Why So Emotional?

A guide for highly charged scenes

INTRODUCTION
Why is an emotional scene a problem scene?

EXPLORE THE OPPOSITE
Look for the opposite emotion in a highly charged scene.

EXPLORE THE PHYSICAL ACTION
What is the body doing in an emotional moment?

CHOOSE YOUR MOMENTS
When is the right moment to yell?

EXPLORE MULTIPLE TACTICS
It all comes back to a character getting what they want.

THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE
Never forget the audience.
Introduction

“Acting is not being emotional, but being able to fully express emotion.” Kate Reid

Why is an emotional scene a problem scene? One would think that when something emotional is happening on stage that would be the best theatrical moment. When a character is emotionally engaged, there is a greater chance that the audience will also be engaged and that’s what we’re all hoping for. We want our theatre to be engaging, vivid, brought to life.

An emotional scene is a problem scene because there is a fine line between emotionally engaged and emotionally overwrought. And it’s a line that is crossed over and over and over again.

We all have memories of seeing shows in which actors go so over the top with their emotions that it is painful to watch: an over the top version of *The Crucible*. That issue play where everyone screams and cries. ANY Greek Tragedy.

When an actor is sobbing on the floor or screaming to the sky it may seem like good acting. Being emotional is often associated with being good. And the actors involved may feel they are being raw and true to the moment. And those qualities are often associated with being good. But the truth is, while that level of emotion is cathartic for the actor, it rarely provides the same experience for an audience.

The emotionally engaged moment will draw an audience toward the stage, including them in the experience. The emotionally overwrought moment will turn an audience away, shutting them out of the experience. If emotional acting keeps an audience away from the action rather than drawing them in, then the performance is not working.

No one likes to be yelled at or to witness someone yelling at someone else. And no one likes to witness someone crying to the point of incoherence. There are also technical elements at play - crying and yelling require a level of diction and articulation that is often missing. So not only is an audience being forced to witness a gale force of emotion, they also can't understand a single word. How does this enhance the theatrical experience for that audience?

*How do we find the right balance within an emotional performance, and what exercises can be explored to counteract overemotional acting?*
Explore the Opposite

“Any fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage - to move in the opposite direction.” Albert Einstein

There are many ways to be angry. You can yell, certainly. That’s the clear choice. But you can also have stone, cold anger. A seething anger. An anger that bubbles under the surface instead of lashing out. Think about the different movie villains you’ve seen. Which are scarier – the ones who are obviously villains and act in a villainous way all the time? What about when villains are quiet, polite, perhaps even nice before they stab their victim in the eye with a screwdriver? They are playing against type, against the clear choice.

Opposites are a great tool to have in your acting arsenal, particularly when working on a highly charged scene. If you have a five page scene and stay at one level, using one tone for that whole five pages, is the scene going to be dynamic? Is it going to be interesting? We often mistake emotional for interesting and that is just not the case. In order to keep the audience reaching toward the stage we need to employ the unexpected, playing against type.

“How do you find variety in an emotional scene?
When you’ve got a scene where there seems to be an obvious emotion to play, rehearse using the opposite emotion. Work with the unexpected and see what you learn. If your character is angry, play the scene happy. If your character is excited, play the scene with indifference. If your character hates another character in the scene, play it as if your character loves the other person. Or play the scene with joy.

Opposite emotions aren’t a blanket fix that will work for every scene. And it may go against the intention of the playwright. But this type of exercise is the reason you rehearse. Opposites give actors the opportunity to play, to find something unexpected, to infuse a scene with variety, to take the scene to a new level.

EXERCISES
In the Greek tragedy Antigone, Antigone has a monologue right before she’s about to be buried alive for her actions. It starts off - “Tomb, bridal chamber, eternal prison in the caverned rock, whither I go to find mine own, those many who have perished, and whom Persephone hath received among the dead.” Have your students read this line and laugh at the same time. Instead of filling the text with dread and sadness, play the opposite. Give the moment a sense of humour. What comes to light when performed with an opposite emotion?

Read the end of Act Two of The Crucible that starts with Hale’s line “Mary... you charge a cold and cruel murder on Abigail.” and goes to the end of the scene.

This section of text is highly charged, volatile, hysterical, and angry. There are a lot of exclamation marks at the end of sentences. Play this text using emotions that are opposite to the clear choices.
Some possibilities are: joy, indifference, glee, glib, teasing, modesty, gentle, timid. What do you learn by trying out a different emotion for the scene? How do the different emotions affect the pace? How do they affect character relationships?

Another option is Act 4 Scene 5 of Romeo and Juliet. Start with the nurse’s line “Mistress! What, Mistress!” and go to Capulet’s line: “Death, that hath ta’en her hence to make me wail, Ties up my tongue, and will not let me speak.”

This is the moment where the Capulets “discover” Juliet’s body and think she is dead. It’s an emotionally charged scene with lots of wailing. **Play the scene with opposite emotions.** Some possibilities are: joy, indifference, glee, surprise, humour, ashamed, relief, goofy. What comes to light in the scene?
Explore the Physical Action

“If you are going to learn only one rule in theatre, it is this: an action is stronger than a word.”
Ron Cameron, Acting Skills for Life

When actors play the emotion of a scene, they often concentrate solely on the voice. They forget to pay attention to what their bodies are doing. It’s all in the sound and less about the action. They ignore the physicality of the scene. The majority of an audience’s connection and comprehension of a scene is based on the visual – what they see. Their connection is lessened if what they see is uninteresting.

When we are emotional in life, there is often a physical action attached – sometimes we are so frustrated we throw a chair, or hit a wall. Sometimes we’re so happy we dance. Our bodies tense up or we completely relax. It’s important to play an emotional scene scene physically as well as vocally.

This can mean a number of things. If you’re trying to play subtext, it can mean you move the body in opposition to the voice. (e.g. Forceful voice/calm body. Calm voice/agitated body.) It can mean finding gestures that accent the feeling.

When you’re looking to move the body in an emotional manner, think about the extremes of moving through space. Explore a variety of areas: high space, medium space, low space. Crawling on the ground, jumping on the furniture. Do not just stand there. Pay attention to what your feet are doing - if your voice is intense and your feet are shuffling back and forth, that’s not an effective moment. Think about the various states of body – tense, loose, calm, agitated. The possibilities are vast and it’s important to explore those possibilities so that the audience receives a visual experience to match their experience.

EXERCISES
In groups, create a short scene that involves an intense emotion. When blocking the scene, each actor must use three different states of the body as well as three different spatial levels. Don’t worry about moving too much. The aim of the exercise is to force moment.

Go for the opposite: It’s a natural instinct to tense up when highly emotional. But if you tense up on stage, you’re going to come across as stiff. Try the short scene again and this time focus on having a super-relaxed physicality. Think Jell-O body. Don’t worry about whether or not it’s right for the emotion, practice relaxing physically when speaking emotionally. What happens with an emotional scene when the body is relaxed?

Here are ten different emotions. Happy, Sad, Confused, Loving, Scared, Betrayed, Excited, Angry, Jealous, and Anxious. Create a physical stance and gesture that illustrates each emotion. Can others clearly identify the emotion just by seeing the stance and gesture?
Address physicality in an emotional relationship by determining and playing the status of each character. Here's a game to illustrate. Give everyone a playing card. The number on the card determines each person’s status (2 is low, Ace is high). While each participant keeps their card a secret, they have to play the status they have been given.

The situation is a wedding reception. Everyone creates a character based on their status. Play the physicality of the status – where does the character hold their shoulders? Do they make eye contact? Do they walk with confidence or with insecurity? At the end, see if the class can guess who had what card.

Put students into pairs. They write a one page scene in which Character ONE hates Character TWO. But the actor must not portray that anger in how they speak. Their dialogue must be perfectly pleasant. Any anger they feel can only be shown through their physicality. How do they stand? How do they move? How do interact with any props, costumes or furniture?

In groups, stage the moment from Romeo and Juliet where Juliet’s body is found. (Act IV Scene 5) Present the scene without the dialogue, using only physical action. Does the emotion get expressed through the body without the safety net of the words?
Choose Your Moments

“O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o’erdoing Termagant. It out-herods Herod. Pray you avoid it.” Hamlet’s advice to the Players, Act III scene ii

Actors can get carried away, letting the emotions take over in a highly charged scene. This is a symptom of an actor who is not in control of how they communicate the scene to an audience. Emotion, just as with motivation and blocking, should always be a choice. Make emotion a conscious choice. Choose moments to yell or sob or attack. Which specific line, which specific beat needs that heightened emotion? Acting becomes purposeful when you choose your moments. When you look at piece of text, think about the scene as a whole. Determine the most important point of the scene and know why it’s important. What path will you play, how will your emotions rise and fall in order to get to your moment?

THE EXCLAMATION MARK

Another area of choice has to do with that pesky point of punctuation – the exclamation mark. Actors often mistake an exclamation mark as an instruction to speak the sentence loudly and at full volume. It’s a natural instinct – see exclamation mark and yell! But it’s important to remember that dialogue in a play must take the audience on a journey. And there has to be variety of tone for that journey to be enjoyable. There has to be variety of pace. If you have five lines that all end in exclamation marks YOU CAN’T SAY THEM ALL THE SAME LIKE THIS even though the punctuation is the same for each.

A great example is this speech of Blanche’s from A Streetcar Named Desire. All her lines end in an exclamation mark, but based on the character and what she’s saying, you wouldn’t yell these lines:

“Oh I feel so good after my long, hot bath, I feel so good and cool and - rested! Yes, I do, so refreshed! A hot bath and a long cold drink always give me a brand new outlook on life!” - Sc 7

An exclamation mark can convey a variety of things. It can indicate passion, frustration, excitement, or joy. It doesn’t necessarily indicate speaking at full volume. When you have a scene where the emotional level is increasing and a number of sentences end with exclamation marks, choose your moments wisely. What is the character trying to say, and what are the different ways to say it? Which line or lines of dialogue require full volume?

EXERCISES

Here are five lines of dialogue, all of which end with an exclamation mark. Have students present the lines with a different emotional tone and pace for each. Remind them that they can’t yell them all.

I can’t believe it! I can’t believe you did that! No one has ever done that before! Look at you! You are out of your mind!

On the next page you’ll see a scene from Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull. The majority of sentences end in exclamation marks. Have students read aloud the scene in pairs with the instruction that they are only allowed to yell one line of dialogue at full volume. Once they choose the one line they have to explain to you why this is the one line that needs to be yelled.
Explore Vocal Tools: Sometimes when actors become emotional, all technique goes out the window. The dialogue becomes jumbled, inarticulate, impossible to understand. If an actor chooses to yell in a scene, it can’t be at the expense of the dialogue. Nothing can interfere with the main goal of a theatrical production, which is to communicate to and connect with an audience. Making sure the audience can understand the dialogue is critical. Few things garble dialogue more than yelling, or uncontrollable crying.

Look at Blanche’s monologue from Scene One of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Begins with “Death is expensive, Miss Stella!” and ends with “Sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go!”) Yell the whole thing. But as you do, speak slowly and over articulate each word. Discuss afterwards what it was like to perform the piece, and what it was like to hear it performed that way.

**Play with creating an emotional range.** Choose an emotion. Count to ten out loud growing the emotion with each number. Then count backwards lessening the emotion with each number. Count slowly, don’t rush. Ask students what it’s like to grow an emotion slowly and deliberately. Repeat the exercise playing a different emotion on each number in the count. Alternate between positive and negative emotions. What is it to play with emotions back and forth?

Ask students how they can use emotional choice in their future work.

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**THE SEAGULL BY ANTON CHEKHOV**

KONSTANTIN: I have no respect for him at all. You want me to think him a genius, as you do, but I refuse to lie: his books make me sick.

ARKADINA. You envy him. There is nothing left for people with no talent and mighty pretensions to do but to criticise those who are really gifted. I hope you enjoy the consolation it brings!

KONSTANTIN: Those who are really gifted, indeed! I am cleverer than any of you, if it comes to that! You are the slaves of convention, you have seized the upper hand and now lay down as law everything that you do; all else you strang[e] and trample on. I refuse to accept your point of view, yours and his, I refuse!

ARKADINA: That is the talk of a decadent!

KONSTANTIN: Go back to your beloved stage and act the miserable ditch-water plays you so much admire!

ARKADINA: I never acted in a play like that in my life! You couldn’t write even the trashiest music-hall farce, you idle good-for-nothing!

KONSTANTIN: Miser!

ARKADINA: Rag-bag!
Explore Multiple Tactics

“Emotional release by itself, no matter how “real,” “honest,” etc. the emotion may be, is never enough to create a character...such release has no artistic form.” Richard Hornby

Another way to avoid an overwrought performance is to focus on the journey of the character. Remind students to focus on what the character wants in the scene, rather than the emotional tone of the scene. In other words, focus on what’s going on inside the character rather than something artificial – I’m going to yell! I’m going to cry!

What is the character trying to get? Pursuing a want rather than indicating an emotion will always be the strongest choice.

Here is a short speech in which a character is yelling. It’s the end of Act IV of *The Crucible* and John Proctor is trying to explain why he can’t bring himself to sign his name to a confession of witchcraft.

JOHN: Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!

Instead of thinking *how* to say this speech, think about what John *wants* in the speech. He wants to live, but he also wants to honour those who refused to confess. He wants to convince the judge to let him confess aurally and not through a signed document. He also wants to convince himself that to live under lies is worse than dying a good man with a good reputation – something he has wanted from the very beginning of the play. He wants to be strong, even as he is weak.

Strong wants have so much more depth than yelling for no reason other than the presence of exclamation marks at the end of the sentence.

Further to that, also consider how the character is going to get what they want. What tactics will they use? In life, if one tactic doesn’t work we usually switch to something else. We rarely stick to a choice, especially if it isn’t working: I want to borrow the car, Mom says no. I say, I’ll make dinner for a week. I say, “You look so pretty, Mom.” I say “I’ll pay for gas.” I plead. I say “Gina’s mom lets her have the car.” I cry, “It’s not fair!” In that scenario, the character tries offers, tries compliments, tries begging, tries guilt, and finally yelling.

Yelling in a scene is only one tactic, one choice. If a character keeps on the same tactic for the whole scene, it won’t be interesting to play or to watch. Use multiple tactics, make more than one choice for a character to get what they want.

**EXERCISES**

**Play with the notion of tactics:** Divide the class into pairs. Each pair creates a scene in which both characters want to watch television. Each character comes up with three different tactics, three different reasons why they should watch television over the other. Who gets what they want? Do they come to a mutual decision? Does no one win? You decide.

**Look at Act Two Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons***, the scene between Chris and his father which begins: “CHRIS: You knew they wouldn’t hold up in the air.” and ends “CHRIS: ...I ought to tear the tongue out of your mouth, what must I do?”
Chris, the son, has come to learn that his father knowingly let faulty planes fly during WWII. Chris is furious. Think about what Chris wants: Does he want his father to apologize? Does he want to flee the horror of the situation? Does he want to hurt his father? Does he want to hurt himself? What then what are the different tactics he can use to get what he wants? Keep in mind that yelling is only one tactic. Come up with at least three different tactics for how Chris is going to get what he wants in this scene.

**ACTOR SAFETY**

“I don’t want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them.” Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

An important thing to remember is that the emotional scene is emotional for the *character*, not the *actor*. The experience an actor has (and ultimately, an audience) will not be at its best if the actor feels emotionally unstable because a character is emotionally unstable. There are some techniques that ask actors to draw on their own emotions and use their own pain to find the emotions of the actor. But this is a *technique*, it needs to be practised and learned through training.

**How can a director keep actors safe as they prepare for an emotional scene?**

1. Never leave actors in the lurch after rehearsing something emotional – have a discussion about what actors are feeling. Allow actors the opportunity to let the tension of the moment go before they return to the real world.
2. End the rehearsal with something light – an improv or a game. Create a purposeful divide between the emotional scene and real life.
3. Set up a pre-performance ritual for the actors in the scene, something they can do beforehand. The best type of exercise to prepare an actor in this situation is to focus on breath control. When actors get over emotional, breath control is often the first thing to go. Have actors breathe in for a count of one and out for a count of one. Then breathe in for a count of two and out for a count of two. Go all the way up to eight.
4. Make sure the scene is carefully blocked – don’t let the scene get out of control physically.
The Audience Experience

Anyone who makes theatre of some sort has to consider the audience experience and how an audience will engage with their work. The job of a theatrical production is to connect to an audience in some way. Yes, some theatre makers want to alienate an audience, make them uncomfortable. But that is still a connection of sorts, especially if it’s purposeful. At the end of the day, without an audience there is no show.

Even if the audience doesn’t react the way we want, the theatre does not exist without them. So it makes sense to think about the audience experience during rehearsals. It doesn’t always happen. I have sat through many many shows where it was clear that the audience was far away from the actors’ minds.

Some questions for your students to ask themselves as you work on an emotional scene.

1. What do I want the audience to get out of this scene?
2. How valuable is this experience for them?
3. What am I doing to engage the audience?
4. How many different ways am I communicating to the audience?
5. What is the goal of the scene?
6. Has that goal been fully realized?
7. How long have I been yelling?
8. Why am I yelling? What does the character want by yelling?
9. Is there any other way I can communicate other than yelling?
10. How long have I been crying?
11. Why am I crying? What does the character want by crying?
12. Is there any other way I can communicate other than crying?