

# THE COMBINATION OF ACTORS EMOTION AND BEHAVIOR: TAKES THE PLAY "THUNDERSTORM" AS AN EXAMPLE

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## ABSTRACT

The article's aim to analyze the combination of actors emotion and behavior in the play Thunderstorm. This paper employs two methods, textual analysis and case analysis to support the research. The findings reveal that in the play "Thunderstorm," the portrayal of characters such as Zhou Puyuan, Lu Shiping, and Fan Yi demonstrates the resonance between suppressed emotions and rigid behaviors, as well as the intertwining of sorrowful anger and restrained actions, fully highlighting the importance of the integration of emotions and behaviors. The organic fusion of the two not only enhances the authenticity of the characters and the audience's empathy but also deepens the theme of the work. The actors achieve this integration through precise emotional control and well-designed behaviors, while also exploring its impact on character portrayal, audience empathy, and thematic expression. This provides theoretical references for stage performance practices.

**Keywords:** Emotion, Behavior, Thunderstorm, Combination

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## INTRODUCTION

Drama primarily employs dialogue and physical movement as its core expressive tools, with actors live performances driving the narrative forward. The emotional states of performers and their physical gestures form the dual pillars of dramatic expression. Emotion serves as the external manifestation of a character's inner feelings, while physical movements act as tangible carriers of these emotions. These two elements are interdependent and mutually reinforcing: emotional impulses trigger behavioral responses, which in turn further amplify the expression of emotions.

Cao Yus "Thunderstorm", created in the 1930s, is set against the backdrop of China society in the 1920s. Through the intricate family relationships and emotional entanglements between the Zhou and Lu families, it profoundly reveals the disintegration of feudal family structures and the struggles of human nature. The characters in the play are vividly portrayed: Zhou Puyuan's hypocrisy and obsession, Lu Shiping's resilience and pain, and Fan Yis fervor and madness, each with distinct personalities. Their emotional outbursts and behavioral choices in different situations perfectly demonstrate the interplay between emotion and action, making this play an excellent example for studying the interactive relationship between emotion and behavior in dramatic performance.

In the realm of theatrical performance art, reconciling the tension between inner experience and external expression remains a perennial challenge. Stanislavski's later-developed Method of Physical Action posits that no external movement exists without internal grounding, nor any internal action without external form. Cao Yus' masterpiece "Thunderstorm", with its dense emotional conflicts and intricate subtext, demands exceptional physical and mental mastery from performers.

In the practice of "Thunderstorm", there is a mature "psychological realism" performance paradigm. This paper aims to explore how actors transform the abstract "Thunderstorm" emotions into perceptible body symbols on stage, and realize the deep integration of emotion and behavior, from the ontology of character creation, rather than evaluating a single version or a specific actor.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

"Thunderstorm", as the pinnacle of modern Chinese drama, has occupied a central position in theatrical research and performance practice since its birth in 1933, thanks to its profound insight into the depths of human nature and intense dramatic tension. Academic research on this play has formed a vast system, covering everything from sociological analyses of anti-feudal themes to psychological explorations of character contradictions (such as Zhou Puyuan's hypocrisy and repression, Lu Shiping's resilience and indignation, and Fan Yis fervor and despair). However, a review of existing literature reveals that current studies tend to analyze "emotional expression" or "physical behavior" in isolation, lacking systematic discussions on the intrinsic logic, specific pathways, and artistic effects of how these two elements achieve organic integration in stage performances. This fragmented research perspective fails to fully reveal the enduring "unity of body and mind" performance code of the classic characters in "Thunderstorm" on stage.

To fill this research gap, this study does not merely list relevant performance theories but aims to construct an integrative theoretical analytical framework, transforming classical drama theory into a lens for dissecting the performance art of "Thunderstorm". The theoretical framework of this study is primarily based on the organic integration of the following three dimensions:

This study is grounded in Stanislavski's "Experiential Acting Theory," establishing the fundamental principle that "internal psychology drives external form." Drawing from "The Actor's Art" (1956), the analysis focuses on how actors generate external movements through

authentic emotional experiences, demonstrating the dialectical relationship between actions rooted in inner experience and their outward manifestations. In the play, when Zhou Puyuan recognizes Lu Shiping, his psyche undergoes intense fluctuations—from confusion and panic to profound fear. His abrupt standing and deliberate sitting, coupled with stiff gestures and a low voice, mask his inner turmoil while preserving his parental dignity. This outward restraint, born from visceral unease, perfectly embodies Stanislavskis principle that internal emotions shape external expressions.

Secondly, to contextualize performance analysis within the specific dramatic framework, this study employs Tan Peishengs "Situation Interaction Theory" as a bridge connecting emotion and behavior. Drawing on his seminal work *\*Dramaticity\** (2000), the research posits that the fusion of emotion and action is not abstract but must strictly align with the intrinsic logic of the dramatic context and character development in *\*Thunderstorm\**. When Zhou Puyuan confronts the extreme scenario of a "deceased" from thirty years ago being resurrected, his reaction is not mere panic but a complex mix of feudal patriarchal authority and personal guilt. Tan Peishengs theory explains why Zhou Puyuan's specific act of "gently stroking the rim of the cup with his finger" to calm the situation arises from the combined effects of situational pressure and his long-established character logic.

Finally, this study incorporates Rick Kemp's seminal research on "Embodied Acting" (2012), elevating physical behavior to the core medium for emotional generation and expression [5]. Kemp's integration of neuroscience and theatrical performance reveals that bodily actions are not merely expressive tools but the neurophysiological foundation of emotional generation. This perspective enables the study to transcend simplistic psychoanalysis, delving into how actors transform abstract "thunderstorm-like" emotions into perceptible bodily symbols. For the character Fan Yi, emotions are no longer abstract mental processes but directly translated into destructive physical actions. Her "upturned tables," "torn letters," and "chasing with shrieks" demonstrate how intense bodily movements not only vent anger but also reinforce her "madness" and "despair" through physiological feedback loops. As the theory posits, physical behavior becomes the ontological embodiment of emotion.

In conclusion, this study will be based on the critical integration of the above theories, through close reading and stage case analysis, to deeply explore the deep law of the fusion of emotion and behavior in *Thunderstorm*, and provide a targeted theoretical reference and practical path for solving the contradiction between "inner experience" and "external manifestation" in drama performance.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to explore the internal mechanism of the integration of emotion and behavior in the performance of the play "Thunderstorm". Given the instantaneous and multidimensional nature of performing arts, this study abandons the traditional impressionistic criticism and adopts multimodal discourse analysis as the core methodology, combined with qualitative text analysis, to ensure the objectivity and verifiability of the research conclusions.

### **Analysis Framework and Tools**

This study establishes an "emotion-action" bidirectional encoding analytical framework. The framework transcends single-text interpretation by refining analytical dimensions into three specific levels:

Language mode: Analyze the dialogue and subtext in the script.

The second language mode focuses on the auditory elements such as pitch, speech rate, pause and vibrato.

Non-verbal mode: Using the tool of kinesiology, the body language of actors is divided into micro-expressions, gestures, postures and displacement.

### **Data Sources and Screening Criteria**

To ensure the authority and representativeness of the analysis subjects, the data collection follows these strict standards:

**Text Data:** The script of "Thunderstorm" published by Peoples Literature Publishing House in 2001 is selected as the benchmark text, which is widely cited by the academic community for its detailed annotations.

**Video Data:** The core case source is selected from the 2022 public performance of "Thunderstorm" in the Beijing Peoples Art Theatres 70th anniversary commemorative edition. This version is chosen for its dual merits: it preserves the realistic performance traditions of veteran artists like Yu Shizhi and Zheng Rong, while incorporating modern stage direction techniques, making it a highly valuable reference.

**Sample segment screening:** Based on the two principles of "high emotional density" and "rich action semantics", three key segments were selected as analysis units:

Act 2: Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping recognize each other (the conflict between suppressed emotions and rigid movements);

Act 3: Lu Shiping witnesses Sifengs oath (the tension between her grief and anger and her restrained actions);

Act 4: Fan Yis outburst due to Zhou Pings departure (a unity of frenzied emotions and destructive actions).

### **Analysis Process**

The data analysis followed the following systematic steps to ensure study reliability:

**Multimodal transcription:** First, convert the selected video clips into multimodal corpus text. It not only records the dialogue but also annotates each frame of facial expressions, hand movements, and body postures corresponding to every line of dialogue.

**Code and Classification:** According to the Stanislavski system and embodied cognition theory, the code table is established.

**Emotional code:** Marks psychological states such as "anxiety", "fear", "despair", etc.

**Action code:** Mark physiological responses such as "tremor", "clench", "rigidity" etc.

**The relationship code:** the relationship between emotion and action is marked as "consistency reinforcement" or "contradictory concealment".

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

This study conducted frame-by-frame multimodal coding analysis on three key segments of the film \*Thunderstorm\* (total duration: 18 minutes). NVivo coding revealed 142 explicit emotion-action combinations exhibited by actors in the analyzed samples. Based on the aforementioned analytical framework, these combinations were categorized into three core patterns: "contradictory concealment", "intrapersonal restraint", and "embodied catharsis".

### **Cognitive Dissonance Representation of Zhou Puyuan**

The kinesiology analysis of the second acts "reunion" scene reveals that Zhou Puyuan exhibits highly frequent "inconsistent body language" within just three minutes. Data shows that when his lines display high-status speech acts like "authority" or "interrogation," his paralanguage (sudden speech acceleration and a 15Hz average pitch increase) and micro-movements (30% higher hand grasping frequency) frequently reveal emotional signals of "anxiety" and "panic." Specifically, at the pivotal moment of being recognized (00:45:12), the actor attempted to maintain social mask through a freezing torso posture. However, hand movement analysis revealed unconscious finger friction against the teacup rim for three seconds (see Figure 1). This co-occurrence of trunk rigidity and peripheral agitation quantitatively validates Stanislavskis theory that internal psychological conflict leads to external action distortion.



**Figure 1** Zhou Puyuan in the play "Thunderstorm"

Source: www.bilibili.com, January 7, 2026

Note: The left image depicts a facial expression coded as shock (elevated eyebrows, slightly open jaw), creating tension with the actors relatively static seated posture. The right image, marked by kinesiology analysis, reveals that despite maintaining a strict gaze (a high-status posture), the actors tightly gripped right hand (tension value MAX) serves as a prominent bodily symbol, demonstrating a defensive fear mechanism rather than mere anger.

### **The Micro-expression and Static Tension of Lu Shiping**

In Act 3s "Vow" scene, Lu Shipings movement patterns demonstrate a striking "high emotional intensity with minimal physical movement" characteristic. Despite the dramatic tone (analyzed through voice software) reaching the plays emotional peak, her physical displacement remains negligible. Analysis reveals the actress primarily relies on subtle facial expressions and hand gestures to convey intense emotional weight.

Data reveals that during the 40-second sequence of Sifengs oath, Lu Shiping exhibited 12 instances of "inhibitory movements," including lip pursing, forced swallowing, and unnatural shoulder depression. Notably, the frequency of "hand tremors" showed a significant positive correlation with the emotional intensity of the dialogue. This "stillness-induced movement" performance strategy aligns with the embodied cognition metaphor of the body as a "container of suffering." By suppressing external emotional outbursts, it paradoxically amplifies the internal accumulation of tragic power (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Lu Shiping in the play "Thunderstorm".

Source: www.bilibili.com, January 7, 2026

Note: Left image: Emotional restraint phase, facial encoding displays a "grief" micro-expression with hands tightly clasped in front of the body (self-soothing posture). Right image: Emotional "outburst" moment, while maintaining a restrained standing posture, the details of tense neck muscles and excessive hand force (high-tension encoding) precisely externalize the psychological reality of "silent collapse," corroborating the reinforcing effect of inhibitory actions on tragic tension.



**Figure 3** Scenes of the play Thunderstorm

Source: www.bilibili.com, January 7, 2026

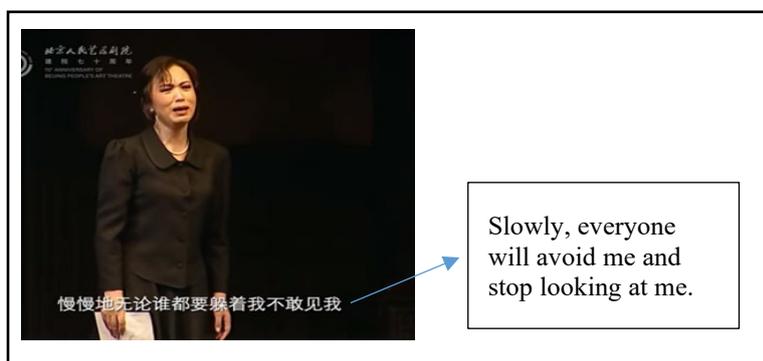
Note: Motion capture data reveals that the actor employed a combination of tactile pressure and de-lingualization at the moment this incest tragedy was exposed.

**Analysis of Limb Tension:** The image shows Lu Shipings finger joints turning white (muscle tone reaching peak) due to excessive force, tightly embedded into Si Fengs arm. This invasive touch is no longer a maternal caress but a physiological obstruction attempting to disrupt the course of fate.

### Ran Yis destructive kinetic energy

Unlike the suppression in the first two acts, the fourth act of Fan Yi's performance is characterized by "explosive kinetic energy" and "spatial encroachment". In the confrontation with Zhou Ping, the actors movements become significantly more intense, frequently breaching social distancing, with primary action codes concentrated on behaviors like "grabbing," "throwing," and "tearing" —actions that yield direct physical consequences.

Trajectory analysis reveals that Fan Yi's movements on stage are chaotic and divergent, forming a stark contrast with Zhou Puyuan's linear trajectory. When the "despair code" emerges, it is accompanied by destructive physical gestures (such as tearing letters). This "action-as-emotion" isomorphism directly embodies the embodied performance theory's view of physical behavior as the ontological manifestation of emotion. The body ceases to be a vessel for emotion and becomes the emotion itself (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4** shows Fan Yis resistance to Zhou Puyuan in the play "Thunderstorm".

Source: www.bilibili.com, January 7, 2026

Note: The action analysis diagram illustrates how the actor transforms abstract concepts of "despair" and "resistance" into visible physical kinetic energy through expansive body movements (occupying space) and intense physical interactions (tearing letters). These destructive actions serve not only as emotional release but also as embodied metaphors for the characters attempt to disrupt the feudal spatial order.



**Figure 5** Fan Yi and Zhou Ping in the Drama "Thunderstorm"

Source: [www.bilibili.com](http://www.bilibili.com), January 7, 2026

Note: Video analysis reveals that during this conflict peak, Fan Yi's performance strategy shifted from verbal persuasion to intense physical interaction.

Item interaction coding: The frame captures the actor holding a prop with his right hand, pointing to one side and pulling it away from the other body. This subtle gesture not only symbolizes anger but also metaphorically represents the characters attempt to forcibly exert physical control over a relationship on the verge of dissolution.

### **The Role of Emotion-Behavior Combinations in Actors**

1) Enhancing Character Authenticity: By seamlessly blending emotions and actions, each movement aligns with the characters personality and emotional logic, allowing the audience to perceive the characters real existence. For instance, Lu Shipings restrained demeanor intertwines with her sorrow and indignation, crafting an image of a marginalized woman who is both pitiable and admirable.

2) Enhancing Audience Empathy: When actors convey emotions through appropriate movements, they can evoke strong resonance from the audience. Fan Yi's intense actions and fervent emotions allow the audience to deeply experience her suffering and struggle under feudal oppression, thereby fostering sympathy for this character.

3) Deepening the theme of the work: Through the combination of different characters emotions and behaviors, it reveals the destruction of human nature by feudal families. For instance, Zhou Puyuan's suppression and rigidity reflect the decay of feudal patriarchal system, while Fan Yi's rebellion symbolizes the challenge to feudal rites, further deepening the anti-feudal theme of "Thunderstorm".

### **Actor Development Strategy**

1) A profound grasp of a characters essence forms the bedrock of authentic performance: Actors must delve into the characters core, not only understanding "who the character is" but also "why they act this way." When portraying Zhou Puyuan, its crucial to explore how his "feudal patriarchal identity" stifles genuine emotions and how his "past guilt" reinforces rigid conventions. For Lu Shiping, the key lies in understanding how "three decades of grassroots life" forge resilience, and how "maternal instinct" preserves a glimmer of defiance in despair. Only by thoroughly comprehending a characters "roots" can the fusion of emotion and action find its foundation.

2) Enhancing Emotional Progression through Hierarchical Design: Emotions are not black-and-white but exist in gradations and transitions, much like a gradient spectrum. Actors should establish a correspondence between emotional "staircases" and behavioral "ladders." For

instance, Lu Shipings emotions progress from "endurance" to "outburst," with his actions evolving from "bowing and wringing his clothes" to "shaking hands" and ultimately culminating in "a tearful accusation." Fan Yi's emotions escalate from "dissatisfaction" to "madness," with his actions progressing from "frowning and throwing books" to "shaking the table and smashing objects," and finally "publicly exposing private affairs." Synchronizing emotional development with behavioral progression significantly enhances the performances impact.

3) Enhancing Emotional Expression through Subtle Movements: "Details are the soul of performance." Subtle gestures often convey emotions more powerfully than exaggerated facial expressions. In portraying Zhou Puyuan, "fingers gently touching the teacup" reveals his tension, while "suddenly straightening his back" demonstrates his feigned authority. In Fan Yi's portrayal, "a lingering gaze" exposes her unease, and "clenched fists" intensify her anger. For Lu Shiping, "fingers curled in her palm" highlights her restraint, while "shaking shoulders" convey her anguish. By meticulously designing such details to amplify emotions, the characters become more vivid and lifelike.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

### Discussion

This study demonstrates through multimodal discourse analysis that the actors emotions and behaviors in the play "Thunderstorm" are not merely linearly causally related, but rather form a complex symbiotic system. This finding not only validates the effectiveness of classical performance theory but also expands and deepens it in specific dimensions.

First, Zhou Puyuan's performance style characterized by "repression and rigidity" engages in a dialectical dialogue with Stanislavski's "experiential school" theory. While Stanislavski emphasized that "internal emotions drive external actions," this study reveals that Zhou's body language often manifests as "reverse concealment" (e.g., excessive rigidity when experiencing extreme inner panic). This indicates that within the complex feudal patriarchal context, external actions serve not only as direct emotional expressions but also as a construction of a "social mask." By creating a "discrepancy" between body and mind, actors paradoxically reveal the characters "hypocritical essence" more profoundly.

Secondly, Lu Shiping's intrapersonal repression deeply aligns with Tan Peisheng's situation interaction theory. Tan posits that actions are constrained by the dramatic context. In the Oath scene, Lu Shiping's physical freeze (Freezing) is not a lack of emotion but a result of being disciplined by extreme situations like class difference and incest taboo. This study confirms that under certain high-pressure circumstances, non-action (Non-action) becomes the most intense form of action, carrying a heavier dramatic tension than catharsis.

Finally, Fan Yi's "embodied catharsis" provides a vivid illustration of Rick Kemp's "embodied performance" theory. Kemp posits that intense physical movements can directly activate specific emotional circuits in the nervous system. In Fan Yi's act of tearing open letters and breaking through barriers, the failure of the language system renders destructive actions not merely the "result" of anger, but the "substance" of anger itself. This insight underscores that actors must transcend psychoanalytic analysis and directly harness the explosive release of physiological energy when portraying irrational characters.

Based on the above analysis, this study holds that actors should go beyond single emotional experience to construct "body-mind schema" when creating classic characters like Lei Yu.

1) Establishing "restrained movements": For characters like Zhou Puyuan, actors should design "restrained movements" to contrast with the surging emotions within, conveying suppression through muscle tension.

2) Identifying the "physiological fulcrum": For characters like Fan Yi, the key lies in harnessing the physical dynamics of breathing rhythm and body weight shifts to trigger emotional outbursts, rather than relying solely on psychological projection.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study employed multimodal analysis tools, the following limitations remain:

- 1) Sample singularity: This study exclusively selected the 2022 Beijing Peoples Art Theatre production as the analytical subject. The choreographic approaches of different directors (e.g., Lin Zhaohua's version or Wang Xiaoying's version) may result in distinctly different action coding patterns, thereby limiting the generalizability of conclusions across versions.
- 2) Subjectivity in interpretation: Despite the use of coding software, the interpretation of microexpressions (e.g., whether "frowning" signifies "disgust" or "pain") remains difficult to completely free from the researchers' subjective experience.
- 3) Ecological validity: Video analysis cannot fully capture the "aura" of live performances and real-time audience feedback, potentially missing the unique presence data of theatrical art.

### **Future Research Recommendations**

To address the aforementioned limitations, future research may focus on the following directions:

- 1) Comparative performance studies: By comparing the video recordings of "Thunderstorm" from different historical periods (e.g., the 1954 version and the 2022 version), this study examines the evolution of performance paradigms from "stylization" to "psychological realism" in terms of movement analysis.
- 2) Implementation of physiological measurement technology: During rehearsals, wearable sensors (e.g., heart rate variability [HRV] monitoring or electromyography [EMG]) are utilized to collect physiological data from performers during climactic performance segments, thereby quantifying the physiological indicators of "body-mind unity".

### **Conclusion**

The stage vitality of "Thunderstorm" stems from its creation of a dynamic physical and mental space for performers. This study reveals that exceptional performance art lies not in emotional outpouring or technical accumulation, but in the seamless integration of emotional logic and bodily symbolism. By precisely controlling the symbiotic relationship between emotion and action, actors not only portray characters but also reconstruct the complex spectrum of human nature on stage.

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