstances, for example, their inner eyes will see the faces of the people, the outline of their bodies, objects, and places – while the ears will hear music and sounds will activate the emotions and sensations reinstalled by the memories. Through this method actors can discover fascinating details and aspects of the characters. Speaking on imagination Stanislavski also adds, “The aim of the actor should be to use his technique to turn the play into a theatrical reality. In this process, imagination plays by far the greatest part” (1936, 54).

Strongly emphasized in the second half of his system, Stanislavski insists that the actor’s training is not complete without a focus on ‘physical creation.’ These are simple and mundane exercises involving repetition and observation. For instance, the actor can dress the character up according to his imagination. By allowing the outfit, shoes, accessories, and make up to influence the character’s movement and daily routine, the actor may discover compelling details, or after being transformed by the costume, the actor may improvise on a short scenario and observe how their body reacts. Actors are asked to make notes on how the body moves, the speed, the tempo, and the characteristics of the movement shaped by the constraints. Creating physical characters not only requires some visible transformation, but it also initiates changes from the actor’s personality and logic.

Words convey meaning, feeling, and attitude, and for Stanislavski “to speak is to act”. A key part of the system, searching for the character’s voice is another exercise to build creative and complex characters. Stanislavski’s voice training or ‘voice creation’ begins with the text. Actors read and analyze the text thoroughly to uncover subtext hidden in the dialogues. Subtext is key to adding variation to the dialogues. Through intonation and pauses, expression, tempo and rhythm, actors can convey the essence of the character. In addition to effective communication, listening is an essential technique to aid natural and realistic acting, or as Stanislavski puts it, “To hear is to see what is spoken of, to speak is to draw the visual images” (Stanislavski 1949, 101). Active listening allows the actors to focus on being present, while deep listening enables the actors to react naturally and communicatively.

In summary, ideas from both Stanislavski’s early years and the post-Stanislavski period focused on ‘physical creation’ offer fundamental training in characterization through both mental and physical exercises. Although ideas here are well-acknowledged in broader contexts, Pantoomkomol (1994) found that problems in modern plays in Thailand were the result of Thai actors’ misinterpreting the term ‘acting’, and this in turn led to unnatural acting. She also found that focusing on the characters and not being present in the moment also results in fake and stiff acting. Addressing these issues, Pantoomkomol (1995)’s *The Art of Acting* (1995), published in Thai, allowed actors to understand and explore new modern acting styles based on Stanislavski’s method, with chapters focusing on the meaning of acting while highlighting the need of being sincere. For example, when she says, the key is “to act with sincerity is the most important regardless of genre, style and period” (Pantoomkomol 1995, 1). Basing her discussion on Stanislavski’s ideas, Pantoomkomol deserves credit for Thai contemporary actors’ current understanding of their craft, despite many modern actors not being familiar with the source material.

3 Research Methodology

This article is part of a 2020 qualitative research project titled “The Acting Process of Thai Actors” (Praditthaen 2020). The research was conducted during 2017–2019 and aimed to investigate how successful Thai actors have evolved in terms of acting concepts, and to look at how acting method concepts influence their acting style. The objectives of this study were the following: (1) to examine the ideas and beliefs regarding ‘acting’ and (2) to examine the acting procedures of Thai actors in film, television, and stage. The survey was conducted through interviews (appendix 1) with semi-structured questionnaires

(appendix 2) based on the hypothesis that acting procedures and training are influenced by ideas and beliefs. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part I focused on personal ideas and concepts regarding good acting and what characteristics of communicative acting consists of. Participants were free to discuss openly. Part II invited the participants to reflect on personal experiences, problems, and solutions. The questionnaires were based on Stanislavski's concepts and Pantoomkomol (1995). The questionnaire was submitted for approval to specialists in acting, production, and psychiatry prior to the interview.

Choice of participants was based on Judges et al. (1995)'s model of personality and career success. All participants met the following four criteria: (1) they had experience in film, television, and stage acting, (2) they had been a full-time actor in Thailand for no less than 20 years, (3) they must have been active in the entertainment industry up until 2017, (4) they had received awards for acting by a recognized organization. The participants consisted of 26 Thai actors: 14 males and 12 females aged between 38–79 years old. Most of the participants (53%) were between 40–55 years of age. All the participants had been performing for more than 20 years covering three types of film, television, and stage. However, 58% of the participants were television actors. In terms of education, 57% of the participants held a bachelor's degree. But, in terms of acting training, most of the participants learnt from working with directors and independent studies, whereas the rest of the participants had learnt from acting coaches or had a degree in performing arts. From the preliminary data, a working hypothesis was that Thai actors' beliefs and ideas were influenced by Stanislavski's concepts both in theory and in practice.

4 Results

4.1 *Part I Thai actors' Understanding of "Acting"*

The participants of the study were found to have a better understanding of 'acting' compared to earlier Thai actors (Pantoomkomol 1994). The Thai actors interviewed for this project (Praditthaen 2020) could confidently describe their belief and idea towards 'acting'. They all emphasized that good acting is 'sincere acting,' and that acting is an action catered to communicating the character's needs. They also agreed that actors have a responsibility to be the character and tell the story. Reflecting on good acting, the participants explained that good acting must be sincere and express emotions from within naturally. Participants agreed that 'actions' are logical, and that there must be no pretentiousness or overacting. This view can be seen for example when Participant 8, said, "I don't act. I believe I am. I don't pretend to be. I just be," or with a

response from Participant 20, “To act means to do. So, actors are doers. When you have this in mind, you don’t have to pretend to do or to be.”

The interviewees pointed out that being sincere and natural is the definition of good acting. Being sincere and natural includes behaving normally, expressing emotions and actions like people in their daily life, and reacting to what is happening instinctively. Participants felt that sincerity brings out ‘fresh,’ ‘unintended,’ ‘unexpected,’ or ‘true’ feelings either from within or through reacting to the circumstances of the scene. When asked to define ‘acting,’ participants stressed the importance of portraying the character. Many of the actors saw themselves as a ‘medium,’ one which is ready to adapt, mentally and physically to portray a believable character. Consider a comment such as this, “To act is to be someone else. By not being yourself, you learn and understand many other lives apart from your own” (Participant 13). Specifically citing Pantoomkompol (1995) one participant said, “You get a taste of other people’s lives by becoming a character...in Sodsai Pantoomkompol’s book, she said we must believe in the magic ‘if’ and when you do, you walk into the scene, you become a character, when faced with the situations, you react naturally. It’s a magical feeling,” (Participant 4).

Beyond seeing themselves as a medium between the character and the audience, participants also view the finest acting as coming from the actor being able to adapt and transform into any character completely, leaving no trace of the actor’s true self, such as in the response, “When I take on a role, it’s as if I am given a chance to bring that character to life. I want nothing more than the audience to wholeheartedly believe in the character” (Participant 24). Some participants were able to characterize their role as a medium between the character and the audience with specific metaphors, such as in the following,

Being an actor is like being a house available for rent. One day when a tenant moves in then you slowly decorate the place. And when they move out, just like you are done being this character, you can slowly clean up the house. If the actor does not know how to clean the house, his acting will become automatic. Today the director tells you to be mad, tomorrow you must laugh, the day after you cry. Today you play the good guy, tomorrow you play a hooker. Your head will be full. And if you don’t clear your head, you will develop a pattern. But you cannot have the patterns. We, humans, are all unique.

PARTICIPANT 26

In the end, it was found that in seeking the participants’ understanding of ‘acting’ they often spoke of successful actors being ones who were willing to go as

far as they could both mentally and physically in order to bring a believable and convincing character alive to the audience.

4.2 *Part 11 How Thai Actors' Beliefs Result in Methods of Characterization*

This survey found that Thai actors preferred an internal process which emphasizes the character's mental state and use of psychoanalysis to motivate the character's action. This corresponds with Stanislavski's early years concepts which focus on characters' thoughts and feelings. To become a believable and realistic character, many actors thought that they must acknowledge the character's background, upbringing, and environment, along with conscious and subconscious factors which might contribute to the character's behavior. Many participants also added that if an actor chose to employ this method, they must commit physically and mentally to a search for the essence of the character in order to convey the emotions convincingly.

Methods focusing on transforming to an 'inner realism' begin with deep analysis of the character. The actor must list out all the differences between himself and the character and focus on those clashes. These then serve as the materials for the transformation. The bigger the contrast, the more committed the actor must be. Since decisions and actions are influenced by a character's background and environment, actors must invest in decoding the underlying logic of the actions laid out by a script. For example, when faced with a character with extreme psychological issues (e.g., ultra-optimism, high anxiety, paranoia, etc.) an actor must seek a possible source for the underlying behavior. By involving themselves in the daily routine of the character, observing people with similar personality traits, or putting themselves in similar situations to the character's, many actors may find a way to tackle potential challenges. If actors are successfully trained to adapt, then in these new surroundings they will naturally develop new behaviors. One participant shared a very crucial method to the mind of a disturbed character's obsession with revenge,

In *Hunt* I changed everything to understand this woman. I changed my routine, my daily lifestyle with my family, and my work. I stopped modeling. I don't dress up or put on any make up. I intentionally let myself go. I want to be obsessed and repeatedly visualize killing 7–8 men. I really want to understand how it will affect my psyche. I want to observe the change within and bring Mathurod [the character] to life.

PARTICIPANT 24

This participant shared that this experiment was very effective, and it is notable that she was also awarded best actor for this role. However, she reported that her mental health suffered from the process, with chronic depression and anxiety resulting from the transformation process. She said that she felt worthless and empty even though the show was long over, and it took some time for her to recondition her mindset and regain confidence. Another participant also used the same method and mentioned similar effects as a result, "I used to do this [the emotional method]. When I play a murderer, I'd sit at home, do nothing, and be obsessed about something. I'd bite my nails. My eyes would roll left and right. It worked. But it's very exhausting since you have to focus a lot. And it could be harmful." (Participant 14). Although the results may prove satisfactory, all the participants pointed out the dangers of this method, especially when the actor may already have some pre-existing psychological trauma. The risk comes from being confined to a negative mindset for a lengthy period of time and letting the character's personality traits take over. No matter how rewarding the result is for the character, for the actor it may be challenging to stay in control and be able to step out of the character after the work is done.

In contrast to these immersive approaches, some actors preferred a more physical approach to create and transform themselves into the character. The physical methods correspond with post-Stanislavskian concepts, but they mainly serve as a secondary assistance to creating the character. Most participants believed that actions were the result of thoughts and reasons, and that it was the character's thought process which paves the way for a series of behaviors. While through the emotional method, actors can totally transform into the character, the physical method is useful when actors can thoroughly understand the character. Furthermore, it can be incorporated with the emotional method to add a realistic touch to the transformation. For example, costumes are useful for adding a dramatic change in the movement and actor's appearance. One participant pointed out how he made a physical transformation to become a realistic character with the following,

When I was in *Soi Pradhana*, I had to wear those pairs of shoes to feel like I'm Mr. Wong. They were very uncomfortable, but they made me feel like Mr. Wong would wear them. I could easily get into character. Whereas in another drama, *Dancing Malee*, I played a sensitive character. I found that when I put on a woman's scarf, it helped me get into character. The costumes made me believe. The touch of the fabric can inspire my movements, the speech and tone of voice.

PARTICIPANT 22

We can see with this example that even something as simple as a character's shoes can help an actor find a character's walk – their rhythm, weight, and pace. The shoes mentioned in the comment above highlight how a physical factor led to the discovery of a certain behavior. Additionally, the participant also said a scarf allowed them to discover a feminine side of a character. Another similar example comes from a participant who used a character's daily routine (which differed from the actor's personal experience). He said, "I dress like my characters would dress. When I play a fisherman, I only wear fisherman trousers. I live on an island and sleep outdoors. I spent a week living like a fisherman in order to understand how they feel." (Participant 1). Despite this actor growing up in an urban environment, and only ever going to the seaside for vacation, Stanislavski's techniques of 'character dressing' and 'observation' both served as techniques which allowed him to get into the role. Furthermore, uses of blended methods may help actors adapt more quickly, such as with the previous participant who felt that he would not be able to fully understand a fisherman, so he needed to take the time to observe how fishermen live and spend some time in a similar environment. While his personal experience was different, immersing himself into an unfamiliar environment was a shortcut to getting into the character.

Another actor who had to portray a character who had undergone vocal cord operation reported taking voice lessons to explore other pitches and tones of voice. Their process, as reported in the following excerpt from the interview, brings Stanislavski's 'voice creation' component to mind. He said, "For *Ong Bak*, my character has a hole in his throat. He talks one word at a time. I had to practice talking like that for a while until it became natural. I use a high pitch with a lot of wind. I had to rehearse a lot until it became second nature to me and convincing. Otherwise, it would look pathetic" (Participant 25). Because the character's voice was projected differently, the actor observed real patients with this condition and redesigned his speech by adjusting the pronunciation and managing to find the most natural choice for this character.

An anecdotal observation from this study is that all the participants, being successful actors, are honest with themselves. They were all comfortable in stating their strengths but were also not afraid to admit their weaknesses, especially when it comes to past mistakes which became valuable lessons. It is especially important for actors to know themselves and to be able to objectively illustrate their strong points as well as their flaws, their likes and dislikes, including what works and does not work for them. As emphasized in Stanislavski (1935)'s diagram on the first steps on actor's training, to qualify as a good actor, one must know oneself. Expanding this some, what this means is that to effectively choose which tools to use for characterization, the actor

must have a clear understanding of themselves and their materials. This helps them to find a balance between inner/emotional methods and outer/physical methods. Overall, the participants of this study believe that both methods cannot be separated, but that the actor must ultimately monitor this balance. By sharing the details of their characterization systematically, it is evident that time is a key factor to choosing methods for getting into character. Another aspect which the actors take into consideration when choosing the method is the differences between the actor and the character. However, the paramount goal of creating a realistic, sincere, natural, and convincing character remains.

5 Discussion

Findings from participant interviews showed that the participants, Thai actors, have a better understanding of acting than what was previously reported by Pantoomkomol (1994). The sample interviewed here was able to define and detect good acting and choose which methods should be applied to ensure a convincing performance. Moreover, their characterization methods were reminiscent of the ideas of Stanislavski. In the period prior to the publication *The Art of Acting*, (Pantoomkomol 1995) actors and directors in the Thai entertainment industry only focused on the expression of emotion for its own sake, because they believed that emotions were key to portraying a character. Pantoomkomol (1994) says, "The audience are always attracted to the dramatic characters, full of emotions. This leads to the misconception of preparing emotions beforehand" (p.109). Thai actors therefore previously tended to praise actors who could show a lot of emotions, confusing it for a convincing portrayal of a character. However, in this research, it was found that contemporary actors were able to reflect upon their beliefs and develop an understanding of acting which is focused more on the subtleties of creating a natural and realistic character portrayal rather than a purely dramatic one.

Furthermore, ideas and concepts were seemingly relatable to Stanislavski's methods, especially those in the early years which concentrated on psychological and emotional approaches. Ideas and themes connected to these were found throughout the interviewee's responses to the questionnaire. Therefore, it can be assumed that Thai actors have been influenced by Stanislavski's early years methods. Apart from the belief and concepts, Stanislavski's training seems to have been practiced by Thai actors, by participants reports of utilizing both internal and external methods. The internal method corresponds with Stanislavski's emotional methods which focus on how emotions can drive the action, whereas the external method is consistent with a post-Stanislavski's

focus on physical actions which highlight use of the body and voice in portrayal of the character. Moreover, all 26 participants shared a view that characters should be portrayed with sincerity; that is, regardless of the method, the actors all aim to create a convincing and natural character.

Another anecdote from this research is that acting is a tough industry, in that actors risk their mental health and their well-being in exchange for success if they lack an understanding of their limits. The two methods discussed here differ both in the process and the results. The first method delivers satisfactory results; an actor's total transformation appeals to both the actors and audience while offering a sense of freshness. When the audience sees a character with no trace of the actor, this is usually viewed as a successful process of 'getting into the role.' However, there are negative side effects. Actors might focus on the method rather than concentrating on the present moment. This leads to pre-decided actions and reactions of the character in the scene. The problem here is that the audience can also sense planned actions/reactions, and therefore as a scene progresses, this can cause the audience to detach themselves from the characters. This 'premonition of the character' is the biggest downfall of the method and can lead to an unsuccessful characterization.

Another disadvantage of this method is the actor's mental health is at risk. Jumping into the characters' thought process and psyche can cause permanent damage to the actor's well-being in the form of depression, especially when negative life experiences are not monitored carefully. This point has been made elsewhere in the literature such as in Sawoski (2016)'s statement that "Method actors felt 'personal suffering' as all acting was supposed to be highly personalized. This was because the importance given to the 'true experience' of the actor, required them to dredge out experiences from their past, and use emotions drawn from them as 'substitutes' onstage" (p. 23). While the second method, the physical method, focuses on the external tools or the physical actions, it does not hold such negative mental side effects. Actors can also freely be in the present without constantly worrying about the character. But this can have the effect that the actor and the character are too similar, and the resulting weak characterization cannot engage the audience's belief and attention. In summary, there are potential downsides to both methods.

The traces of Stanislavskian methods in the Thai actors' responses can be attributed in part to Pantoomkomol (1995). Pantoomkomol was trained at UCLA and at that time Stanislavski's works were standard in the US performing arts academy (Bogart 2005). Her publication of *The Art of Acting*, therefore, signals an important milestone in the development of Thai actors' knowledge of these methods. It relayed knowledge about acting systematically in a simple and accessible manner which allowed Thai actors to study, practice, and

improve their acting skills. Stanislavski's methods and techniques are therefore widely adopted by Thai actors, with 69% of the participants reporting having learned from his approach. Beyond this self-reporting his vocabulary and concepts were evident throughout the interviews. This is perhaps due in part to the helpful glossary section in Pantoomkomol (1995) which explains keywords of the field. This has allowed many Thai actors to become accustomed to Stanislavski's methods and practices, despite not having knowledge of the source material. While Stanislavski's method has remained the most well-known and reliable technique among Thai actors, there are some other modern approaches. A recent study (Jariyapun 2018) has even focused on adapting Dhewakul's concept of acting to creating the characters. This is a concept which mixes ballet techniques, Stanislavski's method, and a Buddhist philosophy of mindfulness to allow an actor to get into the character and communicate with the audience. Whatever the approach, audiences are most likely to engage with realistic and natural acting styles, and performances in this style are more likely to receive awards (Patayanon 2013).

6 Conclusion

Thai actors' beliefs and concepts can be categorized into two contexts: the meaning of acting and the goal of acting. In terms of the first context, acting means a series of sincere and natural actions. These actions are unique and logical to each character. As for the goal of acting, the paramount goal is to totally become the character. Actors will transform their personalities, thoughts, beliefs to fit the character's psyche. Actors, therefore, must search for the best approach to transform into the character. There are several concepts and beliefs which inform Thai actors' methods of characterization. Actors begin the process by deep analysis of the character prior to applying a suitable method. Most of the actors participating in this research preferred a mix of exercises from Stanislavski's early years and post-Stanislavskian ideas. However, there seemed to be no fixed formula, and what worked for one actor might not work for another. Additionally, the same outcome should not be expected from applying the same exercise or pattern to a distinctive character. Characters, like people, are often unique. They carry their own lifelong history and experience with their own particular background and upbringing. It is only fitting that Thai actors' method of characterization appears to be relative and flexible.

What is more important than the exercises themselves is the thorough understanding of the character and the ability to select the best approach

for each individual character and convey the essence of the character to the audience. The key to the right method of characterization seems to be a clear understanding of acting methods and human uniqueness. Clarity around these concepts, along with dedication and hard work, are likely to result in a suitable approach to creating a realistic character. Stanislavski's 'early years' methods which insist that creation begins internally with the character's emotions forms the core which drives the character. And evidence of the post-Stanislavski methods of both internal and external exercises were found, in the end, most participant's means of creating a character was found to be more influenced by internal/emotional exercises and it therefore can account for much of successful Thai actors' drive to surrender to the character.

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Appendix

1. Outline for Interview Questions

Note: The questions for the interviews are semi-structured and may vary for each actor.

1 Acting philosophy and beliefs

- 1.1 Who do you look up to as an actor? Why?
- 1.2 What's your philosophy in acting?
- 1.3 Please describe what good acting is in your perspective.
What is the characteristic for good acting?

2. Methodology (3 parts)

2.1 Pre-production preparation

- 2.1.1 Can good acting be acquired by practice? How?
- 2.1.2 How do you practice or improve your acting skills? (Continued from 2.1.1)
For instance, do you take acting classes or lessons?
Do you practice by observation or from working in the industry?
- 2.1.3 What's your secret for being an actor?
- 2.1.4 How do you prepare yourself for a role?
- 2.1.5 What's the most difficult part of the pre-production process?
- 2.1.6 Prior to performance, how do you prepare yourself?
Do you analyze or interpret the script?
- 2.1.7 How do you work on characterization?
- 2.1.8 What's the most memorable role you have played?
- 2.1.9 What are the factors which made your portrayal of that character outstanding?
- 2.1.10 Pianists practice by playing the scales, warming ups the hands, listening to the songs, and read the music. How do actors practice?
- 2.2 Performance and production: internal and external
- 2.2.1 While performing, have you felt lost?
- 2.2.2 How did you deal or fix that? (Continue from 2.2.1)
- 2.2.3 "Age and life experience are advantages for actors." Do you agree or disagree with this? How? Please elaborate.
- 2.2.4 Have you had accidents while performing? How did you deal with the incident?
- 2.2.5 How do you keep your acting fresh while filming?
Considering multi takes and expected reactions.
- 2.2.6 If your partner cannot react to you in the scene, how do you fix it?

- 2.2.7 What was your most memorable experience of performing?
- 2.2.8 How do you deal with external problems such as costumes, wigs, make up and props?
- 2.2.9 What is the best environment of an actor to work in?
- 2.2.10 What is the best media for you to act in: television, film, or theatre? Why?
- 2.3 **post-production and practice**
 - 2.3.1 How do you evaluate your performance?
 - 2.3.2 How do you get out of the character in case of a long run or long filming period?
- 3. **Problem solving**
 - 3.1 From your experience, what's the most vital problem for actors?
 - 3.2 How would you address this?

2. Questionnaire

Research in THE ACTING PROCESS OF THAI ACTORS

A Dissertation Submitted in partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

DOCTOR OF ARTS (D.A. (Arts and Culture))

Faculty of Fine Arts Srinakharinwirot University 2019

Part I **Personal Information**

Name
Last name
Date of Birth
Age
Sex
Status
Siblings
Address
Ethnic Race
Religion
Interests

Part II **Education and Acting Experience**

- 2.1 High school
- 2.2 Undergraduate Study
- 2.3 Postgraduate Study
- 2.4 Acting course or diploma and Name of Tutor or Institute
- 2.5 Online Study

Part III Work Experience

Rate the importance of each activity in the production from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most critical and 1 the least.

Pre-Production Period begins at the announcement of the role until rehearsal (for plays) and the shooting (for films and TV)
Production Period begins at the rehearsal (for plays) and shooting (for films and TV). This is the period which the actor starts building the character.
Post-Production Period takes place after each performance is delivered (for plays) and the shooting is done for the day (film and TV)

No.	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
1. Pre-Production						
1.1	Script Reading					
1.2	Memorizing the lines					
1.3	Character Analysis					
1.4	Character Analysis with Director					
1.5	Character's Background Research					
1.6	Transformation For example, change of hairstyle, learning a dialect, losing/gaining weight					
1.7	Workshop					
1.8	Getting to know the ensemble and the team					
1.9	Body and Voice Preparation					
1.10	Mind Preparation					
1.11	Rehearsal and scene work					
No	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
2. Production						
2.1	Relaxation					
2.2	Concentration					

No.	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
2.3	Getting into the character's mental and emotional state using the set and scenery					
2.4	Getting into the character 's mental and emotional state using sound and music					
2.5	Getting into the character's mental and emotional state using other characters					
2.6	Getting into the character's mental and emotional state using imagination					
2.7	Getting into the character's mental and emotional state using costumes and make up					
2.8	Listening and reacting					
2.9	Using dialogues to convey emotions					
2.10	Communicating through body language					

No	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
3. post-Production						

- 3.1 Theatre
- 3.1.1 Self-assessment after each performance

3.1.2 Receiving notes from director to work on them

3.1.3 Receiving comments from critics to work on them

3.1.4 Receiving comments from the audience to work on them

3.1.5 Receiving comments from co-actors to work on them

3.1.6 Getting out of character
- 3.2 Film and Television
- 3.2.1 Self-assessment by checking the tapes after each scene

3.2.2 Receiving comments from the director to work on them

No.	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
	3.2.3 Receiving the comments from co-actors to work on them					
	3.2.4 Receiving the comments from the media to work on them					
	3.1.1 Self-assessment after each takes					

No	Activity	5	4	3	2	1
4. Attitude towards acting						
4.1	Talent is important for acting					
4.2	Acting can be learnt and practiced					
4.3	Imagination is key to acting					
4.4	Concentration is key to acting					
4.5	Life experience plays a big part in acting					
4.6	Having a good partner in the scene is critical to your performance					
4.7	Director helps actors understand the character and getting into the mental and emotional state of the character					
4.8	Acting coach helps actors understand the character and getting into the mental and emotional state of the character					