



## Body awareness in acting – a case study of TRE as a supporting tool for drama students' personal and professional development

Cathrine Scharff Thommessen & Marit Fougner

To cite this article: Cathrine Scharff Thommessen & Marit Fougner (2020) Body awareness in acting – a case study of TRE as a supporting tool for drama students' personal and professional development, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 11:4, 434-452, DOI: [10.1080/19443927.2019.1694971](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1694971)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2019.1694971>



Published online: 28 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 380



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Body awareness in acting – a case study of TRE as a supporting tool for drama students’ personal and professional development

Cathrine Scharff Thommessen and Marit Fougner

## Abstract

Tension and Trauma Release Exercises (TRE) is an approach that assists the body in releasing deep muscular patterns of tension originated from stressful and traumatic experiences. This approach is included as a tool in the Method Acting curriculum of the three years Bachelor in Acting at NSKI University College in Norway. In this study, we explore drama students’ experiences with TRE and its use to promote personal welfare and professional performance. Focus group data was collected from twelve drama students and subjected to a thematic analysis. Three central themes emerged from the data material; (1) increased self-awareness of body and mind, 2) skills performance under pressure and (3) increased ability to create a character. We conclude that TRE is a useful tool in eliminating emotional tension and in sharpening the awareness of self as an individual and of one’s own being, actions or thoughts, so increasing focus and energy in Method Acting.

**Keywords:** method acting, drama students, self-awareness, mind-body, tension release exercises, reflective practice

## Introduction

Professional acting is associated with the art of awareness. Thoughts, emotions, and bodies of the actors must be alive when on stage if they are to create a specific character (Kemp 2012). Somatic movement practices, like Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais and other self-use techniques,

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

are used in actor training to enhance the actor's presence through psychosocial awareness (Polatin 2013). The Norwegian NSKI University College has, as an alternative to these approaches, included The Tension and Trauma Release Exercises technique (TRE) in their acting curriculum since 2010 (Curriculum NSKI 2016).

Few empirical studies have examined the effectiveness of body psycho-physical approaches upon the learning experiences and outcomes of drama students. The purpose of this study was to increase our understanding of the embodied learning of actor students, who use TRE, and to explore and describe students' personal and professional experiences with TRE in relation to the prescribed learning outcomes.

Cathrine S. Thommessen, the paper's first author is the responsible teacher for the regular TRE classes at NSKI. She is a dance- and movement teacher, certified massage therapist, trauma therapist, as well as experienced in movement-based embodied contemplative practices like Feldenkrais, Yoga, and Continuum. She has several years of experience with teaching movement in general and TRE in particular, both individually and in groups, and with TRE as personal development practice. She trusts the body's innate capacity to heal within the right circumstances. Marit Fougner, this paper's second author, is a physiotherapist with 28 years of experience as a preclinical teacher for an educational programme in physiotherapy. Personal experiences with TRE and a study of body-mindfulness techniques in chronic pain management (Fougner & Killi Haugstad 2015) became an incentive to explore acting students' experiences for possible stress regulatory strategies promoting self-knowledge and self-care among students in different programmes.

## Theoretical framework

### *Mastering tension in acting*

Konstantin Stanislavski, considered to be the founder of modern realistic acting tradition, introduced in the beginning of the 20th century, what he called "psycho-physical training" as a tool that could be used by student actors to understand and master bodily experiences (Stanislavski 2016). Long-term practice of this technique aims to establish a connection between internal and external elements of acting and can lead to an actor developing an understanding of why he or she is acting in a certain way on stage. One of the first principles of this training programme was relaxation. Movements without tension were, according to Stanislavski, the first thing a student-actor had to master to acquire concentration on stage.

Lee Strasberg, Stanislavski's American successor (Merlin 2016), was the creator of Method Acting. Strasberg had the same raw material and challenges as all other teachers and visionaries following Stanislavski: the actor's body and consciousness (Blair 2008). In "the Method", the actors are trained to consciously use themselves as a tool to attain reality and truth on stage (Strasberg 1987). Strasberg continued to emphasise relaxation as tension release. According to him, tension was unnecessary energy interrupting and interfering with the natural functioning of the

body, the human instrument. He was particularly concerned about tension in the upper and lower back muscles and noticed that some psychologists connected this tension with strong emotional experiences. As well as influencing the actor's inner life, emotions, thoughts and body awareness, muscle tension also impedes the ability to move and to be moved freely, according to Strasberg. Tension, is therefore the natural foe of relaxation and concentration, both closely related, and needs to be released by both actors and actor students.

### *Stress, tension and trauma*

Cognitive neuroscience has given new insight in acting and actor training (Blair 2008). A renewed understanding of the connections between biology and cognition, how the neural networks fire together and wire together, can help us explain the relationship between bodily action, emotional experiences, and thinking in relation to stress and tension.

Encountering stressful situations can lead to the fight, flight or freeze response, activated by a reaction from the autonomic nervous system (ANS) also known as the acute stress response. This refers to a physiological reaction triggered when we feel a strong emotion like fear or anxiety (Porges 2011). Muscle tension is part of this automatic, unconscious reaction to stress, and can lead to deep chronic tension lasting even long after the stressful situation is over. It is as if the event is stuck in the body or as Strasberg says (1987, p.97): “[o]bviously, both the tension and the pain were the result of conditioning”. The primary muscles involved in this process are the flexor muscles, especially the iliopsoas muscle that is the strongest hip flexor, able to contract to pull the body into a ball to protect inner organs (Koch, 1997). The organism's stress-response also includes affective and cognitive aspects, which all together when it is stuck in the organism is what is known as trauma (Levine 2015). Trauma consist of long-term memory, both explicit (also called declarative) and implicit memory. Explicit memory has to do with what we can recall, for instance from a particular event or from our childhood. The implicit memory on the other hand has to do with automatic bodily responses, either as procedural memory related to skills, as bicycling, or as emotional memory related to what we perceive in our surroundings, like social challenges or danger. The latter is experienced in the body as physical sensations. Connected to thoughts and reflections, these sensations become more pronounced feelings.

Feelings are mental experiences of body states, according to one of the most renowned neuroscientists Antonio Damasio (1999). This understanding explains how bodily reactions influence on how we feel and how we think, and supports Strasberg's (1987) pronounced understanding of the connection between the actor's mental and physical states. The interaction between physical, mental and affective states is further emphasised in the Method when pointing to muscle tension as interfering with the actor's thoughts, emotions and inner awareness. Since being tensed is as much an emotional as a physical condition, likewise with relaxation. Reducing tension is therefore about increasing the possibilities of being present with own emotions. A wide range of relaxation techniques is used in acting for

freedom of movement, emotional regulation, to focus attention and to reduce rumination, depression, and stress. The most common methods used in actor training include the Feldenkrais Method (Queste 2002), the Alexander technique, Tai Chi (Barker 2002; Forsythe 1996), and Yoga (Kapsali 2013). In Feldenkrais, the main part of the method consists of attention to how we move, and how to integrate more functional and organic movements. The approach includes awareness of the whole body, the nervous system, muscles, skeleton, as well as the environment. The Alexander technique is a way of learning to bring the whole person into balance through working on body awareness, and alignment, to stay connected to the body even in moments of stress. Tai Chi is also an integral part of acting training to promote the innate integrity between mind and body. Tai Chi uses movement, breath and visual focus. Because it is slow, the students can work on self-awareness of body and movement, similar to both Feldenkrais and Alexander. Yoga emphasises a combination of breath work, stretching or positions (asanas) and meditation, but the different approaches vary in intensity and focus concerning these core elements. Yoga facilitates an awareness of the body, its tensions patterns, and willingness to explore the limitations exposed through bodily exercise.

Many movement-based embodied contemplative practices, as the above, are based on intentionally generated self-willed movements (Schmalzl et al. 2014). These can be understood as practices starting from *top-down* conscious actions, thus inviting *bottom-up* processes to happen. By top-down we mean processes arising from anatomically higher brain areas, such as neo cortex, influencing lower brain areas and the rest of the body (Schoore 1994). Top-down approaches include thinking and reflecting involving earlier experiences and memory.

The term bottom-up is understood here to mean processes that arise from anatomically lower brain areas and body, and then influencing higher regions such as feelings and thoughts. The idea, according to which spontaneous body movements have emotional effect, dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology (Zarrilli et al. 2013). The *James-Lange theory of emotion*, built on the work of psychologists William James and Carl Lange, gives insights into how spontaneous movements happened *before* conscious feeling, not because of it: perception follows expression. The theory has influenced much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century acting theory, like Stanislavski's work on physical actions, and the psychophysical tradition from Meyerhold onwards. But the theory is used differently by these two; while in Stanislavski's system the actor first created a character from within, Meyerhold's more biomechanic approach instructed the actor to develop a character from without, employing external movements first.

### **TRE as an acting training method**

Some practices may involve spontaneous movements that are not controlled by the mind: bottom-up processes. They are based on the ability to surrender to spontaneous movement and to being in a state of receptivity, vibrations/tremors being a part of the animal-like movements that can arise (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). Some practices consist of exercises

designed to release tension from the surface level, while others also deal with deep chronic tension. In common, they all tend to seek relaxation, body awareness and wellbeing.

The Tension and Trauma Release Exercises technique (TRE) created by David Berceli (2008) is an alternative to the methods commonly used in acting training. TRE is based on both self-willed and involuntary spontaneous movement, including both top-down and bottom-up processes, also dealing with deep chronic tension. The automatic and spontaneous movements, which are the most central part of the approach, are what makes TRE different from other techniques.

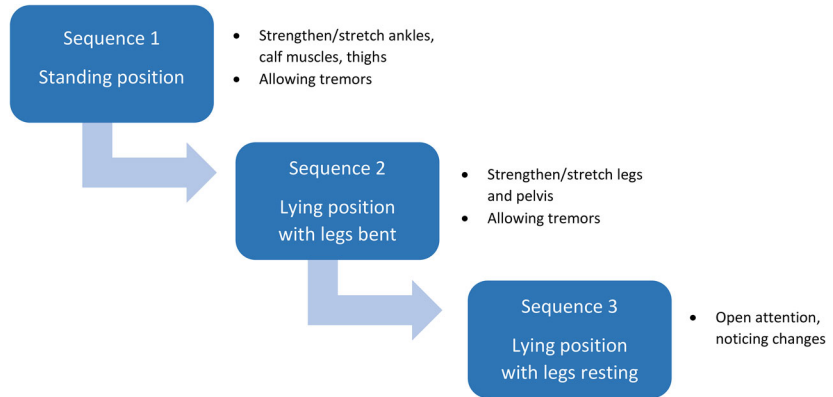
Through whole-body tremors, TRE aims to discharge profound tension patterns originated from the stress response. Central to this approach are the flexor muscles, especially the iliopsoas muscle, which is located around the lower back and pelvis, one of the most important areas to work on tension release, according to Strasberg. Strasberg (1987) also shares the view of tension as energy stuck in the body to be released. Similarly, to Strasberg's relaxation technique, TRE seeks flexibility in muscles and connective tissue, awareness of internal body sensations and a feeling of presence in oneself.

TRE consist of simple exercises specifically designed to induce the natural trembling and shaking mechanism of the body. TRE-induced tremors come from the limbic part of the brain and are therefore not under our conscious control. David Berceli created TRE to be a tool that anyone can learn to use to help work with his or her own tensions - alone, in a group, or individually and more deeply, with a therapist. In this study, however, drama students practice TRE in groups facilitated by their movement teacher to promote personal wellbeing and professional skills, not as a form of therapy.

### *Practical implementation*

The NSKI study plan includes weekly classes in TRE, which all students are required to attend. Learning about, understanding and accepting mentally how the body reacts in stressful situations is an important part of the training, a top-down approach. Research review shows that stress may induce both beneficial and harmful effects (Yaribeygi et al. 2017). Muscle tension, particularly in the face of danger is almost a reflex reaction to stress, the body's way of guarding against danger, injury and pain, and then release their tension when the stress passes. Positive stress can heighten our senses and improve our performance with a given task or assignment. However, when we experience stress too often or for too long, or when the negative feelings overwhelm our ability to cope, then problems will arise, possibly causing anxiety and depressive disorders. Understanding the body's natural fight-or-flight response is one way to help cope with such situations. Based on these facts, the course topic includes different types of stress and basic neurophysiology and neuropsychology mechanisms involved in the formation of stress responses. Students have lectures on this theory before being introduced to TRE through experience-based training.

The practical part, the bottom-up approach that follows, consists of three sequences (Figure 1):



**Figure 1.** Basic TRE sequences.

The first and second sequences contain exercises designed to fatigue the major muscle groups of the legs and pelvis, like the earlier mentioned psoas, (Figures 2, 3). This invokes involuntary muscle tremors.

Letting the body surrender control allowing the body to shake is the main part of TRE work and is happening during these sequences, especially when the pelvis is resting on the floor. The shaking then is the body's innate response to lower the tension level built up during the exercises (Figure 4).



**Figure 2.** Exercise designed to fatigue the major muscle groups of the legs and pelvis.





**Figure 3.** Exercise designed to fatigue the pelvic psoas muscles.



**Figure 4.** Letting the body surrender control allowing the body to shake.

The students' access to tremors often increases after they have become used to and familiar with the basic TRE exercises. Shaking can last for 10–30 minutes.

In the final sequence, students end up in a resting position, noticing changes and body sensations (Figure 5).

Afterwards they are encouraged to reflect on their work and share experiences with their classmates and the instructor. By using their own body awareness, the teacher facilitates empathy and understanding of the student's processes through all sequences (Toivanen & Kaasinen 2013),





**Figure 5.** Open attention noticing changes and body sensations.

observing and supporting the students both physically through different types of touch and by creating a safe environment using the voice.

### **Focus group interviews**

Reflecting on teaching and learning practices has become a staple activity in undergraduate education to promote learning (Justice et al. 2006). Regularly recording their reactions and thoughts about experiences provides students with a structured process that can help them to get the most out of their examination of their activities (Boud et al. 1994). In this study focus group interviews were undertaken using a semi-structured interview guide, to obtain insights into how drama students, in a given context, make sense of TRE. This material is drawn from the twelve students who agreed to participate, six male and six female. Four of them had three years of experience with acting studies and TRE, eight of them had two years of experience.

Due to the first author's role as the students' TRE instructor, the second author conducted the semi-structured interviews. Questions were "directed to the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question" with the following guidelines:

- Describe any physical and/or emotional experience-based reactions triggered by the TRE training sessions.
- Describe some experience-based examples that demonstrate the value of TRE training in personal and/or professional learning.

In a focus group design, social interaction between participants is the core issue (Krueger & Casey 2000). Therefore, the moderator allowed participants to talk to each other, ask questions and express doubts and opinions, while having very little control over the interaction other than

generally keeping the participants focussed on the topic. Although some were more active verbally, everyone in the groups contributed to the overall group dynamic, without dominating the discussion time.

### **Findings and discussion**

Three central categories emerged from the data that highlight the drama students' experiences with TRE-technique:

1. Increased awareness of body and mind.
2. Skills performance under pressure.
3. Increased ability to create a character.

The drama students' experiences with the regular TRE training sessions reflect processes ranging from an attitude of curiosity in bodily experiences that facilitate self-awareness, to actively applying the knowledge to overcome stage fright, and create a role. The presentation of the results includes students' quotes.

#### *Awareness of body and mind*

The students showed an open-minded attitude towards their first experiences with TRE. They were fascinated and surprised to find that small and simple body movements provoked self-generated trembling, and that this gave access to life events and an awareness of the impact these have had on their lives, emotions and ability to concentrate.

#### Female student A:

Sometimes (during the TRE sessions) I find nothing, no tremors today. I leave the room with the same feeling I had when I came. Some days your body and mind however tell you that you should be elsewhere. I have experienced this in TRE, that I have become aware of life events. It is unlike any of the other school subjects. In TRE sessions, I have been able to work with those events, despite the fact that I felt uncomfortable there and then. I noticed in my body that something had been released, without any strain, everything happening spontaneously.

The student tells about how doing TRE takes her mind back to something that happened earlier in life. The statement might indicate that she had been exposed to her implicit memory by working on releasing muscle tension. According to Bercei (2008), TRE tremors enable direct access to the unconscious reptilian brain and facilitate changes that could not otherwise be accomplished. However, others claim that this connection still is to be established and that several ongoing studies look into that context (Gordon- Lennox 2017, p. 58).

The student describes a perception of a change occurring in the body after working with memories from the past. This physical sensation is by Gendlin

(2007) called “a body shift”, occurring when one is able to focus on what is happening internally, and might lead to new insights into one’s self.

Students’ reflections demonstrate an exploratory but at the same time accepting attitude towards their physical and emotional reactions. Their awareness of the living body and mind has different expressions and manifestations as they notice their control mode shifting into a capacity surrendering the need to control, in favour of a kind of non-judgmental acceptance, and a sense of self, grounded in physical sensations in the present moment (Mehling et al. 2012).

#### Female student B:

TRE is unique [...] compared to meditation and so on where you focus on your breathing [...] TRE activates the body in such a good way, which makes it very easy to be present in it. It is in fact a challenge to me that my mind flies in its own direction, thinking about almost everything at the same time. I think of everything I should have done.

The ability to sense the presence of self through body awareness, as expressed by the student, is one of the aims of using TRE in Method Acting. In a study by Coffey et al. referred to by Moore et al. (2011), the “acceptance” component in mindfulness practice seemed to correlate strongly with the ability to regulate negative affect. However, we do not know how the students, who chose not to participate in the study, relate to this. Research shows that body awareness and attention to bodily reactions could be a challenge for those who have experienced difficult and fearful life-situations (van der Kolk et al. 2007).

Some students looked upon the regular TRE sessions as being a free space in which they dared to expose themselves to each other. They found it liberating allowing themselves to show feelings and strong reactions and to have the opportunity to express and normalise feelings, both alone and with others.

#### Female student C:

It was a new experience for me to accept the loss of body control, but quite exciting at the same time. Crying, laughter and anger all came out in TRE [...] the class being a safe place to feel and express your emotions with peers, with a teacher who knew what she was doing and where it was permitted to react in different ways, to show emotions that should not be displayed on the metro or in street. I did not know what TRE was about, but I gradually began to understand [...]. It was exciting. You just have to sense how your body is reacting and try to see how this might be connected with your mind set or with life events.

The student’s quote confirms that the space feels safe enough for her to be able to explore her emotions and body reactions. Her reflection on both loss of body-control and feeling safe point to the importance of being guided

by a skilled teacher who understands how to support the students and help them remain within their comfortable level of stress-activation, their *window of tolerance* (Siegel 2012) in which various intensities of psychophysiological reactions can be accepted without overwhelming the stress-system. As mentioned above, some of the students might struggle with attention to bodily reactions, even small ones. This could therefore be counter-productive; a stress-reaction could create more tension, the opposite of the aim of TRE. A teacher's role in drama education is, among other things, to inspire the students, to facilitate their work and to encourage them to find own creative solutions to challenges. This would certainly include helping the students building tools for self-regulation, so that they are able to find their own calm space when things are overwhelming, both now as students and later as professional actors.

Female student D:

A kind of collective consciousness around what is happening has grown. It is legitimate to share in each other's tears, because we know or acknowledge that we will experience the same. For that reason, tears are okay, everyone feels the tears, everyone knows.

Performing the training in groups involves disclosure of emotions both to oneself and to others. It also fosters the acknowledgement of the privilege of being allowed to express strong emotions, and to be an empathic fellow human. Rogers (1975) defines empathy as being able to put one self into another's shoes, a kind of understanding of another person's thoughts and feelings. These skills are of great importance to the actor.

The students were familiar with basic neurophysiology and neuropsychology, understanding and accepting their classmates' processes. The experienced tension release, as reported by the students, was also connected to emotional reactions.

Male student A:

Our comment to any outbursts of crying or anger is "Oh! That must have been liberating!" This is now our immediate and automatic response when emotions are exposed. I believe there is a correlation between the ability to release emotions and being available to your own and others' emotions.

Research shows that the ability to take care of one's needs, improvement in self-respect and respect of the rights of others was improved by body awareness (Mehling et al. 2011). Through this, awareness of one's own body as an actor can relate to being on stage with others and before the public. The quote also shows the student's understanding and acceptance of his own body reactions.

Some students learned that TRE provides an access to self-knowledge, to being able to analyse their own patterns of thoughts and to see the distinction between true and false self-behaviour.

**Male student B:**

I think that TRE was a kind of gate opener for me. When I experienced it for the first time, this shaking in the body, I was suddenly very self-conscious and questioned: Was this shaking due to my own efforts and eagerness to be “good” or was it the body’s innate response to the exercises? I tested this by trying hard to shake and I found out that the effect was not nearly as dynamic. Then I told myself just to be in the situation, continue to breathe, give in and try to accept what happens to the body and what is beyond my control. This was exactly what happened and I felt a sensation of release.

The student’s investigation through focussing attention on his bodily experiences reveals an insight into the nature of movement as both an internal and external phenomenon. The self-reflexivity displayed seems to be deeply rooted in embodied experiences that are made accessible through the bottom-up connection (Schoore 1994). One might say that this awareness makes explicit connections between self-development and the practice of TRE as an approach. His expression of *just being in the situation* can be associated with a “non-judgemental mindfulness” (Mehling et al. 2011, p. 1); reflecting an orientation of curiosity, openness to experience and acceptance.

*Mastering presence and stage anxiety*

Both Stanislavski and Strasberg suffered from exactly the same fear that haunt all other actors, stage fright (Merlin 2016). To be fearful or anxious is a very natural response to an important event, coming from the deeper part of the brain, originally meant to protect us from danger. However, how do we deal with this challenge?

As the findings above, the acceptance factor was, also reflected in the students’ stories concerning stage anxiety.

**Female student B:**

Before I started practicing TRE, I often was nervous before going on stage. My legs shook and so did my voice throughout the breathing rhythm. These nerves were far from welcome - oh no, here it comes again, I'm losing control. Now, however, I dare to feel the tremor, and, it's okay, because it is just a matter of letting the body complete the trembling. It will disappear by itself; it is nothing to worry about and it feels so liberating!

To acknowledge that stage anxiety exists, is part of the long-term strategies that are recommended for actors (Merlin 2016). Likewise is the ability to care less. The student describes her newly gained knowledge as liberating, allowing her to be present, aware of the body and to let go in the meaning of being able to put her-self “into a state of receptivity and surrendering to spontaneous movement that arises” (Schmalzl et al. 2014, p. 2).

Another female student (E) sees that the technique can give her the ability to reverse her habitual tendency to ruminate and focus on life's trivialities:

I have not yet figured out how to use TRE in acting. I still think this is difficult. Except when preparing, to become relaxed before going on stage. You cannot use up your energy on worrying about paying your bills. You will then lose focus, which does not work. Presence - that is what you strive for in acting. You will not get anywhere without it and TRE has meant a lot to me in this.

Before going on stage, being physically and mentally relaxed, are of great value to an actor to avoid stage fright (McGaw, Stilson, Clark, 2010; Wang 2000; Merlin 2016). Lee Strasberg said, "Tension is the artist's greatest enemy" (McGaw, Stilson, Clark, 2010, p. 22). Strasberg, who himself thought of stage fright as the most vulgar preoccupation of them all, (Wang 2000, p.299) was pointing to relaxation as a means to avoid stage fright to be able to concentrate.

The student expands the perspective by relating to her own personality, her need to process events in their life and the coping strategy for anxiety attacks:

I am a person who struggles with high levels of stress and performance pressure. I have been that way since I was a child. These are powerful and deeply rooted emotions. It is part of my personality and very hard to get rid of. It affects the entire day. However, TRE work was a great help when I experienced stress attacks. I cannot wait to finish my training, to get some distance from it and make it my own. It becomes excessively much doing it at school and it is very school-like.

The understanding of bottom-up connection, autonomic reactions from the body that influence the thinking part of the brain (Schoore 1994), is shown in this quote, as well as how this affects the student in both daily life and under pressure. The student expresses how her whole nervous system influences her when in alert-mode and how difficult it is to regulate and to live with this. One of the most important tasks related to stage fright, is to get to know what it is all about (Merlin 2016). That includes inevitably getting to know oneself, as the student expresses. A study conducted by Beaudoin (1999) looked at how body-centred approaches were integrated into daily life. The participants mostly used the approaches to work with anger, fear and distress and reported that one of the most helpful elements was the ability to let what they were feeling and what was happening go, and to be able to be present with their bodily sensations.

Male student C:

I agree. There is no point practicing TRE with peer students who I know and make me feel confident. The audience is an entirely different matter. They assess your work, the performance and in this context, I need to get rid of nervousness and tension, instead be open and free and have confidence in my performance, being able to rely on my work, convince

them ...to make the audience believe, ...what should I say...the role you are acting, performed in a make-believe world.

The student implements Strasberg's principle (1987) of the importance of being able to move freely without tension and in being able to transfer all attention to the task and relates to the stressful situation in self-presentation and role-playing. Freund (1990), who introduced the term "dramaturgical stress" describes this phenomenon as a feeling of lower social status in relation to the audience and the call for a "status shield" as protection, referring to a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983, p.167), who describes how status serves to protect individuals from the "displaced feelings of others".

The students, as they get into the world of acting, demonstrate some recognition of its connection to body awareness. They seem to realise that being an actor requires an all over awareness to be able to concentrate on their performance, to help them determine their status in a scene and thereby establish a position and the inherent requirements to express the character's whole being.

The third category is rooted in Method Acting classes. These draw on the students' experiences of TRE, the aim being to evoke their emotions to build a character by connecting to and entering into another character's mental state.

### *Creating a character*

The effects of regular TRE exercise training have different expressions. A common feature is that the insight those who practice TRE gain about their own body tension serves as an incentive to break tension patterns. The data reflects a general trend, in that students believe they have developed, through these experiences, the ability to direct their gaze towards greater depths within themselves, gaining access to memories of life events and their effects on personality and functioning. Their experience coincides with Strasberg (1987), who claims that an actor who is familiar with his/her own past, feelings, emotions and thoughts will be in a better position to make a character come alive. In fact, in Method Acting the actor is trained to constantly use his/her own body, feelings and thoughts to make a character come alive, therefore he/she needs to be in contact with them.

#### Female student B:

If I had not been practicing the exercises at school, then I would not have been aware of my need to relax, to keep my shoulders down. When I'm on the subway, for example, I have started reminding myself to relax and become more aware of other people, to notice if they seem stressed [...] or simply what they are acting in that moment. I believe that when playing a character or trying to get into a character, we can recreate characteristic traits observed on the subway.



The student's embodied experience seems to bring to her a closer awareness of self and others. The statement also reveals a strategy for creating a character through observation of strangers. The quote reflects what commonly is included in actors' repertoire strategies for the development of characters, transposing from personal experiences and using environmental resources (Bandelj 2003).

Female student A:

For me it's not just about being able to let go. It is just as much an awareness that tensions are a part of me. They don't stop me, but I instead use them actively in the scene work. Three years of practice has not resulted in the absence of tension. However, I have become aware of the tensions, their causes and what I can do to reduce the pain and how they prevent me from breathing freely and cause muscle stiffness. I have learned not to be completely flustered when being confronted by the situation. I used to have many strange body sensations, experienced the body as taking over somehow [...], during one actor training session I suddenly felt as though my body failed me, and did not understand what was happening. I have now realized how important it is to be able to stand in your own grounded presence. If you are going to create a character with tensions or other characteristics and history, you must acknowledge your own body and personal history.

Both of the latest statements indicate the students' understanding of the psychophysiology of stress and that TRE can be used for more than reducing their bodily tensions. It seems that they have become aware of the value of their own tensions in the make-up of their personality traits, developed and shaped by their life history. recognising suppressed emotions and being willing to let go by giving up control, is part of tension reduction. This is both an emotional and a physical challenge, involving body awareness and body trust. A study conducted by Nigh (2013) confirms drama students' TRE training can bring about a heightened awareness as an altered state of consciousness. The study examined former drama students' experiences with practicing warm-up exercises originally introduced as a tool to calm the nervous system, increase focus and reduce stress before rehearsals. The findings showed that the students gained an additional and unexpected benefit before rehearsals in that they "simply seemed to see and feel differently" (Nigh 2013, p. 641). This perception may reflect the interplay between mind and body, the feeling being accessed through images, thoughts and the body, through the felt experience.

Female student C:

We are encouraged, in Method Acting, to draw on own experiences to convey personal emotions to the character. This approach often, however, appears as an intellectual work method. You strive to memorize certain people or situations [...]. What I like about TRE is the physical approach. I experienced a bodily reaction at the beginning of the year. It was not so great, but the reaction started a process that was [...] I once had to have a spinal tap carried out. I was sick for a long time. However, it has not

been in my thoughts since then. During one of the TRE training sessions, I however experienced strong vibrations around the spine. Then the spinal tap came forward again. I realized for the first time that the body vibrations were a physical response to this event. I think TRE is all about becoming conscious about the connection between my history and body. I hope this is the knowledge that I somehow could use in my acting work

Her story reflects a prolonged stressful experience that she became aware of through TRE training. The experience illustrates a “bottom up” response from the body that is beyond the control of our consciousness regulating cognitive functions (Schore 1994). Her story supports the belief that earlier inaccessible painful experiences can be elicited through TRE by memories and by thoughts essentially being cognitive functions. Strasberg himself had a similar experience with an actor. After concluding that both her tension and pain were the result of earlier experiences, Strasberg says: “The release of those areas was essential for her to free herself from mannerism and tension that interfered with her ability to express herself on stage” (1987, p.97). However, at the same time, he claimed that tension was not emotional (p.124-125), and pointed to the disagreement among psychologists at that time, in the 1950s, concerning what emotions really are (p. 113), ignoring the earlier mentioned James-Lange theory of emotion. Recent development in scientific thinking (e.g. Damasio 1999) helps us to reveal some of those uncertainties.

The students attribute TRE as a key tool in understanding the connection between the unconscious mind, emotions and bodily expressions. It also helps them to understand how they can use this knowledge as a source for building credible role characters.

## Conclusion

The analysis of our students’ TRE experience data yielded three main themes; an increased self-awareness of body and mind, mastering presence and stage anxiety and an expanded repertoire within themselves when creating a character. When asked to summarise the most important learning experiences from regular TRE group training sessions, the students’ engagement in the insights gained from the interaction between body states and emotions is particularly pronounced. An important factor is the experience of accepting exposure of their own and others’ emotions, thus creating a sense of a classroom community of caring. The self-evoked muscular shaking process followed by a deep feeling of tension release often evoked intense emotional reactions that aroused the students’ curiosity.

Their experiences were an incentive for exploring many connections with their life history and everyday life. The realisation that they were able to see a correlation acted as a springboard to Method Acting and was manifested in the following ways. Accepting the TRE-induced muscle shaking allowed students to experience that tension release was a consequence of relinquishing control. This kind of insight seems to provide a sense of control, thus changing stage fright into greater confidence. Secondly, drawing

on personal experiences of the awareness of body and mind appeared to improve the ability to evoke realistic emotions when working with building a character and creating a role in their Method Acting.

In our view, this study provided insight into ways that TRE can help improve quality and efficiency in Method Acting and the skills training that allow students directly to apply their experiences. It contains material from 12 out of 24 students, giving support to the idea that TRE is a relevant tool for drama students' personal and professional development. However, half of the students chose not to participate in the study. There may be various reasons for this. In their quotes, the students expresses several experiences with TRE that might be challenging for others. To name a few, we would point to their experience of loss of body control, a group context in which own emotions becomes apparent to others, and peoples different needs for self-reflections. Some students might also find it difficult to put into words their own emotional bodily experiences.

We believe that TRE can be implemented as a kind of movement-based embodied contemplative practice by minding the following points. Firstly, by supporting the student's ability to stay on an accepted level of activation within their window of tolerance to help them to reach new territory. Secondly, gaining new insight in both self and others by sharing experiences, using notebooks and learning new material facilitating growth. Thirdly, TRE might not be a tool for everyone. However, a mindful introduction to this approach will help the students to experience themselves whether TRE is the right tool for them or not.

## References

- Bandelj, N., 2003. How Method Actors Create Character Roles. *Sociological Forum*, 18 (3), 387. doi:10.1023/A:1025765502226
- Barker, S., 2002. The Alexander Technique: An Acting Approach. *Theatre Topics*, 12 (1), 35–48. The Johns Hopkins University Press. doi:10.1353/tt.2002.0002
- Beaudoin, C., 1999. Integrating Somatic Learning into Everyday Life. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de L'éducation*, 24 (1), 76–80. doi:10.2307/1585773
- Berceli, D., 2008. *The Revolutionary Trauma Release Process. Transcend your Toughest Times*. Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, Inc.
- Blair, R., 2008. *The Actor, Image and Action. Acting and Conitive Neuroscience*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R. and Walker, D., 1994. *Reflection: Turning Experiences into Learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Curriculum NSKI. 2016. Bachelorgradstudium i Skuespillerfag [Bachelor Program in the Art of acting]. <http://nski.no/wp-content/uploads/Studieplan-for-BA-i-Skuespillerfag.pdf>
- Damasio, A., 1999. *The Feeling of What Happens. Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning Inc.
- Forsythe, J., 1996. Spirituality in Actor Training. *Theatre Research in Canada*, 17 (1)doi: 10.7202/1062396ar
- Fougner, M. and Killi Haugstad, G., 2015. Treating Gynecological Pain: The Experiences of Bachelor Students in Physiotherapy Performing Somatocognitive Therapy. *Physiotherapy and Practice*, 31 (5), 318–26.

- Freund, P.E.S., 1990. The Expressive Body: A Common Ground for the Sociology of Emotions and Health and Illness. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 12 (4), 452–477. doi:[10.1111/1467-9566.ep11340419](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11340419)
- Gendlin, E.T., 2007. *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Dell.
- Gordon-Lennox, J., 2017. *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies. A Transdisciplinary Conversation*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hochschild, A., 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Justice, C., et al., 2006. Inquiry in Higher Education: Reflections and Directions on Course Design and Teaching Methods. *Innovative Higher Education*, 31 (4), 201–214. doi:[10.1007/s10755-006-9021-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-006-9021-9)
- Kapsali, M., 2013. Rethinking Actor Training: Training Body, Mind and... Ideological Awareness. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 4 (1), 73–86. doi:[10.1080/19443927.2012.719834](https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2012.719834)
- Kemp, R., 2012. *Embodied Acting: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Performance*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Koch, L., 1997. *The Psoas Book*. Felton, C.A.: Guinea Pig Publications.
- Krueger, R.A. and Casey, M.A., 2000. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Levine, P.A., 2015. *Trauma and Memory*. California: North Atlantic Books.
- McGaw, C., Stilson, K. and Clark, L.D., 2010. *Acting is Believing*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Mehling, W.E., et al., 2011. Body Awareness: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Common Ground of Mind-Body Therapies. *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities in Medicine*, 6(6), 1–12. doi:[10.1186/1747-5341-6-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/1747-5341-6-6)
- Mehling, W.E., et al., 2012. The Multidimensional Assessment of Interoceptive Awareness (MAIA). *PLoS One*, 7 (11), e48230. doi:[10.1371/journal.pone.0048230](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0048230)
- Merlin, B., 2016. *Facing the Fear*. London: Nick Hern Books Limited.
- Moore, M., et al., 2011. Mind-Body Skills for Regulating for the Autonomic Nerve System. Defence Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, 2011.
- Nigh, K., 2013. Seeing Feelingly: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Mind/Body Experiences of Six Drama Students. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43 (5), 641. OISEUT. doi:[10.1111/curi.12029](https://doi.org/10.1111/curi.12029)
- Polatin, P., 2013. *The Actor's Secret. Techniques for Transforming Habitual Patterns and Improving Performance*. Berkeley California: North Atlantic Books.
- Porges, S., 2011. *The Polyvagal Theory*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Queste, A.S., 2002. The Feldenkrais Method": Application for the Actor. *Feldenkrais Journal*, 14, 11–16.
- Rogers, C.R., 1975. Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being. *Counseling Psychologist*, 5 (2), 2–10. doi:[10.1177/001100007500500202](https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007500500202)
- Schmalzl, L., Crane-Godreau, M.A. and Payne, P., 2014. Movement-Based Embodied Contemplative Practices: Definitions and Paradigms. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 205. doi:[10.3389/fnhum.2014.00205](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00205)
- Schore, A.N., 1994. *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development*. Mahweh, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M., 1999. Emotion and Movement. A Beginning Empirical-Phenomenological Analysis of Their Relationship. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, 259–277.
- Siegel, D.J., 2012. *The Developing Mind*, 2nd ed. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Stanislavski, C., 2016. *My Life in Art*. London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Strasberg, L., 1987. *A Dream of Passion. The Development of the Method*. London: Methuen.

- Toivanen, T. and Kaasinen, M., 2013. Comparing Body Awareness between Actors and Drama Teachers. *The European Journal of social & Behavioural Sciences (EJSBS)*, 6 (3), 1105–1108. eISSN: 2301-2218. doi:[10.15405/ejsbs.87](https://doi.org/10.15405/ejsbs.87)
- van der Kolk, B.A., McFarlane, A. and van der Hart, O., 2007. A General Approach to Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In: B. van der Kolk, A. McFarlane, and L. Weisaeth, eds. *Traumatic Stress*. New York: The Guilford Press, 417–440.
- Wang, S., 2000. *An Acrobat of the Heart. A Physical Approach to Acting Inspired by the Work of Jerzy Grotowsky*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Yaribeygi, H., et al., 2017. The Impact of Stress on Body Function: A Review. *EXCLI Journal*, 16, 1057–1072. doi:[10.17179/excli2017-480](https://doi.org/10.17179/excli2017-480)
- Zarrilli, P.B., Daboo, J. and Loukes, R., 2013. *Acting: Psychophysical Phenomenon and Process*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Cathrine Scharff Thommessen** holds a MA in Pedagogy (2017), University of Oslo. The topic of her Master thesis was stress and bodily regulations in young boys in prison. She is the first author of a book recently published at a renowned academic publishing house aimed at educators and therapists about the importance of dealing with their own stress reactions in trauma informed care. She has diverse theoretical and practical background in the medical and somatic field, as well as a BA in dance and pedagogy. She has been working as a supervisor in stress regulation at NSKI University College since 2011.

**Marit Fougner** is associate professor at Oslo Metropolitan University College of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences; Department of Physiotherapy. Her lecture topics are: qualitative research methods, research ethics, evidence based practice, manual skills training. Fields of research and research topics: Learning models bridging theory and practice, inter professional education, client- centered physiotherapy, cultural competency in physiotherapy, somatocognitive therapy (SCT) for chronic pelvic pain in women, aging, health and welfare.