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## The Reflective Actor: Metacognition, Role adaptation and Psychological growth

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### Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the role of metacognition in theatrical role adaptation and its psychological implications for theatre practitioners. While acting is often perceived as primarily emotional or intuitive, this research positions reflective cognitive regulation as the central mechanism underlying performance quality, emotional containment, identity boundary management, and therapeutic growth. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten theatre practitioners and analyzed thematically, revealing that actors engage in continuous internal monitoring during script analysis, rehearsal, and live performance. Participants described deliberate emotional calibration, dual awareness (simultaneous immersion and observation), structured role-exit practices, and reflective integration processes that prevent emotional spillover and identity diffusion. Importantly, the findings indicate that psychological transformation does not occur through emotional expression alone but through metacognitive reflection that converts performance experience into insight, resilience, empathy, and self-regulation. The study reconceptualizes theatrical role adaptation as a model of applied metacognitive mastery, challenging traditional dichotomies between cognition and emotion, art and science, and performance and therapy, and highlights implications for acting pedagogy, drama therapy, clinical psychology, and performance training.

**Keywords:** Metacognition; Theatrical Role Adaptation; Drama Therapy; Emotional Regulation; Identity Negotiation; Reflective Practice

### 1. Introduction

Theatre has long served as more than a site of aesthetic entertainment; across cultures and centuries it has functioned as a space of ritual, identity exploration, and psychological transformation [1]. The ancient Greek concept of catharsis, communal engagement with tragedy to purge and regulate emotion, presaged contemporary understandings of performance as a psychologically active process. Acting, at its core, is a cognitive, emotional, and embodied endeavour that requires practitioners to inhabit roles that may diverge significantly from their own lived identities. This process of role adaptation involves continuous negotiation between self and character, demanding immersion deep enough to generate authentic emotional expression while simultaneously maintaining sufficient distance to preserve psychological integrity. These demands do not arise from intuition alone; they require reflection, monitoring, and regulatory control aligned with the cognitive science construct of metacognition, broadly defined as awareness and regulation of one's own cognitive processes [2,3].

Metacognition encompasses two principal dimensions: metacognitive knowledge (awareness of strategies, task demands, and personal capabilities) and metacognitive regulation (planning, monitoring, and evaluating cognitive activity in real time) [4]. Applied to theatrical performance, metacognitive knowledge involves knowing how to prepare for a role and which techniques sustain emotional authenticity, while metacognitive regulation encompasses monitoring immersion, evaluating whether emotional states risk becoming overwhelming, and adjusting performance strategies accordingly. Hatami [5] documented that actors frequently describe a form of "double consciousness,"

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simultaneously inhabiting the character and observing themselves in performance. Johnson [6], Anderson [7], and Santamaria and Moncrief [8] established that drama activities foster metacognitive awareness, with Kuzmenkova and Erykina [9] extending this to structured drama-based metacognitive strategy instruction. Heyes and colleagues [10] further argued that metacognition is socially constructed, an insight directly relevant to the inherently collaborative, dialogic theatre rehearsal environment.

The connection between metacognition and drama therapy is theoretically salient. Landy [11] established that role-play enables clients to externalise internal conflicts, experiment with adaptive behaviours, and reflect on alternative perspectives. Systematic reviews confirm that drama therapy enhances emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and self-awareness across clinical populations [12,13]. Therapeutic frameworks such as Metacognitive Reflection and Insight Therapy (MERIT), while not explicitly theatrical, demonstrate that deliberate cultivation of metacognitive skills supports self-awareness and recovery [14]. Yet despite this converging literature, empirical research rarely identifies metacognitive processes as the explicit mechanism underlying therapeutic outcomes in drama-based interventions. Performance studies address reflection in acting without consistently connecting it to cognitive psychology, while cognitive science examines metacognition primarily in learning and problem-solving contexts, not in creative performance [15].

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative, phenomenological investigation of ten professional theatre practitioners lived experiences. Specifically, it examines (i) how actors perceive and employ metacognitive strategies during role adaptation; (ii) how they negotiate self-role identity boundaries; (iii) the emotional regulation strategies they deploy during rehearsal and live performance; (iv) the social dimensions of metacognition in collaborative theatrical spaces; and (v) the therapeutic transformation actors attribute to reflective practice. In doing so, the study reconceptualizes theatrical role adaptation as an applied metacognitive process with implications for acting pedagogy, drama therapy, and clinical psychology.

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## **2. Materials and methods**

### **2.1. Research Design**

A qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm was adopted. Phenomenology was selected because the study aimed to illuminate practitioners' conscious experiences of metacognition in role adaptation, processes that are inherently subjective and meaning-laden rather than quantifiable. This approach privileges depth of understanding over breadth of generalization, making it appropriate for the investigation of internal cognitive and emotional processes in a specialized professional population.

### **2.2. Participants and Sampling**

Ten professional theatre practitioners were recruited through purposive sampling, with additional participants identified via snowball sampling through professional theatre networks and referrals. Purposive sampling ensured that all participants possessed relevant experiential knowledge. Inclusion criteria required: (i) professional or semi-professional theatre experience; (ii) a minimum of three years of acting; (iii) experience preparing and performing varied roles; and (iv) willingness to introspect on cognitive and emotional processes. Individuals lacking adequate theatre experience or unwilling to provide informed consent were excluded. The final sample represented diverse age groups and performance backgrounds to ensure breadth of perspective.

### **2.3. Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. The interview schedule comprised open-ended questions aligned with the research objectives, covering: mental preparation processes when adapting to new roles; awareness of thoughts and feelings during rehearsal and performance; strategies for separating personal identity from character; emotional regulation techniques following performance; and perceived personal growth through role work. Interviews were conducted both online and in person, in quiet private settings to ensure confidentiality and comfort. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **2.4. Data Analysis**

Transcripts were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [16]. Phase one involved repeated reading of transcripts to achieve data immersion. Phase two entailed systematic generation of initial codes relating to metacognitive awareness, identity regulation, emotional monitoring, and perceived therapeutic

impact. In phase three, codes were organized into candidate themes reflecting patterns across the data set. Phases four and five involved iterative review, refinement, and naming of themes to ensure internal coherence and accurate representation of participant accounts. Phase six produced the final analytical narrative, interpreted in relation to the research questions and extant literature. Dual-analyst discussion was used to enhance credibility during coding.

## 2.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants received detailed participant information sheets and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms (P1 through P10) and removal of identifying details from transcripts. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty and to decline any question they found distressing. Given that interview content involved personal and potentially emotional material, participants were reminded of this provision throughout the process. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis yielded five overarching themes: (1) Conscious Cognitive Monitoring in Role Preparation; (2) Self-Role Boundary Negotiation; (3) Emotional Regulation and On-Stage Metacognition; (4) Social Metacognition in Collaborative Spaces; and (5) Therapeutic Transformation Through Reflective Practice. Table 1 presents the themes and their associated subthemes.

**Table 1** Major Themes and Subthemes Identified Through Thematic Analysis

| Major Theme                    | Subthemes  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Conscious Cognitive Monitoring | Script analysis; intentional strategy use; reflective rehearsal          |
| Self-Role Boundary Negotiation | Identity shifting; distancing techniques; integration vs. separation     |
| Emotional Regulation           | Monitoring affect; emotional containment; controlled vulnerability       |
| Social Metacognition           | Awareness of audience; co-actor attunement; director feedback processing |
| Therapeutic Transformation     | Enhanced self-awareness; emotional catharsis; resilience and growth      |

### 3.1. Theme 1: Conscious Cognitive Monitoring in Role Preparation

Role adaptation was consistently described as a deliberate and highly reflective cognitive process. Actors reported engaging in formalised internal dialogue during script analysis and rehearsal, indicative of active metacognitive monitoring. Participants described questioning their interpretive choices continuously:

"I am constantly asking myself: why is my character reacting this way? Am I placing my own personality into this?" (P4)

This monitoring extended to evaluation of rehearsal techniques; participants described experimenting with different delivery approaches while assessing authenticity, a process consistent with metacognitive regulation involving planning, monitoring, and revising cognitive strategies [3,4]. Actors were not passively absorbing a script; they actively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed character interpretations through recursive reflection. The internal questioning participants described reflects a meta-level awareness of interpretative bias, consistent with the higher-order metacognitive skills identified by Jia and colleagues [15] in creative performance contexts. These findings align with acting training traditions that embed systematic reflection into their very structure, from Stanislavski's "magic if" to Grotowski's radical self-monitoring [17].

### 3.2. Theme 2: Self-Role Boundary Negotiation

A second prevalent theme concerned the regulation of self-other identity boundaries. Participants described a complex oscillation between immersion in and separation from character, maintaining what several referred to as an "observing ego":

"One part of me is inside the emotion, and another part is always watching. If that watching part disappears, I lose control of the performance." (P7)

Actors employed structured "role exit" practices following performances, particularly after psychologically demanding material, including journaling, physical decompression, and grounding rituals. These function as metacognitive closure strategies, intentional procedures for assessing emotional residue and reaffirming personal identity after immersion. This oscillation between identification and individuation reflects what Hatami [5] terms "double consciousness" in acting. Consistent with Soto-Morettini's [18] philosophical account, participants demonstrated that role adaptation demands conscious regulation of the boundary between personal experience and artistic construction. Pestana, Valenzuela, and Codina [19] similarly found that theatre participation supports identity development through reflective experimentation with alternative selves. Participants' recognition of the psychological risks of over-identification reflects anticipatory metacognitive regulation, an advanced form of self-regulatory control.

### **3.3. Theme 3: Emotional Regulation and On-Stage Metacognition**

Participants reported experiencing genuine emotional engagement during performance while simultaneously regulating multiple technical parameters including vocal projection, timing, and spatial positioning. This dual awareness represents advanced metacognitive functioning:

"I can feel the grief of the character without drowning in it. Breath control became my anchor. If I breathe consciously, I can be in the emotion and still be aware of where I am on stage." (P2)

Several actors described early-career experiences of emotional overwhelm, contrasted with the regulatory mastery developed through sustained practice. Regulatory strategies reported included controlled breathing, emotional compartmentalisation, and cognitive reframing of distressing scenes. This developmental trajectory, from overwhelm to mastery, is consistent with evidence that metacognitive abilities are strengthened through systematic practice [15,20]. The findings demonstrate that effective performance involves calibrated vulnerability rather than emotional surrender: actors channel affect within structured boundaries rather than suppressing it. This aligns with contemporary affective science emphasising regulatory flexibility as predictive of psychological well-being [21]. The concurrent management of emotional intensity and technical precision constitutes a paradigm of advanced metacognitive control.

### **3.4. Theme 4: Social Metacognition in Collaborative Spaces**

Role adaptation emerged as a necessarily relational process. Participants reported continuously interpreting social signals from co-actors, directors, and audiences, adjusting performance in real time:

"I am always reading the room. If my scene partner shifts their energy, I shift with them. It is a constant conversation happening without words." (P9)

This interactive metacognition, simultaneously monitoring one's own internal states and inferring the mental states of others [15], functioned as a dynamic social feedback system. Participants also reported processing directors' feedback reflectively rather than defensively, distinguishing useful critique from emotional reaction. This social dimension extends Heyes and colleagues' [10] argument that metacognition is socially constructed through dialogue and collective meaning-making. The findings contribute to emerging research on improvisational theatre demonstrating improvements in empathic attunement and social responsiveness [22], providing process-level clarification that interactive metacognition underlies these socio-emotional benefits. Actors' real-time perspective-taking corresponds to predictive social cognition models and suggests theatrical collaboration as a high-density training environment for socio-cognitive calibration.

### **3.5. Theme 5: Therapeutic Transformation Through Reflective Practice**

The fifth and most theoretically significant theme concerned the transformation of performance experience into psychological growth through reflective integration. Participants reported gains in emotional insight, empathy, self-regulation, and resilience attributable specifically to the reflective processing of role work:

"Acting gave me a safe container to explore things I had buried. But it was only when I reflected after, wrote about it, talked about it, that I understood what happened inside me." (P6)

However, participants distinguished between performance alone and performance accompanied by reflection: several noted that demanding roles without structured post-performance processing produced stress rather than growth. This finding is critically important. It positions metacognitive reflection, not emotional enactment per se, as the mediating variable between theatrical experience and therapeutic benefit. This directly addresses the explanatory gap identified in systematic reviews of drama therapy, which consistently document positive outcomes but rarely specify mechanisms

of change [13,23,24]. The present findings propose the following process-based model: Theatre practice → Metacognitive engagement → Reflective integration → Psychological growth. By externalizing internal conflicts through characters, actors create safe psychological distance for self-examination, a mechanism that parallels guided exposure combined with cognitive restructuring in clinical practice [25].

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#### 4. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that metacognition is not peripheral to theatrical role adaptation but constitutive of it. Across all five themes, participants engaged in continuous planning, monitoring, evaluation, and regulatory adjustment of cognitive, emotional, relational, and identity-based processes. Theatrical performance, therefore, exemplifies applied metacognitive mastery, simultaneously demanding artistic precision, emotional governance, identity elasticity, social attunement, and reflective integration.

Theoretically, this study reframes acting as a cognitively-emotionally disciplined practice rather than a purely expressive one. It extends metacognitive theory beyond academic and laboratory contexts into an embodied, affectively intense, socially evaluative performance domain. By identifying reflective integration as the mediating mechanism of therapeutic growth in drama practice, the study provides a process-based explanatory framework that bridges performance studies, cognitive psychology, and therapeutic theory. Practically, the findings suggest that acting curricula should formally incorporate metacognitive skill training including guided journaling, structured post-performance debriefs, and instruction in regulatory flexibility. Drama therapy programmes may benefit from explicitly teaching boundary-exit rituals and narrative integration exercises to maximise therapeutic efficacy and minimise the risk of emotional spillover.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was relatively small and drawn from a limited range of theatre traditions, constraining generalisability. Data relied on self-report, introducing the possibility of recall bias or social desirability effects. The cross-sectional design precludes developmental claims about metacognitive skill acquisition. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track metacognitive development across acting careers; integrate neurocognitive measures such as EEG or fMRI to provide objective evidence of the regulatory processes actors describe; evaluate drama-therapy programmes that explicitly incorporate metacognitive scaffolding in clinical populations; and conduct comparative cross-cultural investigations of reflective practice in diverse performance traditions. The present findings provide a theoretically grounded foundation for such interdisciplinary inquiry, positioning theatre as a structured psychological laboratory in which metacognition enables both artistic excellence and human flourishing.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

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The author declares no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest in relation to the design, conduct, analysis, or publication of this study.

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