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Why Some Roles Make Actors REAL Suicides, Lunatics and Criminals.

Psychology Explains the Force of Suggestion Which Made Charles Warner Really Kill Himself After Playing Suicide for Years, Made Joe Jefferson as Shiftless in Business as Rip Van Winkle, Etc.

By Professor David Edgar Rice, Ph. D.

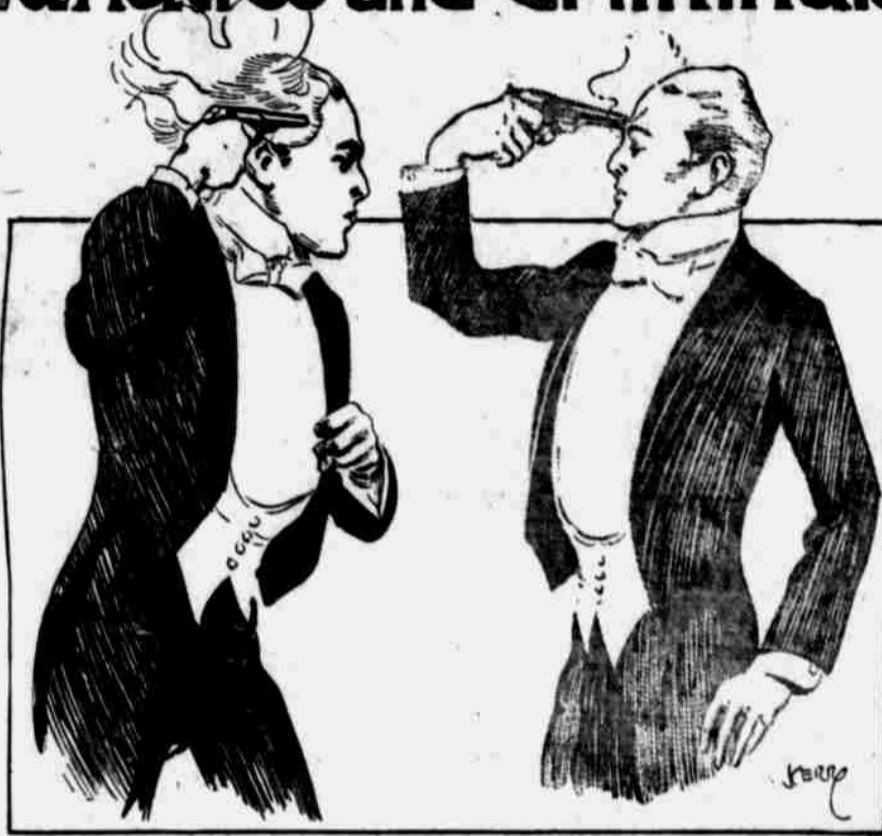
A GAIN and again we find that a peculiar, often depraved, type of character, assumed by an actor on the stage, passes into that actor's every-day life and becomes his every-day personality. When that happens the actor or actress becomes in real life the character he or she has been portraying, and acts exactly as that character does in the play.

Ida Rubenstein, the French actress who played the title role in D'Annunzio's "Martyrdom of St. Sebastian," had to give up the play because of the constant desire for self-immolation that kept coming over her. She wanted to throw herself under horses or cast herself into the Seine.

Charles Warner, the English actor, after playing a drunkard in "Drink," for forty years, developed all the symptoms of delirium tremens and eventually committed suicide in New York because those symptoms oppressed him so terribly, although he was not a hard drinker.

least the assumed emotions have overwhelmed him.

How does psychology explain these very remarkable and alarming facts—for obviously psychological science is concerned with these facts. It explains them by telling us that a bodily change occurs in us before an emotion. We do not cry because we feel sorry, we feel sorry because we cry. We do not strike because we are angry, but we are angry because we strike. We



"It is this phantom self which, under the power of suggestion, he must imitate. As it raises the unreal pistol, he raises the Pistol—and Shoots."

To the same effect Miss Emily Bateman, one of the greatest emotional actresses, says: "If real tears do not come to my eyes I do not truly feel what I am acting. nor can I impress my audience to the same extent when I feign emotion as when I really feel it. I have acted the part of Leah for twenty-four years, and the tears always come to my eyes when the little child says 'My name is Leah.'"

The foregoing instances establish two facts with positive certainty: (1) To the successful actors themselves, the feelings, however induced, are for the time being real; and (2), there is an exceedingly close relation between the mental state and the physical expression, no matter whether the physical expression be regarded as the cause or as the effect of the mental.

According to the view of modern psychology, it is only half the truth to say that there is an intimate relation between the mental state and the expression of feelings. Emotions are regarded merely as the accompaniments of bodily sensations, and can not exist without them. Neither can an emotion which has once been experienced be recalled to consciousness except by recalling the sensations with which it was originally associated.

Materialistic as the view expressed above may seem, it has the sanction of no less an authority than Professor James, who, in fact, goes one step further and asserts that these kinaesthetic and visceral sensations not only condition the emotions, but actually constitute the emotions themselves. He says:

"Our natural way of thinking about the emotions is that the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and that this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression. My theory, on the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they

occur is the emotion.

"Common sense says that we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between (the perception and the emotion), and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble.

Professor James holds that this statement is true not only of the coarser emotions whose expression is obviously largely physical, but of the so-called higher emotions as well, as the moral, intellectual and aesthetic feelings. "A glow, a pang in the breast, a shudder, a fullness of the breathing, a flutter of the heart, a shiver down the back, a moistening of the eyes, a stirring in the hypogastrium, and a thousand unnamable symptoms besides, may be felt



Photo by SYKES - CHICAGO.
The American Actress, Dorothy Donnelly, as "Madame X."

do not tremble because we are afraid, but we are afraid because we tremble.

First, the actor having mimicked the physical expression that causes the emotion, he really experiences the emotion. Then, according to the scientific law of habit, physical movements frequently repeated, become ingrained in the human organism. Consequently, if the actor gets in the habit of repeating certain physical expressions which are emotions, they tend to become fixed.

In order to get to the bottom of this mystery, we must ask ourselves: To what extent does the actor "realize" the character he represents? and by what mechanism does he arouse within himself the feelings and emotions of his part? To what extent is his real character permanently influenced by the fictitious feelings of the stage? Does the man who, for example, plays the part of a thief or a "dope fiend" actually experience the feelings of degradation belonging to the character, and does the long continued performance of such a part tend to develop permanent traits, or it is possible for him to rid himself of the acquired habits of mind as easily as he lays aside his wig or removes his makeup at the close of the performance?

As to "realizing" the character, the traditional view, as old as dramatic art itself, is that the actor will fail to achieve the highest effects unless he actually allows the part to possess him so completely that his body responds in spontaneous movements. It is true, indeed, that a few great players, like Coquelin, reject this view, and insist on the predominance of the intellectual elements. William Archer, the well-known English critic, in his "Masks and Faces," has collected evidence on this point and finds that most successful actors and actresses declare they must feel the emotion they express.

Salvini, for example, says: "If you do not weep in the agony of grief, if you do not blush with shame, if you do not glow with love, if you do not tremble with terror, if your eyes do not become bloodshot with rage, if, in short, you yourself do not intimately experience whatever befits the diverse characters and passions you represent, you can never thoroughly transmute into the hearts of your audience the sentiment of the situation."



Photo by HALL - N.Y.
Tully Marshall as the "Dope Fiend" in Clyde Fuchs' Play, "The City." He Has Been Used to Similar Characters in His Most Important Parts.



Perugini's Painting of the Martyr St. Sebastian.

state and the physical expression. As Talma, the great French tragedian, puts it, he must have "received from nature a peculiar organization for sensibility, that common property of our being; and as all our emotions are intimately connected with our nerves, the nervous system in the actor must be so mobile and plastic as to be moved by the inspirations of the poet as easily as the Aeolian harp sounds with the least breath of air that touches it." The existence of this heightened susceptibility is indicated in the case of many actors and actresses who assert that the mere study of the parts results in even stronger emotions than they give expression to when on the stage.

Further, players in most cases are likely to attempt only those parts which are more or less congenial to their nature. The interest may be in the nature of a fascination rather than of actual sympathy with the character. The man who plays the thief need not have the uncontrolled instincts of the latter, yet he could hardly hope to carry the part with much success if those instincts were wholly lacking in his mental makeup.

There is also the additional fact that the study of the part is carried on at high pressure and under the stimulus of interest. An emotional experience which, for the average individual, would represent the sum total of a lifetime may, for the actor, be concentrated within a period of a few months. It is real experience none the less, from the physiological point of view, and as such is bound to have its permanent influence upon the character.

It may be said, therefore, that the salvation of the actor lies either in his mediocrity or his versatility. The less his genius for acting, the less he will feel, and consequently the less will be the influence of the part upon his character. If he plays the part with feeling, the habit of mind will grow with each repetition. If Nat Goodwin, for example, were not such a consummate love maker on the stage, it is hardly probable that he would have had enough wives to make a book.

Ida Rubenstein, the Famous French Actress, Who Had to Give Up the Part of "St. Sebastian" Because of the Desire for Self-Immolation It Aroused in Her.



the moment the beauty excites us. In all cases of intellectual or moral rapture we find that, unless there be coupled a bodily reverberation of some kind with the mere thought of the object and cognition of its quality; unless we actually laugh at the naughtiness of demonstration or witlessness; unless we thrill at the case of justice or tingle at the act of magnanimity; our state of mind can hardly be called emotional at all.

Feeling and emotion being thus reduced to a purely physiological basis, it is altogether possible for them to become ingrained by repetition, under the law of habit, just as certainly as skill in playing the piano may be acquired by practice, or the fire horse may be trained to respond to an alarm. The stealthy movements of the thief in the play, the muscular twitches of the alcoholic or the cocaine fiend, the tears of the woman in despair, are not merely the expression of or resultants from the given state of mind; they actually help practice and frequent repetition the action becomes ingrained and applied with a given mental state, the physiological condition appropriate mental. In the light of this, shall we acquire "dope fiend" understood. of the effect of a number and a you.

There are, in fact, certain reasons why members of the theatrical profession are peculiarly susceptible to the effect of this. The first place, the genius of the actor is nothing more or less than his ability to establish the connection between the mental