Emotions in Performance: Between Rape and Research Lab

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Abstract
Framed by the narrative of staging and performing a rape, this paper will map the subjective journey of six student research practitioners at a university’s Emotion Lab. The student performers explored their affective bodies through breath and voice as well as conventionalized, realistic and expressive gesture. A series of questions that arose in this context circled around themes such as “awareness,” “contagion,” “fear,” “control,” “containment” and “spillage.” This lead to an investigation of the emotions surrounding (the performed) emotions, for example: “fear.” “Are there emotions you are afraid to express?” “Are you afraid an emotion can overwhelm you?” The immediate relevance of these investigations becomes imminent when undergraduate acting students are asked to perform scenes that deal with emotional extremes: such as staging a rape scene.

The Premise
Like so many acting teachers before, I have been pondering the question of how to prepare student actors to perform extreme emotional states. Last spring I had a conversation on the topic with my colleague, Sandeep Bhagwati, who was working with a group of student performers on Per/Son/Alia, an original, improvisation-based
piece. At the time he was encountering difficulties with the staging of a rape scene. The young woman playing the victim, a second year acting student, was worried that her classmates would identify her as a rape victim outside of the performance context. This fear made it very difficult for her and her partner to find a way into the scene.

[2] Bhagwati’s problem reminded me of issues I had encountered myself several times when directing student productions, which either implied or included rape scenes. The task of performing a scene that was so extreme in content, emotionally challenging, and culturally taboo, pushed student performers to their limits and fundamentally questioned their position towards acting.

[3] Whereas in much of the general repertoire of plays and scenes students actually try to embrace the emotional content, be it positive or negative, in the case of rape it seems that many students, but particularly women have much greater difficulties. Rather than to speculate about the reasons for such fears, I will focus on the acting problem at hand. A rape scene directly confronts the problem of differentiating between “performed” and “felt” emotion, the aesthetic ideals that are attached to such differences, and the student performer’s own emotional and cultural position towards such choices. The student actor seems to be suddenly challenged to decide between play–acting and using a repeatable technique to help her master this unsettling task.

[4] In order to meet the task of performing such an emotionally challenging scene it seems that the student needs to have a clearer understanding of the nature of performed emotions and a technique
that enables her to realize this on stage. Within my realm of experience Richard Schechner’s Rasabox matrix iii enables the student to analyze and perform emotions in very fine shades, whereas in many of the other theater training forms currently taught in North American Undergraduate Training, emotions are not specifically trained or even directly addressed.

[5] The Stanislavski System of course considers emotions but is not really clear about how to train for an emotionally truthful performance. The techniques laid out in “An Actor Prepares” iv are either based on recalling personal memories, on imagination, or on imitation. How to exactly shape or treat the remembered, imagined or imitated emotion is not discussed. Later adaptations of the System, such as Strasberg’s Method v base their emotion work on techniques usually referred to as “emotional recall.” This process is hotly debated for its effectiveness and not many acting teachers are willing to explore the technique in the undergraduate classroom for fear of psychological risks to the students vi. Anne Bogart eliminated emotion as a category from the Viewpoint Training as opposed to Mary Overlie’s original six viewpoints vii. Stephen Wangh, on the other hand, describes clearly in “An Acrobat of the Heart” viii how he works with his students on emotional awareness, yet here too, the translation from training to a repeatable stage technique is not fully developed.

[6] An in depth analysis and comparison between these different training techniques would go too far in this context, in general though, it seems that the actor is more often expected to somehow calibrate emotional expression by defining the circumstances surrounding the emotion, such as character history, given circumstances and
objectives, or to simply follow the performance score, the line of
physical actions. By doing so she/he is expected to “naturally” arrive
at the appropriate emotional expression.

[7] In 2006, I was able to institute an Emotion Laboratory at
Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, with the goal of
investigating the performer’s affective body or, if you will, the
performed, embodied emotion. In the Lab, particular focus was given
to the student actor’s process, the differences between applied acting
methods, and the individual’s particular approach. My hope for the lab
is to further develop an acting tool that allows for a detailed analysis of
emotion processes in performance and a training ground to develop
repeatable performance choices. In the initial phase a group of six
student research assistants, a cameraman, a guest and myself met for
eleven sessions. The two actors who were later to perform the rape
scene in Bhagwati’s piece Per/Son/Alia were among the lab
participants.

[8] In the following I will discuss first the training approach, then
the findings and questions that arose from this investigation and close
with some more thoughts on the rape scene.

**Rasabox Training or Emotion Grid**

For the past twelve years I have been practicing and teaching an
emotion training method called Rasabox Training, first as the member
of a company called East Coast Artists, later as a college professor.
The training method was devised by Richard Schechner in 1994/5,
while working with the company on *The Three Sisters*. The rasabox
training became the basis for the work in the Emotion Lab. The
exercises are directly concerned with the performer’s expression of emotions and her ability to differentiate between affective states. Here, rather than a specific method that propagates a unified style, the actor’s emotional agility is trained.

[10] Aside from Sanskrit dramatic practice as laid out in the performance manual, Natyasastra, Schechner cites the emotion studies by behavioral scientist Paul Ekman and Antonin Artaud’s concept of the actor as the “Athlete of the Emotions” as his other most influential sources in developing the exercises.

[11] Ekman, who edited and annotated the seminal edition of Darwin’s The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, focuses his own research on facial expression, particularly on a group of six basic emotions that he finds to be universally recognizable. In regards to the Rasabox training Ekman’s work seems to offer a contemporary take on the principle of basic emotions and facial expression in some ways relatable to the emotion analysis laid out in the Natyasastra; but rather than to look at the performed emotion, Ekman looks at emotional expression in everyday life.

[12] Artaud suggests in his essay, Affective Athleticism (Un Athlétisme Affectif) that the performer has “a kind of affective musculature which corresponds to the physical localization of feelings.” He stresses the practice of specific breathing patterns for the performer as described in the Cabala. In his opinion the expression of emotions in performance can and should be trained, in ways analogous to the athlete’s training of the muscles.
The concept of rasa is laid out in the *Natyasastra*, it can be translated as “that which is being tasted or enjoyed,” but also as “flavor, feeling, and emotion.” In Sanskrit performance theory rasa is described as an aesthetic state experienced by performer and audience alike. In order to achieve rasa the performer expresses the corresponding *bhavas* (emotional states) by means of *abhinaya* (acting) in a combination of highly differentiated facial, and body movements. Rasa is the transformation that happens in this layered process of communication. It is both the performer’s process itself, as well as the resulting aesthetic experience, which in Sanskrit Drama is equally shared between performer and audience. The *bhavas*, or feelings and emotional states that the performer portrays, become communicable through the process of abstraction and aestheticization in form of stylized movement. Schechner explains:

In the rasic system, there are “artistically performed emotions” which comprise a distinct kind of behavior (different perhaps for each performance genre). These performed emotions are separate from the “feelings”—the interior, subjective experience of any given performer during a particular performance. There is no necessary and ineluctable chain linking these “performed emotions” with the “emotions of everyday life.” In the rasic system, the emotions in the arts, not in ordinary life are knowable, manageable, and transmittable in roughly the same way that the flavors and presentation of a meal are manageable by following recipes and the conventions of presenting the meal.

In the first phase of the Emotion lab, the student performers only began to differentiate between “artistically performed” and “felt” emotion, rather than to consider the integration of an audience. The idea of transforming the performed into an aesthetic experience and reaching for a communion between audience and performer had not yet come into play. “Rasa,” provocative as this aesthetic principle may
be, remains an abstract concept within the setting of the emotions lab, a goal towards which to work, but certainly not a common occurrence during this phase of actor training. The students have renamed the training: working on the grid, or emo lab, in what I see as an attempt to familiarize the technique.

[15] While working on the grid, the actors use their previous acting training in order to find their way to clearly differentiated emotional states. In Montreal, the student performer’s background is mostly based in realism, with some movement training, commedia and clown work. In other settings I have worked with participants who had a stronger background in physical theater, being trained in methods such as Laban, Lecoq, Viewpoints, Suzuki, or Kalaripayattu. The difference in training style and level of experience changes the work substantially.

[16] Ideally, no matter what their individual techniques are, the actors learn to create the emotional state within a split second through practice and repetition, and can then add these states at will like an extra layer to any theatrical situation either in support of or independent from a psychologically motivated “true” emotion. The image of the actor evoked here is that of the Artaudian “athlete of emotions,” an actor whose affective musculature is strong, speedy and flexible and who can adjust to any change in given circumstances.

**Emotion Matrix**

The emotion matrix consists of a square grid of three times three boxes, taped out on the floor of the rehearsal space, each box roughly six by six feet in size depending on the size of the room. Each box is
named after one of the nine basic rasas described in the Natyasastra, which are:

- Sringara - sensual/sexual love
- Vira – courage/vigor
- Raudra - terror/anger
- Bibhatsa - disgust
- Hasya - mirth/joy/laughter
- Karuna – grief/compassion/pathos
- Adbhuta – wonder/surprise/awe
- Bhayanaka – fear/shame; and
- Shanta – bliss, white light, nothingness.

![Figure 1](image)

[18] The allocation of a rasa to each of the boxes is done by the participants according to chance and varies from session to session. Only the center box on the grid, which is not directly reachable from the outer edges of the square, remains always reserved for the same rasa, shanta, the ninth rasa, which had been added to the initial list of eight basic rasas some hundred years later, when Buddhism arrived in India. In the Natyasastra all the other 36 conventionalized rasas are considered mixed states.
[19] In a first encounter with the rasa boxes, performers are asked to write and/or draw reactions to each Sanskrit word on the floor of its box. When all are done, the participants view each other’s responses. This part of the process allows beginners to focus in on each separate emotion and to distinguish clearly between the boxes. The writing/drawing itself functions like a first imprint of the performer in relationship to the rasa. The physical nature of these exercises creates a body-map; the participants learn cognitively where each box is. This step can be repeated as needed.

[20] In the following steps the performers are spread around the grid and enter the different boxes according to varying sets of rules. An ample amount of time as well as freedom of expression in a pre-verbal state is key in this phase. It is important for the beginner that each emotion is kept within the physical space of its box, and does not get mixed with others. Only after these nine basic states are firmly understood can the boxes be removed and the actors can play freely with the emotional states and begin to explore the mixed states.

Figure 2 Karuna, Joseph 2006  
Figure 3 Sringara, Isabelle 2006
[21] In one of the next steps, called “Embodying the Rasa”, the performer jumps into one of the rasa boxes and immediately assumes a physical pose that is meant to embody that specific emotion. Here the performer already works with issues of containment and control. After the initial period of simply exploring the emotions in the different boxes, using body, breath and voice but no specific stylistic guidelines, the task of compressing this experiential search into one fixed, repeatable pose is difficult. It is at this moment – in the fixation of the position, the temporary development of individual “conventions,” that the first hurdles appear.

Figure 4  Vira, Vance & Chantria  2006
Awareness & Control

At this moment some of the student actors encounter for the first time very consciously the experience of “not feeling,” of using “signs” rather than “authentic” feelings. This can lead to a strong sense of disenchantment. I am quoting lab participant Tom Preece:

I found the more specific the poses become [...] my energy is drained from actually feeling the emotion or being the object that embodies it, and is poured [instead] into trying to get the pose exactly right and indicating the emotions. xviii

This feeling of loss, or better the loss of feeling, is hard to transform without the option of actually learning the conventionalized form to a degree where it becomes second nature, only then can the performer re-infuse the form with feeling. Within the limited amount of time for the lab this process remained incomplete. In previous acting classes however, it was possible to reach a state of emotional freedom within a fixed physical form.

[23] In the narrative of the lab a refocusing on the many cultural and physical factors that determine emotional expression took place. In an
ethnically mixed society such as Canada or the United States, many acting students navigate cultural differences in their personal life. Part of their training as actors entails becoming aware of such differences and the ensuing consequences. Within a few weeks of the lab sessions we became acutely aware of such differences and began to understand the multi-layered implications such differences pose for the beginning actor.\textsuperscript{xix}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Karuna_2006.png}
\caption{Karuna, Chantria 2006}
\end{figure}

[24] Here Chantria Tram is demonstrating her breathing pattern for grief. Outwardly no big change in her expression is to be detected; inwardly she is working hard, her intensity is palpable. She told us later that in her Cambodian family she has been taught that the display of emotions is not suitable for girls and women.\textsuperscript{xx}

[25] Emotions however, are not only shaped by cultural determinants such as gender, race, age, body type, sexual orientation, and belief, but they are also dependent on immediate life circumstances, as for example the time of day, level of hunger, general health, time in
menstrual cycle, state of mind, etc. The performer is faced with the triple task of not only having to understand his/her personal cultural make-up and the differences in his/her daily varying constitution, but also the demands of the part to be played. In this context Stanislavski’s proposal to divide the actor’s training into two phases, work on him/herself and work on the role, gains new meaning for me in that the young actor first has to recognize their own inherent material before beginning to shape a role.

**Fear & Contagion**

During the lab sessions we encountered a few moments that involved fear, and the sudden importance of what I call meta-emotions. Meta-emotions are those feelings that are personal and influential to performers and audience members and are motivated by circumstances outside of the immediate performance context – yet possibly called up by that context – and in turn influence it in a double feed-back loop.

*Figure 7  Raudra, Joseph, Krystelle, Isabelle  2006*
[27] In order to discuss this phenomenon I will return to the example of the rape scene in Sandeep Bhagwati’s collective creation piece, *Per/Son/Alia*. Krystelle Metras, the student who performed the rape victim, was afraid of being identified as a rape victim in real life because of three issues: the much publicized collaborative nature of this particular collective creation piece, the fact that the student performers were called by their own name, and because Metras opened the scene with the line: “This is a piece I did for my Theater and Development class last semester.” – a class that is known for its autobiographical performances. She deeply feared that being marked as the actual victim of sexual assault would have larger, social consequences for her. Those fears became her meta-emotions and kept her from engaging with the scene for most of the rehearsal process. Later during the run of the performances she nearly mumbled the opening lines of the scene while physically half turning away from the audience.

[28] After the run of the show I conducted an interview with Metras. She was still shaken up and confused by the process but also somewhat exhilarated. At this point, Metras had not been able to clearly analyze her own performance process but felt that instead of precisely repeating the scene, she delved into each of the five performances anew. She let herself be guided by the physical and textual outline, but allowed for slight changes in the physical execution of the score to keep it “fresh.” Joseph Bembridge, playing the rapist, initiated these nightly micro-changes, as challenges and surprises for his scene partner. Both had agreed on this process. This element of play became a two-sided sword; on one hand it provided spontaneity and immediacy for Metras but at the cost of physical risk, on the other
hand it prevented the performers from developing a reliable score within which to explore emotional depth.

[29] Metras was thrown onto a black wooden box, bruising up her body badly every time – but in addition to feeling pain, it heightened the “reality” of the situation for her every time. One could speculate that the physical pain, surely numbed by adrenaline, helped to recreate the emotion in a “naturalistic\textsuperscript{mxviii}” way rather than to engage with the “performed emotion.”

[30] In a review of the play fellow student, Antoine Yared complained:

The scene did seem harsh and […] painful and horrible. Like a real rape would be. Except it is NOT a real rape. […] Krystelle had been coming to class with bruises all over her body, arms and legs, for a good two weeks before the show opened. […] I have taken sword and stage fighting classes, and my final presentation had to be a fight/rape scene. My partner and I came out with no bruises. […] Because you are not supposed to get hurt! It’s called ACTING.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

[31] Here lays the basic contradiction – while Krystelle and Joseph were striving for authenticity and “realness” – a “hot” performance, this audience member wanted a higher level of abstraction – a “cold” performance. These two positions are famously discussed in the \textit{Paradoxe sur le Comédien}. Here Diderot clearly states his preference for the latter, the cold, controlled, reliable approach. Despite the admitted fact that a hot performance can be highly effective at times, he critiques the actor who immerses herself in passionate feelings because he resents the irregularity, unpredictability, and unrepeatability of such “real” feelings.
[32] In my reading Krystelle Metras’ meta-emotion, “fear” numbed her physical and mental awareness during the scene in order to be less present – not unlike what can happen to victims of actual rape. After a number of rehearsals performing the scene “cold” without finding a way into its emotional world, both performers had decided that it didn’t work for them and attempted to perform the scene “hot.” Metras recounts that when starting to use her voice in the scene she started “to get it. Oh my god it’s real, I’m going to do a rape scene” because “when you get raped, you are not silent at all.” Through their physically engaged performance style, Metras and Bembridge achieved lending a strong sense of “reality” to the scene; yet, without sufficient rehearsal time, they were not able to achieve both, emotional commitment and a safe score – they had opted for commitment only.

[33] When talking to Bembridge later, he first asserted that only Metras as the victim experienced emotionality, whereas his position was emotionally neutral. After some probing he admitted that his actions were guided by a form of cold, controlled anger (raudra). Again I read his evaluation of the rapist as “neutral,” as an attempt of disengaging with the actual implications of the scene. Only when imagining his physical actions within the emotion boxes, did Bembridge realize that they could have only been done in raudra. Metras too felt that her emotional state was mostly anger, rather than fear or shame, which are the emotions most often associated with rape victims. Even though the scene was not rehearsed using the rasabox exercises, their participation in the emo-lab gave these two actors a framework of reference, which enabled them to analyze the emotional layers of the scene in retrospect.
[34] For the audience the scene read “intense” yet it was not clear if that meant frightening, exciting, thrilling, or saddening, etc. It seems to me that within an episodic play structure the audience’s feelings are not resolved through an evolving narrative but rather tempered and shaped by rhythmic structures and juxtapositions; in this case the possible feeling of discomfort or uneasiness induced by the rape scene was quickly resolved in the immediately following song and dance number.

[35] The feedback that the actors received from an audience that consisted mostly of fellow theater students was notable in that Metras experienced a distinct lack of commentary from other students. She interpreted this lack as a refusal to engage with her role as rape victim and in some way it confirmed her earlier fears of social ostracization. Bembridge on the other hand garnered open admiration. He received comments such as “powerful,” “sexy,” or admiringly “I could have never done such a scene.” During the course of the interview we discussed possible reasons for such divided responses. In addition to the fact that he performed the role of the empowered assailant, therefore playing into the audience’s sub-conscious adherence to existing power hierarchies–his audience of peers knew Joseph as an openly gay man who had just performed a one-man show celebrating his own, very vulnerable sexuality. This fact in my mind allowed viewers to enjoy his position of power more freely because of the implicit assumption that the gay man playing the part could not possibly be a “real” rapist. The rape victim however could be a “real” victim any day and thus any form of identification with her would remind an audience member of her or his own potential vulnerability. Because for women and some men, the fear of being raped is always
present – it is not a far-removed incident in a far-removed land – but a “pervasive, sustained, and repetitive, [...] element of the development of women’s experience.”

[36] The investigation of this short scene shows that an audience, especially the familiar audience within a university setting, is strongly ruled by meta-emotions and complex cultural and social judgments. The performance of extreme states such as rape challenges the preconceptions of performers and audience alike. It seems that a more detailed understanding of these processes, a finer shading of the multiple emotional layers would work towards a more refined aesthetic experience. A stronger emphasis on the difference between “real” and “performed” emotion in actor training, using techniques such as the Rasabox Training, may help to develop such understanding. After all, why should the emotional aspect of performance be “natural” when every other aspect of performance is usually so highly controlled?

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ii For example: Seneca’s “Trojan Women”, Tretryakov’s “I Want a Child”, and in a more veiled way Brecht’s “Mother Courage”.

iii See my discussion of rasabox training in Ch. 2 as well as: Schechner, Richard: Rasaesthetics. In: The Drama Review 45, 3 (T171), MIT Press, Fall 2001.


vi For example a student might recall the death of a close family member and as a result fall into depression.


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ix Embodied here is to be understood as emotion physicalized by the performer, drawing attention to the physical rather than the mental emotion process. In emotion theories these processes are often discussed in regard to physiological and neurobiological patterns as well as psychological and cognitive processes, however in performance the primary focus is on embodiment. See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Basic Writings, ed. Thomas Baldwin, Routledge, 2004. See: Zarilli, Phillip and Cook, Amy in: Theatre Journal, Volume 59, Number 4, December 2007.

x The lab participants in 2006 were: Joseph Bembridge, Isabelle Fortier, Krystelle Metras, Thomas Preece, Chantria Tram, Vance de Waele; camera work was done by Adam Levasseur, all were at the time second or third year students in the Concordia University BFA program in Theatre.

xi In recent years the training method has been further developed and trademarked by two company members: Michelle Minnick and Paula Murray Cole. They offer regular summer intensives at NYU and Ithaca College.


xiv Ibid, 133.

xv The Natyasastra is a complete compendium on Sanskrit performance and dramatic theory, authored by the mythical sage Bharata, but most likely by a number of performance scholars between 220 BCE and 200 CE. It includes fundamentals regarding all aspects of stagecraft, design, performance and music.

xvi Schechner: 32


xviii Excerpt from Tom Preece’s emotion laboratory diary (Nov 2006). Each of the lab participants was asked to keep a log of each session.

xix My research in the field of ethnic and cultural differences in the expression of emotions among student actors is only in the beginning stages and results directly from the work in the lab.


Video documentation of Per/Son/Alia, written by Lindsay Wilson and Kristin Gorslin, directed by Sandeep Bhagwati, performed at the Cazalet Studio, Concordia University, March 29 – April 1, 2007.

“Naturalistic” here used as “an imitation of nature”.


Video interview of Krystelle Metras by the author, Montreal, April 17, 2007.

Video interview of Joseph Bembridge by the author, April 17, 2007.
