

***Facial Expression for Stage Reality:  
A study based on novices***

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***Abstract***

This study is an analysis of facial expression in stage performance. Gesture is crucial to drama, but it is on the face itself that emotion is first expressed. This is the reason why this research focuses on facial expression. Data collected from practical classes in which students studying drama participated have been analyzed. Problems confronted during this research were most often solved then and there. This research, having both observation and participation as method, possesses the characteristics of action research and practice-as-research (PAR). The problem identified from this research is that those acting on the stage during practical classes did not show as much facial expression as needed. The reason for this is sought, and the solution thereto is presented here. As part of the solution, techniques in training as an enhancement to acting were tried out. Overall, this research will help those in the acting sphere to express their real emotion through facial expression.

***Keywords:*** Facial expression, Emotion, Gesture, Acting, Stage reality, Real life

***Introduction***

In terms of stage reality, it can be said that the ‘Face is the index of the mind.’ Facial expression (FE) and gesture are two of the most important aspects of theatre acting. These two combined together, express physical and psychological qualities of a character. They are inter-dependent. What should be looked into as an important aspect is that the face is the centre of expression. Paul Ekman states that “The study of facial expression has been central to the field of emotion,” (Ekman 1999: 236).

Psychological aspects in acting are related to emotional expressions, such as facial and physical gesture, all over the world. “...world over produce same facial expressions for the six emotions: happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, disgust.”(Gill & Adams 2002: 74). Emotions emerge from the mind: In Sam Kogan’s words: “..Emotion is the bio-physiological result of a thought,” (Kogan 2010: 06).

Acting methods of stage drama are exaggerated from the nature of real life. Actors on stage express their acting as embellished nature which is gained through training and continuous involvement. When the actors meet members of the audience there should be a need to show the exaggerated nature of the stage. In contrast, it can be observed in non- actors (i.e. normal people) who use exaggerated nature in real life when they meet

many people or students for a different effect. For example, in an office or a class room at a school, a teacher or an officer might employ the same techniques as performers to create an impact.

On the other hand, there are some different media that communicate in different ways. During the recording process of a radio drama, the actors show Facial Expression (FE) and gesture when they deliver the dialogue in front of a microphone. Likewise, it also happens when actors hide their faces with masks in a performance. It can be noticed that even puppet artists, while handling the dolls, express emotions on their face.

The present researcher has chosen the exaggerated nature of stage acting because of lack of expression occurring during the training process and stage performances in the actors' faces. In real life face to face communication, FE is used to express, "55 percent of total feelings," (Dodd 1991: 220), but on the stage it requires more than the above mentioned percentage. The significance of this research is to emphasize the training required for using FE meaningfully.

### ***Methodology***

The field of acting in this research is considered to be practical in the teaching of Drama and Theatre Arts. The subjects (students) of this study were from the Special Degree program of Jaffna University, and students from schools. In this study, the practical aspect is given more importance than theory, and the data related to the problems found in practical classes was originally collected from 2000 to 2006. The data has been analyzed from 2006 till now from a research oriented perspective.

The names and other details of the students participating in practical classes are kept anonymous in conformity with research ethics. Data was also gathered from preliminary training in the first year, training in acting in the second year, and director training in the third year. As many as ten students participated in each class and forty or thirty percent of them were males and the rest were females. The majority of students involved in this study come from different walks of life: farming, fishing, carpentry, masonry and driving but not from the government sector. In order to collect data, at the end of every session the experiences gained by participants were discussed in detail. Very important information emerged when feedback was given. Data on problems relating to emotion, FE, gesture, ability to come forward to perform, and psychological aspects were collected on a daily basis through discussion, observation and participation.

In this research, the researcher had two roles: as teacher and as investigator or analyst; and this was in relation to personal practical experience. “The rise of practice-as- research in performance in recent decades has meant that many researchers are increasingly developing their own bodies in their research method,” (Starbuck and Mock 2011: 223). Due to this situation, this research was done with a view to probing through action research and practice as research, which is a new approach used worldwide in the discipline of performing arts and visual media. This present trend in theatre research is accommodated in interdisciplinary research associated with sociology, anthropology, psychology, and neurology. When production and practical sessions open or turn into a forum, discussion, debate and conversation, issues arise and this is a feature in performance as research (PAR).

To reiterate, the face is the indicator and centre of emotion and reading material for expression. As Philip Auslander says “...physical text over the verbal text,” (1997: 105). In this research, the researcher concentrates on how to increase expression in the face as readable material. The issue is that not everybody is expressive due to individual, cultural and psychological aspects. It was observed that the majority of problems that arose during the sessions were based on emotional FE. These problems are categorized as follows on the basis of their characteristics:

### ***Hindrances of play productions and practices***

1. Text on face
2. Mind and body coordination
3. Interfering personal emotion
4. Expressive response
5. Contradicting emotion
6. Lack of training

### ***Methods of unraveling the hindrances***

- I. Retrieving the psychological balance
- II. Event exercise for emotion
- III. Real life techniques
- IV. Mask techniques
- V. *Yoga and branayama*
- VI. *Viyabhi and Sthayi Bhavas in Nityasastra*

In this methodology, in addition to the data collected by casual discussion and feedback, observation too, has been included. Imagination, emotion, innovation and improvisation are creative practices. To subject them to critical analysis is very problematic as this research involves working with a massive team of performers and audience; it is difficult to meet everyone in person and collect relevant information: "... many contributors to establish imaginative uses of methods that trouble the boundaries, between creative practice and critical analysis, between epistemology and ontology," (Kershaw & Nicholson 2011: 01).

### ***Issues Stemming from Research***

In this section, three things are taken up for discussion:

- 1) Type of facial expression
- 2) Hindrances of play productions and practices
- 3) Unraveling the hindrance

Emotion is considered as an infectious aspect. To put it in other words, emotion gets infected by others in several cultures and it could vary from culture to culture. For example, in a Tamil funeral rite people who observe the funeral rite usually get emotional which might be the result of sympathy as well as empathy. In the same way, a performer's emotions are transferred from stage to the audience and the audience feels and reacts in various ways. Performers also feel the emotion connected to the play and reveal their responses in different ways. Issues related to emotions need to be studied scientifically and psychologically.

... Acting as a particular form of behavior: acting behavior. As such it implies the application of psycho physiological findings. This kind of approach brings the study of acting – up to now an almost exclusive domain of the arts- into the field of neuroscience. (Zarrilli 1998: 217)

Furthermore, in the use of proverbs, metaphors and literature, many talk about FE and it is essential to study how FE is portrayed in diverse situations.

In the West, comparative studies have already been done on theater, and researchers have arrived at many findings after an in-depth scientific study of diverse cultures: "The *Natyasastra* is not a scientific study but a compilation of the stage experience by many actors over a span of centuries." (Schechner 2009: 310).

In the case of Tamil theatre, FE is understood through culture and it is a feature of Tamil culture. However, it has a lot of characteristics common to many cultures across the world; “Culture, social groupings within cultures, and individual differences all produce large differences in facial expression of emotion.” (Ekman 1999: 317).

### ***Types of FE***

The process of analyzing FE has led to the categorization of three types of FE:

#### ***Type I***

- A. FE through interpersonal Communication
- B. FE through introspection
- C. FE through sense

#### ***Type II***

- A. Positive emotion (Happiness, love, wonder, ecstasy)
- B. Negative emotion (Anger, fear, disgust)

#### ***Type III***

- A. ‘Approach’ – love, happiness
- B. ‘Avoidance’ – fear, Anger. (Zarrilli 1998: 201)

The above classified expressions would be shown by way of FE and gestures. The facial expressions could be revealed through parts of the face connected to extrinsic expression: nose, mouth, tongue, teeth, lips, forehead, eyebrow, eye, eyelash, cheeks, skin, hair, ear, and nape. Internal parts of face are as follows: muscle, nervous system, blood circulation, brain, and skull. The following parts of the body could express emotions through gestures: hand gesture, thumbs and hands together, hands on face gestures, arm gestures, legs and feet.

FE and gestures might differ from person to person and one emotion could depend on another. FE comes out of performers while they are acting on the stage and at the same time, considerable amount of spontaneous FE would emerge from the audience. During a performance, children as audience bring out a lot of spontaneous expression when compared to adults.

### ***Hindrances of Play Productions and Practices***

During acting practices and play production, it was noticed that performer's face shows different expressions based on where the play is performed: in the plays performed at the University, school level and open stages outside. Hence the following difficulties were observed.

- 1) Text on face
- 2) Mind and body coordination
- 3) Interfering personal emotion
- 4) Cultural limitations for emotion
- 5) Expressive response
- 6) Contradicting emotion
- 7) Lack of Training

#### ***Text on Face***

Performers used various forms of FE while delivering a dialogue. As a matter of fact after a dialogue was delivered orally simultaneous facial reaction should continue on the performer's face but they did not give any required impact of expression.

#### ***Mind and Body Coordination***

The feeling of sorrow and anger was expressed through loud crying and weeping but not through the face and body. In practical classes, it could be seen in the exercise, when recalling an emotional memory, students usually showed the emotion of anger, sadness and fear very often and the other emotion like happiness, disgust and hatred. A character in a play does not always retain its attribute which is supposed to be with a character throughout the play. For example, a character like a cunning person was expected to laugh all the time but in actual stage performance he/she did not do it all the time. Some students who did not disclose any kind of feelings were considered to have been affected by some psychological factors. Some students were unable to recall their emotions or feelings on their faces, and such students were unable to convey their emotion verbally too. Some students tended to show some good effects of emotion and to show inner feelings, but could not bring it out effectively on their face. All in all, half the students in the practical classes very rarely showed FE, for whatever reason.

### ***Interfering Personal Emotion***

A character is assigned a role to be performed in a play and is supposed to give the only required emotion to that role but mostly some characters added their personal emotions to the role they performed. For example: when a character was asked to express the feeling of happiness of a drunkard the actor showed the feeling of sadness. Another example was when a performer was asked to act out a role of a short-tempered person he refused to act that role because he himself was short-tempered by nature. A third example was a situation where a performer had lost a family member, therefore he always expressed the emotion of sorrow only.

### ***Cultural Limitation for Expressing Emotion***

In Tamil culture, women are not supposed to laugh loudly because women need to be modest and humble in Tamil society. For example, the tobacco leaf is personified as a woman in Tamil society because when a tobacco leaf blooms its aura is gone. Similarly, if a woman laughs, her chastity is questioned. Another cultural factor is due to various divisions in the caste system, some people are bullied and as a result they are not very expressive or they fear to show FE.

### ***Expressive Response***

It was observed that student performers did not react to their co-performers because each performer gives reaction only when he/she is acting out his/her role.

### ***Contradicting Emotion***

It was witnessed that some characters showed contradictory emotion. For example, when a character was asked to cry; crying looked like laughing. This contradiction is found in funeral rites in real life too.

### ***Lack of Training***

Due to lack of training of the performers, they could not bring out the required emotion and their facial muscles were not trained for it.

## ***Methods of Unraveling Hindrances***

To solve the issues related to facial expression, some strategies were adapted and applied to those issues. These practices would reduce the limitations of facial muscle use.

1. Retrieving the psychological balance
2. Event exercise for emotion
3. Real life techniques
4. Mask techniques
5. *Yoga and Branayama*
6. *Viyabhi and Sthayi Bhavas in Natyasastra*

There are mainly two facts when using the above-mentioned solutions to unravel hindrances: when one feels a particular emotion, that emotion appears in the face spontaneously; when one tends to show an emotion in his/her face it touches his/her heart. Certain exercises are used to train the dancers. Likewise, exercises to improve FE in theatre arts need to be developed.

## ***Retrieving the Psychological Balance***

In order to bring out the performers' FE in an effective way, the performer's mind should be peaceful and neutral. Those who suffered from emotional disorders were unable to express their emotion very clearly. It was found in Tamil areas that because of the war situation and social discrimination many students were affected psychologically. To restore the normal state of mind of psychologically affected people, they should be sent for counseling and some drama therapy.

## ***Event Exercise for Emotion***

In this regard, exercises related to emotion should be promoted. The following needs to be practiced by the performers:

### **Shyness**

- bending down their head
- covering the face by hand
- squinting eyes

### **stealthy look**

### **ridiculing**

### **teasing**

### **shock**

### **anxiety**

### **Body Pain**

Stomachache,

Headache

Injection

Intoxication

Care-free



### ***Real Life Techniques***

- Identifying the techniques in day to day life and putting them in a systematic way.
- Stimulating the mind in a situation through thoughts
- Practicing FE in a huge open space. People in the villages have a big sense of FE and voice because of their real life practice in big open spaces.

### ***Mask Techniques***

Using face as a mask: in this practice, face should be stretched and nods used.

### ***Yoga and Branayama***

It helps one to stretch the whole body and the amount of breathing would help one to bring the intended emotion to the face:

- Eye exercise in *yoga* (Nath 2002: 88)
- *Branayama*

Type and nature of emotion are determined by amount of breathing.

### ***Viyabhi and sthayi Bhavas in Natyasastra*** (Appa Rao 1967: 18)

<b><i>S.no</i></b>	<b><i>Rasa</i></b>	<b><i>Sthayi Bhava</i></b>	<b><i>Meanings</i></b>
<b><i>01</i></b>	<i>Sringara</i>	<i>rathi</i>	<i>Love, amorous</i>
<b><i>02</i></b>	<i>hasya</i>	<i>hasa</i>	<i>humorous</i>
<b><i>04</i></b>	<i>raudra</i>	<i>krodha</i>	<i>Anger, furious</i>
<b><i>05</i></b>	<i>viira</i>	<i>utsaha</i>	<i>Vigor, valorous</i>
<b><i>06</i></b>	<i>bhayanaka</i>	<i>bhaya</i>	<i>Fear, horrific</i>
<b><i>07</i></b>	<i>bibhasta</i>	<i>jugupsra</i>	<i>Disgust, repugnant</i>
<b><i>08</i></b>	<i>adbhuta</i>	<i>vismaya</i>	<i>wondrous</i>

A situation needs to be established to practice 33 *viyabichari bhava* and 8 *sthayi bhava* for facial expression. These are the clues to create the practice from the practitioner's point of view.

## ***Conclusion***

Emotion, beyond its existence within a person, must be expressed in interpersonal communication through face and gesture. But when it comes to the expression of mass audience, FE can be understood only through exaggerated nature of face and gesture. An actor is taught this exaggerated FE by means of two approaches. One is ‘expression coming to emotion from face’, another is ‘expression going to face from emotion’. To do this successfully, students have to be given training in the movement of their facial muscles. Retrieving the psychological balance, event exercise for emotion, real life techniques, mask techniques, *yoga* and *branyama*, and *viyabhi* and *sthayi bhavas* are the remedies for the problems. With a help of these strategies; FE, reflection of emotional gestures and a balanced mental state could be achieved to a great extent. It is important to enhance the functional ability of the muscle power of the face. During the training course, students need to be taught how well they could catch the emotion, retain it, and show it in their face effectively. When endeavoring to bring actual expressions on to the face, performers should make use of these varying approaches.

## ***Shortcomings***

- This research should have been done objectively by adopting scientific methods in addition to subjective interplay of methods.
- It is assumed that emotion is brought out through the face. This assumption needs to be confirmed scientifically.
- In this research, done in classroom settings, there have been many external factors obstructing progress such as students’ absenteeism, strikes, holidays, researcher’s personal leave and time restriction in the semester system.

## ***Implications for Further Research***

- Generally, in workshops and practical classes, 50% of the students who participated confronted difficulty in showing FE.
- In this research, FE processes based on neurophysiology and face perception need to be proved practically.
- FE methods described in literature as images of words can be made use of when teaching acting. The cultural dimensions of teaching FE need to be explored further.
- Scientific research should be initiated to determine whether expression of catharsis and *rasa* has any harmful effect on both actors and audience.

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