

Augmenting and Emboldening Actor Training with the Hierarchy of Needs

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Abstract: *Actor training pedagogy in the West is intended to provide students with the requisite skills to succeed in their future career(s). Many of the practitioners whose theories and ideas are taught in such higher education institutions (or schools), have not changed over the last century and many of those ideas include some element of understanding – leading to the replication – of human psychology. This paper argues for the expansion of that canon of theory and practitioners by the inclusion of the theories of the psychologist Abraham Maslow as an adjunct – but not replacement – of these ideas. Using his hierarchy of needs, an additional tool becomes available to training (and nascent professional) actors, directors and maybe even dramaturgs, which could lead to a deeper understanding of the psychology of characters. Extrapolation of these ideas could also see applications in other artistic and literary focussed disciplines, in further and higher educational settings, leading to deeper and fuller understanding(s) of the texts studied and therefore the stories and ideas represented in those stories.*

Keywords: actor training; hierarchy of needs; pedagogy; psychology; cross disciplinary; higher education.

Introduction

Actor training has an implicit goal – to train actors to pursue their craft, therefore facilitating the telling of dramatic stories and through this, broadening societal understanding and knowledge. Over the last century or so, this training – in the UK – and the West more broadly – has been bestraddled by ‘Master Teachers’ (Evans, Fleming, and Reed 2020: 245) whose ideas and theories have set benchmarks by which all skills training is measured, often masking knowledge and skills gaps. This can be especially detrimental when looking at work that is not rooted in the same culture(s) as the theorists and their theories. These gaps can be addressed by looking away from these models of actor train-

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ing. This looking away can, and has rightly, looked at the theorists who have been written out of the history of training by virtue of, amongst other intersections, their race, gender, and/or culture. The focus here, however, is to look further from this explicit dramatic focus to psychology.

Character and Pedagogy

That ‘most actors would claim to “use psychology” when developing a character for performance’ (Page 2018: 2) makes plain that there is (at least) a partial focus on the humanity of the character being developed – questions of how they think, *why* they think, their history and backstory, being gateways to an understanding of this humanity. These questions are explored in the system developed by ‘Master teacher’ Stanislavski (sometimes spelled Stanislavsky), often regarded as the ‘blueprint for much Western actor training’ (Wilkie 2015: 33). Stanislavski’s methodology aims ‘to look at what human beings do naturally in their everyday lives and turn it into something systematic for the stage’ (Merlin 2007: 3), but ‘very rarely is psychology a formal part of an actor’s education and training’ (Page 2018: 1). If the purpose of a drama school education is to give tools to an actor to help them convey a convincing character, not having an explicit focus on the psychological make-up of a character could be seen as constituting a missing pedagogical tool, limiting the possibilities of representation of a broader range of characters in the milieu.

Of the major pedagogical approaches – behaviourism, constructivism (Boghossian 2006), social constructivism (Hirtle 1996) and libertarianism (Glass 2001) – it is arguable that, broadly speaking, social constructivism and/or libertarianism are employed in most drama schools. Building pedagogical approaches through a social constructivist lens and the assertion that ‘education [comes] as a result of the empowerment of the learning in a social situation’ (Hirtle 1996: 91) and the libertarianism approach where ‘human nature is expressed through intentional, reflective, meaningful activity situated within dynamic historical and cultural contexts that shape and set limits on that activity’ (Glass 2001: 16), suggests that facilitations of discussion and thought around the *psychological* composition of a character are aligned. That ‘psychology class is simply not part of the standard training curriculum’ (Page 2018: 1) serves as a frustration to that alignment.

If we are to accept the liberationist assertion that ‘the historical, cultural, and social background shapes the present context, [...] and even outlines possible psychological states and the most intimate aspects of a self, from identity to feelings and desires’ (Glass 2001: 18) it becomes clear that the symbiotic relationship between the psychological self and the context in which it exists must be entered from one side of the circle and often, using tools such as Stanislavski’s Given Circumstances¹, the ‘psychological state’ is a secondary thought. How rich the gains are to invert that relationship and quite

¹ Stanislavski explains these as “[...] the story of the play, its facts, events, epoch, time and place of action, conditions of life, the actors’ and regisseur’s interpretation, the mise-en-scene, the production, the sets, the costumes, properties, lighting and sound effects, – all the circumstances that are given to an actor to take into account as he creates his role” (Stanislavski 1980: 51).

literally see it from a different angle. Whilst this may not work for every adopter, that it might work for some and augment and/or challenge others – stimulating wider linking of concepts and performative strategy – seems to be a salient and persuasive argument to add this tool to the toolbox of knowledge meted out in a drama school setting. It would, logically, follow, that to work with the psychological make up of character, students would be better placed for success if they were to understand psychology more explicitly.

In the UK, all undergraduate Acting courses provided at institutions registered with the Federation of Drama Schools are over three years (Federation of Drama Schools 2022). The course structure for all courses can be broadly described as;

Year one: introductory modules in voice, movement and acting with contextual studies aiming to situate all this learning,

Year two: advanced work in these areas, making more concrete and interdisciplinary links. There is also the addition of more specific, discrete skills such as stage combat, screen acting, radio acting, Shakespeare, clowning etc,

Year three: the demonstration of the coalescence of all learning, through the prisms of public shows and personal independent projects as well as explicit preparation for the world of the performance and creative industries.

One school handily subtitles each of their three years, progressively, as ‘Discovery [...] Mastery [...] Independence’ (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama 2022). Within this structure there is space for psychology to be a golden thread that runs through the entire course – indeed, as posited here – this praxis could become an explicit and integrated part of the acting strand.

Looking Away from the West

It can be glibly assumed in the ‘West’ that the vast majority of actor training across the world is Western in outlook (and geographical positioning); indeed, The Hollywood Reporter’s annual list of the ‘Top 25 Drama Schools in the World’ (Huston 2023) sees ‘the world’ as comprised, exclusively, of institutions in the USA, UK and Australia – ignoring the many schools of theatre which are not Western in pedagogical or geographical genesis. There is learning possible from a ‘looking away’ here.

The differences between training in the ‘West’ and ‘East’ could be delineated by its directness. ‘Indirect training is most common in the West [where actors] learn a basic grammar of performance and apply that grammar to creating performance’ (Watson 2013: 1) whereas in the ‘East’, ‘in performance forms such as Noh, Beijing Opera, Kathakali, and the various forms of Balinese dance [...] most of the physical, vocal, and psycho-emotive skills learned by young actors are a byproduct of the work on the repertory rather than the focus of the training. Mastering a fixed repertory of roles and plays is the cornerstone of this type of training’ (Watson 2013: 2). There is learning to be taken from this dichotomy of performance training, in that successful pedagogical

difference in pursuit of the same goal, is possible. There is already evidence that ‘deepening awareness of Oriental traditions has played a large part in both the development of actor training and performance aesthetics’ (Hodge 2000: 6), albeit with ethical considerations of appropriation brought to the fore. In sensitively using the spirit of this curious scholarship coupled with a critical awareness of origin and full and proper acknowledgement, there are opportunities to enrich and embolden.

Maslow

As we turn to look explicitly at the work of Maslow – a Western psychologist – we are also confronted by appropriation. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was not solely his own work but ‘informed by the time he spent with the Blackfoot Indians in Canada’ (Blackstock 2011: 74), it ‘represents an interpretive model of human developmental needs based on a Eurocentric paradigm upon which the needs of the individual hold precedence over collective well-being’ (Bear, Choate, and Lindstrom 2022: 40). Looking at, acknowledging and understanding the contextual and cultural origins and positioning of any knowledge that is used within the pedagogy of any training is essential in assessing its efficacy – both for the work itself and those with (and for) whom the work is studied and/or made. It must be made clear at this juncture that we are looking at Maslow as it relates to Western psychological mores. There are other Western ethnocentric psychological theories² that sit alongside, and maybe in opposition to, Maslow’s ideas and it is recommended that those, and others, are to be investigated should Maslow’s ideas not be deemed contextually suitable when working with and/or on Western ethnocentric texts/work.

In the ‘A Theory of Human Motivation’ we are introduced to an ‘attempt to formulate a positive theory of motivation’ (Maslow 1943: 371). The idea that humans are comprised of a set of positive motivational forces which drive and shape the experiences and relationships that are had, was not a new concept, but in his work, Maslow aims to coalesce this into a framework which is useful and malleable. It could be compared to Stanislavski’s attempts to do the same. Stanislavski’s system is, as the moniker attests, a systemic formulation of areas that an actor should be working in, with and through, to create characters which – like real people – are ‘inconsistent, complex beings’ (Merlin 2013: 26).

Maslow describes these needs as ‘basic’; subcategorised further into physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. It is important here to linger on the word ‘needs’. These categories are posited not as additional or supplementary ‘wants’ or ‘desires’, but as essential ‘needs’. Without them humans and their humanity cease to be.

Maslow posits that ‘[h]uman needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also, no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state

² Such as Frederick Herzberg’s ‘Two Factor Theory’, Clayton Alderfer’s ‘Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG) Theory’, and David McClelland’s ‘Acquired Needs Theory.’

of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives' (Maslow 1943: 370). It is from this understanding that the graphical representation of this – the famous pyramid³ – is deduced.

	The need for self-actualization .	Following your calling, freely, 'doing what [an individual] is fitted for' (Maslow, 1943)
	The esteem needs.	Self-esteem; respect; recognition of achievement(s); status; strength; independence; freedom
	The love needs	Friendship; romantic relationships; family; social acceptance
	The safety needs	Personal security; employment; financial security; good health;
	The 'physiological' needs	food; water; reproduction; rest; clothing, shelter; health

Fig. 1: Maslow's Hierarchy

Maslow's ideas have gained traction in the worlds of business, education, social care, nursing, marketing, child development studies and people management; in these contexts it is presented as a way to manage and understand people and their psychology. The same could, and should, be true for those training to portray people and their psychology, but there is not, save for a chapter in 'Psychology for Actors' (Page 2018: 151–166), extensive documented use in acting and/or actor training. It is argued here, that using psychological principles alongside psychologically informed actor training such as that propounded by Stanislavski, can allow an actor to further embed and understand their learning. Synthesisation of ideas can lead to additional benefits.

Douglas McGregor is an 'influential' (Adair 2011: 148) proponent of Maslow's ideas in the world of management. His widely used 'Theory X and Theory Y' extrapolates Maslow's ideas into a practical theory of effective management through an understanding of the motivating forces exerted on and by the workforce. He recognised that positing the hierarchy in 'language which industrial and commercial managers could understand' (Adair 2011: 147) removed a barrier in applying his theory practically. Creating the conditions for Maslow's hierarchy to be contextualised, and tested, through different lenses can lead to tangible results. Nevertheless, it is important to look at critique of the hierarchy to make informed decisions in regard to usefulness and application.

The prepotent notion of a strict hierarchy, which precludes the idea that the hierarchical levels that have been moved through could 'become temporarily dominant again as a result of deprivation' (Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey 1964: 76) is to be challenged. Given that Maslow did not, as explained earlier, institute the pyramidal representation, it is possible to argue that the ability to be in multiple places in the hierarchy at once is important. The implicit assumption that all people are equal (Graham and Messner 1998: 196) ignores that 'each culture and subculture judges human behav-

³ 'The ladder was a common way of conveying the theory until the 1980s, when the pyramid became dominant' (Bridgman, Cummings, and Ballard 2019: 83).

our according to its own norms and values' leads to a conclusion that Maslow's 'academic frames are grounded in one particular set of cultures only: the Western ones' (Mawere et al. 2016: 68). 'The empirical validity of the theory itself' (Wahba and Bridwell 1976: 213) have been much discussed and must be factored into its dissemination and teaching through a decolonised lens – as well as the reporting and discussion of any findings or conclusions. There is also a question – as alluded to previously – around the rights of authorship of the theory. These findings are to be held in tandem with the benefits that can be gained in using the hierarchy in various contexts. It is argued that 'many of these criticisms are levelled not at Maslow's theory per se, but at the pyramidal misrepresentation and sanitization of the theory provided by management publications' (Sosteric and Raktovic 2020: 6). Human psychology is not a zero-sum game.

Psychology and Training

Stanislavski was 'eager to negotiate the profound and nuanced dialogue between our *bodies* and our *psychologies*' (Merlin 2007: 5 [emphasis in original]) this dialogue underpins his – and subsequently our – understanding of 'the human being (and, therefore, actor) as what he called a 'psycho-physical' instrument' (Merlin 2007: 5). In his description of character objectives, of which there are three types – 'the external or physical, the inner or psychological, and the rudimentary psychological type' (Stanislavski 1980: 119) – Stanislavski argues that 'they must be distinctly woven into the fabric of your part' (Stanislavski 1980: 119), asserting that 'all actors [...] should make use of characterizations which enable them to become 'incarnate' in their parts' (Stanislavski 1979: 30–31). If the actor at the centre of this formulation is not empowered fully, the representation that they can offer can only ever be surface deep. The spectre of the uses of psychology as a method for 'inhabiting' a character is inextricable from these ideas.

A three-year acting undergraduate course within the Western model could be further enhanced by making it a four-year course, with the first year being a whistlestop tour of psychological principles – a study of what makes humans human – ideally across cultures, taking into account students' lived identities and therefore providing an understanding of their personal version of the 'psycho' in the psycho-physical instrument. This 'research into the psychology, the human experience of the character' (Whyman 2016: 157) would, it could be argued, allow for ease in habitation of characters in the specific actor training that will follow. Through an understanding of a personal, individualised context – especially if that is not 'Western' in origin – the mapping of a Western centric version of training would be easier, as the internal tension between what is innate and what is supposed as innate can be navigated consciously. Given that actor training is an expensive pursuit⁴, an additional year of training, and therefore expense, is less than desirable, but using the Maslow principles as an embedded and integrated pedagogical lens in actor training may mitigate this suggestion and enhance training.

Much Western actor training, is geared toward a naturalistic style, finding an objective truth for performers. Brecht, whose ideas are often seen as a foil to Stanislavski,

⁴ Tuition fees for UK institutions are circa £9,000 per year.

‘introduced character resumé, à la Stanislavsky; he adapted emotion memory to facilitate complex, even contradictory characterizations; he paid attention to physical actions and the analytical segmentation of the actions to define the super-objective, as Stanislavsky called it’ (Silberman 2020: 45); for Brecht to work, naturalism is a starting point – ‘while adapting Stanislavsky’s emphasis on realistic observation and detail (i.e., naturalism), on empathy, and even on audience identification with characters, he [Brecht] insisted on the critical demonstration of social significance’ (Silberman 2020: 46), this social significance can be bolstered through a conscious and nuanced investigation into how the ‘social’ is constructed.

Naturalistic acting is the aim to have a replication, on stage, of that which can be observed in ‘real life’. To find ‘truth’ Stanislavsky urged his actors to find the anchor to which their characters are moored – themselves. Theories such as the ‘Magic If’ which places us ‘on the plane of make-believe, by changing one circumstance only’ (Stanislavski 1980: 65) are rooted in the idea that for something to play as coherent and understandable it needs to be rooted in something that is *itself* coherent and natural. The psychological understanding of character is therefore embedded in this approach, and – it is here argued – could be pushed and extended further through the use of Maslow.

Physical and mental wellbeing must be safeguarded and prioritised in order to create the resilience and safeguarding of an actor’s own psyche in preparation to withstand the replication of a character’s psychological turbulence – this safeguarding is inherent in working with the hierarchy. Famed Method adherent and lauded three-time Oscar winner, Daniel Day-Lewis ‘when he played Hamlet in 1989 became convinced on stage that he was talking to the ghost of his own father [...]. He walked off mid-performance, and has not returned to the theatre since’ (Hattenstone 2018) – a thorough and robust safeguarding in his training, as well as a rooted knowledge of his own psychological state could have been acted as a preventative factor in this eventuality.

Understanding what ‘neutral’ – or balance – is for the actor can reap rewards when the psychological explorations take an actor ‘far from home’; knowing where ‘home’ is can help the navigation process back to it and create a sense of distance between the actor and the character which will allow the actor to ‘shed’ the character afterwards. The (Michael) Chekhovian technique of ‘thinking, feeling and willing’, which tells an actor that they ‘should be able to distinguish between [their] own qualities and the qualities of [their] character’ (Petit 2009: 98–99) is a technique already within the actor training canon onto which this can be mapped.

In a drama school setting where ‘the term wellbeing can get misused, in an ignorant and unkind way, as a code word for “mental health problems” [...] a whole-student approach to wellbeing is the next step for drama schools’ (Davidson, Maxwell, and Shergill 2022: 41) it becomes imperative that there is an understanding of what wellbeing is, what it could look like and the tools available to enact this.

Application

The progressive arc of a character in a scene or play is a progressive arc of change. Using Maslow’s theories, this progression can be posited clearly and pictorially. In relation to the hierarchy, all characters – or, as Maslow would argue, all people – are

looking to know where they are and how they can ascend the hierarchy. The demonstration of application that follows is of, and about, characters grounded in Western culture.

In creating a character, knowing where it is that they begin on the hierarchy can make the range of choices for its creation clearer. A character who is at the bottom of the hierarchy does not have many or any of their psychological needs met and would therefore have low status in any scene that they are in, as status comes from security, which that character lacks. Those psychological needs can be found in the given circumstances posited in the script – if working from one – and/or from the character’s needs within the story if devising⁵. This then gives the actor space to play with physicality; their character will be responsive to their surroundings in order to attain their needs, which will have implications for how the character is physically represented. Even if the entire story arc of the character leaves them on this rung of the ladder, there will be some hierarchical movement, even if that is small.

Stanislavskian objectives and super objectives can be seen as analogous to hierarchical ascension. An objective is something that the character wants. If it is a ‘positive’ objective, that want – or objective – will see the character aim to ascend to the next rung of the hierarchy; if it is a ‘negative’ objective, i.e., one that is intended to pull down or diminish another character, then the objective can be their want to bring everyone down to their level, acknowledging, tacitly, that they feel stuck where they are and see no way of moving. Their aim is to make their movement, their arc, their progression, relative. If other characters fall, the relativity means that the protagonist rises – shifting the power and status. Using the hierarchy makes clear, for the actor, what it is that they need to be ‘playing’ to create a lifelike character.

Ravenhill suggests that ‘plays are a sequence of duologues when you scratch the surface’ (Ravenhill 2021) but in order to understand the transaction that is taking place, the characters need to be coming at the conversation from different ‘angles’. Conflict of expectation and objective(s) creates tension which in turn creates drama. If we are to apply Maslowian ideas to this, what we actually see are two different parts of the hierarchy trying to find dominance or equilibrium. Either way, there are needs and wants that the characters have – consciously or not – that can be mapped against the hierarchy.

Act one scene seven of *Macbeth* is here used as an exemplar [see fig. 2], as a way of addressing the fear of Shakespeare – or ‘Shakesfear’ as Cross (2017) coins it – and because of the Shakespearean dominance in Western drama school settings. Figure 2 is an annotated copy of the beginning of that scene, marking suggestions of where application of the hierarchy may be able to expose the psychological nature of the exchange. These annotations can be used to make clear the psychology of the characters in this scene. That knowledge can then be used by the actors, director and/or dramaturg to make physical decisions as to the playing of the scene – the more that is understood, the more scope there is for play.

⁵ This is the process of co-creating the story in a rehearsal room, often with prompts but no delineated script.

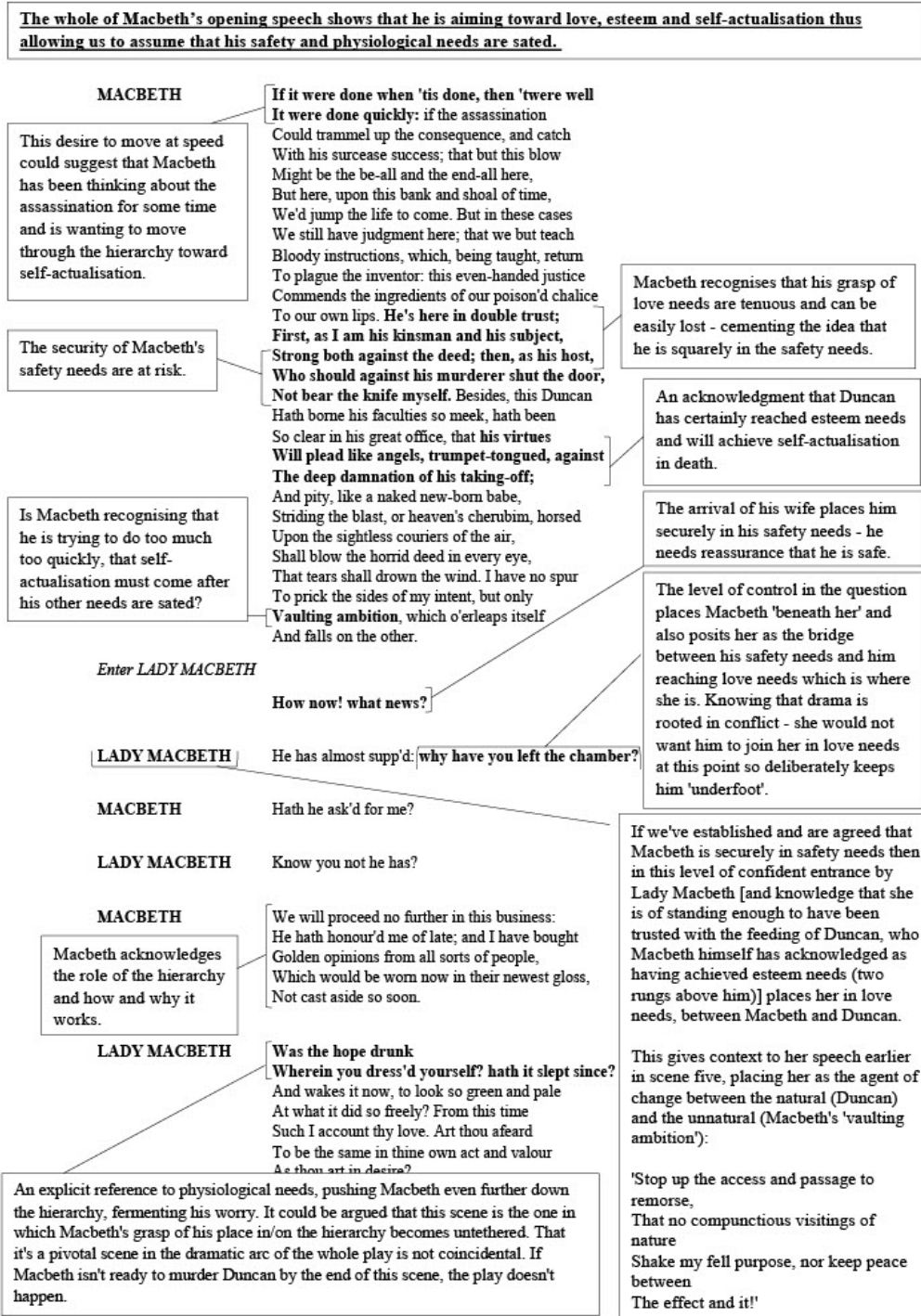


Fig. 2: Partially annotated Macbeth 1.7.1-41

Conclusions

Drama school students at the beginning of their training are given a metaphorical toolbox for skills. Part of the training is to facilitate the mastery of certain tools for this toolbox and make the absence of others more visible. It is impossible for a student actor to learn absolutely everything that there is to learn in three years, but it is possible for that actor to gain a solid base to excel professionally in a way that makes sense to, and for, them. Leaving open areas that can be continually improved on, and a toolbox that can accommodate and expand is essential. One of the markers of all living things (and movements) is growth and change – that should be no different in our continual learning, especially of a craft as multifaceted and ever evolving as acting. This idea of growth and change is at the heart of what is written here.

The addition of Maslow would prove an easy, worthwhile and enriching addition within the current structure of drama schools, where practitioners are studied to skill actors in working on, and with, stories that require realism and naturalism in order to communicate their, often, socially engaged ideas and themes. As posited here, the work with and around Maslow is very much a support to the characterisation work – both mental and physical – that acting methodologies generally aim toward. It will allow for another angle on a character and will make clear(er) the psychological needs of each character. The idea is certainly not to replace established practitioners but to add another method of understanding – which may, eventually, when cross-pollinated with what already exists, become a school of practice in itself.

The efficacy of this approach can be seen in the demonstration of ideas yielded in Figure 2. Understanding characters' psychological drives allows an actor to create a 'whole' character and enables them to base their choices on more points of reference.

New actors to drama school in the UK can be as young as 18 years old, and, it is argued that even at this age where 'the processes that underpin faster neuronal connections' (Sawyer and Azzopardi 2018) are still developing, understanding more about oneself, and oneself in culture and society, can allow for more complex and detailed characterisations. It might well be that in learning about character psychology via Maslow, a self-reflexive learner will begin to apply the things learnt, to themselves and their own objectives.

The ideas articulated here are to be built on, used further, shared and critiqued. The joy of using a hierarchy that has been with us for over three quarters of a century is that there are three quarters of a centuries worth of thinking and usage to be drawn upon. It is hoped that this is a beginning, not only for Maslowian application in rehearsal rooms but also for more cross disciplinary approaches to acting and pedagogies, especially within the varied and various disciplines linked to psychology.

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