

Research project looks at how de-roling may help actors shed intense roles

June 6 2014, by Darrah Tinkler

Actors and actresses have learned many methods of becoming their characters, but how do they leave their character—or de-role—when the role is over?

"I asked myself that question," said Daijah Porchia, a Kansas State University freshman in theatre, Kansas City, Missouri. "How do [actors](#) handle intense parts without becoming depressed or negatively harmed?"

Porchia used this question as the basis of her research project for the university's Developing Scholars Program, which provides underrepresented students opportunities to conduct research projects with a faculty mentor.

Sally Bailey is a professor and director of Kansas State University's drama therapy program. She is Porchia's faculty mentor and has been involved with de-roling techniques for actors and drama therapy clients for the last 20 years. She wrote a chapter about de-roling in the book "Safe Enough Spaces," which explores methods of teaching theatre. De-roling is described as taking roles off after rehearsals so that actors and actresses can come back to themselves when their performance is finished.

Examples of de-roling techniques include shaking limbs and body to literally shake the character off, or ritualistically stepping out of a performance by handing back a character's specific prop or costume piece to a director.

"De-roling is not a common practice in acting, but it's used all the time in drama therapy because you're working with clients who are very vulnerable," Bailey said. "But actors are very vulnerable, too. They spend many, many years learning how to get into role, but they're never taught techniques about getting out of it."

Bailey said she has known many actors—and read about others—who have been bothered by playing really intense roles. Those roles have led to changes in their personality, including depression, acting out or heavy drinking because they didn't leave their characters behind at the end of the day.

Porchia's interest in method acting and de-roling came from the death of actor Heath Ledger, who played the Joker in the movie "The Dark Knight" in 2008.

"Heath Ledger became completely immersed in his role so that he was unable to separate the character from himself," Porchia said. "He seemed to become the Joker and died shortly after performing the intense role."

In fall 2013, Kansas State University's theatre program performed "columbinus," a play based on the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. Director Jennifer Vellenga invited Bailey to teach the cast de-roling techniques. Vellenga's concern was that the student actors were close in age to the characters in the play and, as in the play, they may have experienced similar situations of bullying and stereotyping in real life.

Vellenga believes that the de-roling techniques, along with cast members consciously providing support for each other, helped them handle the intensity in "columbinus" better than if they had not had some way to consciously leave the play in the theatre each night.

For her [research project](#), Porchia interviewed six of the eight "columbinus" cast members about their experiences with the show and how de-roling assisted them. She also asked how they personally were able to come out of their character and if they would do such an intense show again.

Porchia and Bailey will analyze the themes of the students' answers as well as answers from actors and actresses who have not used de-roling techniques in similar intense productions. They want to see how much of an effect de-roling has.

Using empirical data, Bailey and Porchia want to see how valuable de-roling is for all actors. They hope to show that de-roling should be incorporated into all actors' training, no matter the size of the stage on which they are performing.

Provided by Kansas State University

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