

# Developing Intuition for the Contemporary Actor

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## Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of intuition for actors and suggests how a proposed somatic practice may develop an actor's intuition in order to facilitate intuitive behaviour in theatre performance. In this article, I discuss findings pertinent to my current original Practice as Research (PaR) PhD inquiry. I argue that intuition is an energetic sensitivity that produces a governing will and is experienced as a pre-cognitive interoception in the enteric nervous system (ENS). I give evidence to suggest the ENS and vagus nerve form the gut-brain axis involved in the biological process of intuition. I argue that intuition may be developable due to the body's capacity for neuroplasticity. I hypothesise that an actor's intuition may be a psychophysical state by considering the Flow and Absorption theory. I propose that an actor's intuitive behaviour influences their thoughts and emotions, physical actions (gestures and movement), and vocalisations (language and sound) within a performance environment. I propose that intuitive behaviour for an actor is sensitive and responsive to space, time, and relationships.

**Keywords:** Intuition; Actor; Somatic Practice; Theatre Performance; ENS; Vagus Nerve; Sensory Awareness

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## Introduction

The history of intuition in a Western paradigm is marked by scientific and metaphysical discord [1]. Currently, intuition suffers from conceptual vulnerability in the respective disciplines it surfaces under [2]. Primarily, intuition is seen either as an emotionally driven reaction [3] or rapid-thinking tool [4]. In a theatre performance framework, resemblances of intuition are enmeshed in instinct [5], presence [6], creativity [7], influences [8], impulses [9,10] and inspiration [8,11]. Actor training pioneer Konstantin Stanislavski, whose techniques largely remain the foundation for mainstream acting in Europe [12], aimed to cultivate a "creative mood" (p.461) for actors through "conscious psychotechniques", replicating the power of intuition (p.342), himself believing intuition could not be consciously accessed or controlled [11]. In this investigation, I define intuition as an energetic sensitivity [13] which produces a governing will [14] that drives intuitive behaviour. I suggest that a governing will presents itself as a certainty of action for an actor that is shaped by a heightened awareness and sense of control over their behaviour. My interpretation is supported by theatre performer-practitioner Michael Chekhov, who positions the actor's governing will as an energetic force that guides them [8]. Herein is the process of the actor's intuition: energetic sensitivity fostered from an external and internal environment that produces a governing will which drives intuitive behaviour. I argue that an energetic sensitivity is created by a heightened sensory awareness of interoceptions, exteroceptions, and kinesthesia in space, time, and relationships. I refer to space here as both the performance and rehearsal environment, as well as the mise-en-scene. Within time, I include rhythm, tempo, and duration. With regards to relationship, I consider relationship with space, with the ensemble, and with self.

## Intuition: The Subconscious, Thoughts, and Emotions

Intuition is currently theorised as a subconscious process [1] in

two oppositional frameworks influenced by dual-processing theory [4,15]: inferential intuitionism and classic intuitionism [16]. Inferential intuitionism defines intuition as a rapid-thinking tool that opposes rational and analytical thinking and is fuelled by perception processing [2-4,17]. Perception processing theory reasons that thoughts and emotions are constructed through simulated memories that cause predictions of pre-defined perceptions of an external environment [18]. Perception processing theory challenges the somatic understanding that thoughts and emotions are influenced by the external environment as reality independent of the body as an object, but interdependent with the body as a subject operating within the environment [19,20]. Classic intuitionism accepts intuition to be an individual's sixth sense that inexplicably guides their behaviour [21]. Classic intuitionists consider intuition to be an emotionally driven subconscious process that influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviour [22,23]. I suggest that intuition should not continue to be defined in classic and inferential differentiations, nor should it continue to be framed in opposition to rational and analytical thinking in a dual-process model. Dual-processing theory faces scrutiny as a reductive framework that spurs on its own conceptual failure [24]. Moreover, intuition may benefit from analytical reasoning in the process of understanding and developing it. In order to explore intuition, I hypothesise that an employment and analysis of both thought and emotion must occur, in conjunction with a developed sensory awareness. I consider neuroscientific and somatic studies which found that there is no neurological distinction between thoughts and emotions, and that these processes require an application of the body's sensorial systems, not just the cognitive head-brain [18,25, and 26]. It is possible that intuition's binary classifications are perpetuated by the residue of Cartesian dualism, which continues to shape compartmentalisations of the body and brain, as well as a vocabulary for and of the self that must be cautiously deconstructed in order to re-articulate alternative ways of knowing and doing that



are inclusive of whole-body understandings [20]. Dualist perspectives have influenced severe criticisms of intuition, ultimately perpetuating it as emotionally driven and therefore irrational [17,27]. I reflect here on academia's aversion to emotions and subjective experiences in general [28] and debate how much of intuition's criticism is rightly accredited to emotions, or if the criticism is due to the politics of knowledge in Western paradigms that prioritises conscious intellect [1]. A favourable argument in this reflection is Lisa Feldman Barrett's theory of constructed emotions, which argues that emotions are socially constructed categories that are culturally specific, given to define and contextualise affects and interoceptions. Her theory sheds a necessary light on the classic framework emotions traditionally operate within, where emotions are believed to have indisputable biological fingerprints and present themselves as uncontrollable subconscious phenomena that share basic universal truths [18]. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that intuition would be stifled if driven by emotional desires [8,14, and 29], and while emotions may be a by-product of intuitive behaviour, there is evidence to suggest they are not integral to the experience of intuition per se [30].

### **Intuition as a Biological Phenomenon**

Intuition is commonly referred to as a 'gut feeling' [31], but there is evidence to suggest that intuition may originate within the gut; more specifically, in the enteric nervous system (ENS) [21,31, and 32]. The vagus nerve is further cited as a critical component in the neural communication of intuition between the ENS and head-brain. This research would contradict the vis-versa relationship previously perpetuated by Cartesian dualism, where the head-brain was understood as a reactive control system that dictated and created the body's affects and interoceptions [31]. If it is accepted that intuition originates in the ENS, it would account for intuition being framed as a subconscious, or rather, pre-cognitive sensation [32]. Interpreting intuition as a pre-cognitive sensation may account for an individual experiencing the affective surety of action; knowing what to do, without being able to cognitively rationalise the knowledge - a common experience associated with the lived experience of intuition [21]. I argue that this affective surety, the sense of control, constitutes the governing will. To surmise: I suggest that we are cognisant of intuition thanks to neural communication between the ENS and vagus nerve, and that intuition transpires as a neural impulse in the ENS that is stimulated by a sensory awareness of exteroceptions, interoceptions, and kinesthesia that is considerate of space, time, and relationships. In addition to being a biological phenomenon, I further explore the lived experience of intuition; an important consideration in noting that "all human experience...is grounded in biological processes. At the same time, all human experience...is never "simply" biological." (p.94) [33].

### **Intuition as a Psychophysical State: Reviewing Flow Theory, Absorption Theory, and the Actor in Performance**

Intuition is frequently discussed as a singular occurrence in a specific environment or decision-making context [34]. But I suggest that actors may employ intuition as a psychophysical state in performance through my analysis of Flow and Absorption theory. I argue that by developing intuition, it may be possible to explore it as a psychophysical state in a performance environment. Performance requires an actor to be in a continuous state of flow that cannot be disrupted. The performance environment asks the actor to be present, versatile, creative, spontaneous, and unassuming [35]; it requires an actor to apply themselves with skill and ability that goes beyond their formal training and rehearsed techniques [36]. The state of Flow, as

theorized by Csikszentmihalyi M (1991) [37], corresponds with the psychophysical state actors desire to achieve in theatre performance [38]. Flow happens when attention is invested in achievable goals executed through expertise skills, and the individual experiencing Flow is challenged within their own expertise experience. However, if the challenge is too taxing, the individual will become discouraged and desist, thereby prohibiting Flow or nullifying the potential thereof. In theatre performance, attention to realistic goals may be interpreted as the performance of a play text and the portrayal of a character, which requires the actor to explore and develop physical actions, vocalisations, and thoughts and emotions in the space and time dictated by the world of the play, as well as the performance environment, and through relationships with their character, their ensemble, and the performance space at large. It may be assumed that by the time an actor performs in a professional context, they have acquired sufficient expertise skills through their actor training and previous practical experience to rise to the challenge Flow requires. I argue that an employment of Flow may help facilitate intuition, and the employment of intuition may help facilitate the experience of Flow. When actors behave intuitively, the performance becomes "free, joyful, and easy" (p.228) - it flows [7]. Csikszentmihalyi M (1991) [37], suggests that Flow may be obtained when an individual is self-aware and implements their full attention to the task at hand. He offers that an individual will know when they are in Flow because they will no longer be holding a dual-focus (what the actor would recognise as dual-consciousness); time will no longer be something they are cognisant of; and they will feel as though they are not controlling their actions, but will still feel in control of the situation [37]. This paradox of control aligns itself with the idea of intuition being a governing will produce by energetic sensitivity; the inexplicable guiding force that prompts the actor's behaviour. The attention and sensorial awareness demanded from Flow corresponds with Absorption theory [38]. Absorption theory hypothesises that in creative tasks, individuals become immersed in the task they are involved in, experiencing it as a reality, due to the employment of their imagination and attention [39]. Absorption theory echoes the observation that actors "can transcend [their] immediate surroundings by acts of... imagination; [they] can 'forget' [themselves]... and become oblivious to [their] surroundings." (p.91) [20]. An individual's capacity for Absorption is proportional to their imaginative abilities, which allow them to experience imaginative circumstances in a way that may be sensorially perceived; a 'tangible' reality in a specific space and time [39]. I hypothesise that Absorption may be a key component in intuition as an energetic sensitivity. While theatre training practitioners would encourage actors to rehearse training techniques and a play-text so thoroughly that they are able to become absorbed in the performance [20,35], I consider that this may be an impractical suggestion for contemporary actors who must meet professional demands. In mainstream Western theatre practice, what previously took years to master must now be achieved in months, and in the case of professional practice, weeks [40]. I propose that intuition may provide actors with an autonomous tool that bridges gaps created by contemporary professional demands and well-established training approaches, by providing actors with a way of producing the unique qualities which characterise the psychophysical state required of actors in a performance environment.

### **Intuition, Acting Training, and Somatic Practice**

Acting training is designed to equip an actor with an arsenal of skills and techniques that may assist them in performance [20]. Practically, acting training is geared and designed to function in a rehearsal environment. An actor must then translate what they have learnt and



rehearsed, and adapt it to an uncontrolled performance environment [35]. But a rehearsal and a performance environment demand different psychophysical states of operation from actors [35,41]. Rehearsals are designed to be explorative spaces where techniques and moments can be revisited and re-shaped. Yet rehearsals in today's mainstream industry do not always provide the privilege of exploration over time [40]. There is now a tension between what a rehearsal is conventionally designed to do, and what it is practically achieving. I argue that the actor's psychophysical state in performance is duly affected by this tension. Today, there is a burgeoning pool of contemporary training practices for actors. But these contemporary approaches continue to perpetuate techniques from previously existing systems that pre-date today's challenges [28]. A response to this dissonance in actor training has been addressed by introducing somatic training for actors as a means of enabling them to develop their bodies as autonomous tools that may reflexively adapt to challenges presented in a performance environment [42]. In addition to the potential, they hold for actors-in-training, somatic practices offer techniques with which to explore and develop subconscious processes by developing an actor's sensory awareness. Sensory awareness is achieved by focusing attention and intention on interoceptions, exteroceptions, proprioceptions, and kinesthesia [43]. The employment of attention and intention to subconscious processes may change or alter an actor's psychophysical systems and behaviours by stimulating neural re-patterning [26,44]. Neural re-patterning is possible due to neuroplasticity; the body's capacity to re-wire various processes of the body's nervous systems [18,19]. I hypothesise that intuition, as an occurrence in the ENS, is a biological phenomenon that may be susceptible to neuroplasticity. I intend to explore my hypothesis by investigating how an original somatic practice may assist actors in developing their intuition in order to facilitate intuitive behaviour in performance that is sensitive to space, time, and relationships. In order for an actor to develop their intuition, I suggest they must attentively and intentionally explore and develop their sensory awareness, as well as their thoughts and emotions; and that these processes operate within a reciprocal nature of analysis, understanding, and development. "The more viscerally aware, the more emotionally attuned you are." (p.175) [45], and the more emotionally attuned, the more viscerally aware one may be [20].

#### **Suggested Somatic Practice as a Method by Which to Develop an Actor's Intuition**

The method I offer aims to explore and develop an actor's sensory awareness with a focus on their interoceptions, exteroceptions, and kinesthesia by attentively and intentionally employing particular approaches in an original somatic practice. By practising interoceptive, exteroceptive, and kinesthetic awareness, an individual's sensory awareness may be developed, which may create new neural connections and pathways [46], and may, in turn, develop an actor's intuition. The following suggested somatic practice relies on the effectiveness of an actor's imagination. The use of imagination in structured techniques has produced observable neural developments [47]. Imagination is valuable tool in sensory and self-awareness [48]. My preliminary investigation guides me to consider the following techniques to explore in the somatic practice of this inquiry:

**Guided meditation:** guided to focus on motor and mental imagery, meditation may develop sensory awareness [49]. There is evidence to suggest meditation with an emphasis on motor and mental imagery influences and changes brain waves and neural activity [50]. An increase in theta and alpha brain activity has been linked to intuitive states in the practice of meditation [51].

**Language:** has potential to facilitate sensory awareness [52], and therein influence how intuition is explored. Existing research on language's ability to shape and inform our epistemologies and ontologies [18], provides evidence to substantiate a re-consideration of language in a rehearsal environment; how choice and phrasing of instructions may give rise to possible alternative practical explorations for actors regarding sensory awareness and intuition.

**Play:** may be implemented as a somatic tool that may encourage intuitive behaviour [22], by using it as an explorative method with which to engage sensory awareness in rehearsal and workshop environment. Play provides an attentive, freeing, exploratory experience for an actor [40].

#### **Conclusion**

I propose that intuition as a psychophysical state and biological phenomenon may be developed by and through developing an actor's sensory awareness which may influence neural re-patterning. The effectiveness of this suggested practice is dependent on a practical investigation that remains the focus of the future of this research. A PaR investigation is defined by research which is dependent on knowledge production generated through a practical exploration [53]. Therefore, whether or not an actor's intuition is a developable biological phenomenon and psychophysical state remains to be explored in the practice of this research. I intend to conduct the practice of this research by facilitating rehearsal, workshop, and performance processes that will explore an actor's exteroceptions, interoceptions, and kinesthesia through the considered preliminarily designed somatic practice. In considering the extensive review of existing research, I am optimistic that the aims and objectives of my inquiry may prove positive.

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