

Emotional Intelligence and the Actor **Jeannette Ginslov 19 June 2004**

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars. Oscar Wilde

In this paper I will discuss emotions and emotional intelligence, why we have them and why they are important to us as human beings, writers and actors. Most importantly I will discuss the method of Alba Emoting for training the six basic emotions and how the training is beneficial to the craft of acting, directing and performing.

Learning, emotion and personality – a certain calcification

Learning, evolution or adaptation to the environment calls upon the individual to respond – physically and emotionally. There is a stimulus/event and the person receives input via several sense organs and responds either appropriately or inappropriately. The individual at each event is adapting to the stimuli. Adaptive changes can take place on **three time scales**.

Adaptive changes can take place on a **genetic time scale**. The basic blueprint of an individual's brain and nervous system is encoded in his/her DNA. This blueprint is like a solid set of good ideas and sensible expectations. It builds a network of connections that is geared in a general way to the business of eating, resting, reproducing and surviving. Each individual therefore is born with a blueprint for survival and learning for itself, once it is born.

Adaptive changes can take place **in a life time**. The genetic legacy becomes fine-tuned by a personal history of experience. The individual becomes adapted to its **own particular world**. Its response pathways come to reflect a **private story** of the threats and opportunities that it has learnt to deal with.

Finally adaptive changes take place on **an immediate level**. Here the brain adapts in the state of its circuitry in the course of one single moment or event. Every instant presents a novel set of challenges to the individual, and the nervous system, as well as the cardiovascular, the endocrine, and the neuromuscular system must mount an equally precise response. The brain is zeroing in on the meaning of the moment or event, and then reacting with what it genetically inherited and with its lifetime of experiences.

The individual learns how to respond by reward and punishment. The individual learns that certain behaviour can cause physical, emotional or mental damage and does not do so again. The society's values, ethics, mores also control the individual's responses as they evaluate, condemn or condone certain behaviour.

All this information is passed on around the brain and the body via a vast neural network. Via this network, information in the form of electrical currents and chemicals such as calcium, ensure the rapid delivery of messages, point-to-point, anywhere in the body, almost instantly. The messages or signals can travel up to several hundreds of kilometres per hour. The neuron can be conveying information about sights, tastes or motions, urges or frustrations. Meaning is found in these signals in the fleeting patterns of connections that are being formed.

Finally the network of nerves can come to represent complex realisations and behaviours. The individual will therefore start to display certain characteristics and emotions and not others. This is because every neuron is connected to several thousands of its neighbours. The strength of each of these connections is tuned by experience. This is the way of 'wiring in a memory' The network of nerves starts off in a neutral state, but after a while, through the repeated firing at the synapses or connections between the nerve endings, a 'well trodden pathway' or memory is formed. Emotional memory is also stored at these synapses via calcium that is released by the presynaptic neuron. This leads to the release of neurotransmitters into the synaptic cleft or gap. These neurotransmitters bind to the receptors in the postsynaptic membrane and eventually cause this neuron to fire.

An emotional or motional response by the individual is therefore carried out. If this response is a characteristic response, it is expected from this individual, we can assume to know his/her emotional characteristics or personality. Certain emotional responses will become and form the individual's stock response to a situation. According to neuroscientist Joseph le Doux (1994), emotions and memory contribute significantly to our personality, our self, as they become "calcified at the synapses".

However, changes in emotional response and emotional display are possible in a narrative, meaning here character development and growth. The character, in trying to find fulfilment undergoes a mass of emotions, as s/he adapts to the new set of circumstances as quickly as possible. This change or adaptation of their previous emotional display or the difference in emotional display is what, we as an audience, are after. We as individuals seek fulfilment in our lives and by witnessing a character's journey from character establishment to fulfilment, is one way of fast tracking our learning or adaptive/survival mechanisms.

New experiences, new inputs will start to carve out new memory paths. The network is always learning, as it is always adapting to the environment and its genetic inheritance. This ability has been "hard wired" into our genetic makeup as we are instinctively always seeking survival mechanisms to cope. Emotional experiences or displays are the result of "triggering systems of behavioural adaptation that have been preserved by evolution." [le Doux 1994 70]

This forms our consciousness and this consciousness is made up of the neural network in the brain as well as its extensions into the body via a maze of nerves that reach even the remotest corners of the body. Everything from the beating of the heart, the pulsing of the gut, the production of new blood cells, to the raising of individual hairs on our arm when we get a fright is controlled by the nervous system. The mind is embodied. Your whole body sings with knowingness, or 'cognition'. An **emotional intelligence** has started to develop.

A definition of emotions

Emotion is initiated by a stimulus, an external sensory experience that causes the person to react. More specifically "(e)motions are reactions integrated in the neuroendocrine system, triggered by a specific stimulus (emotogenic stimulus), involving a particular area of the effector organs (visceral, humoral, and muscular effectors), and evoking a particular subjective activation (feelings)." [Santibanez-H

and Bloch 1986 108] Neuroscientists Dr Susana Bloch and Santibanez-H (1972) proposed the concept of “effector patterns of emotions” in order to stress that each emotogenic stimulus activates concrete effector patterns. Effector patterns are configurations of reactions, including the posturo-respiratory-facial muscles, blood pressure, heart rate, viscera and glands. There is an interrelation among the postural, facial and respiratory movements. Each emotion has a certain set of physical patterns that accurately display how one is feeling. Psychologist William James (1842-1910) stated that the subjective experience of emotion is “**nothing but the feeling of a bodily state.**” [ibid 114] The latest research supports this view. Joseph le Doux, cited in Roxane Rix *Learning Alba Emoting* (1998), claims that “sensory signals cause an involuntary physical response *before* reaching the ‘thinking brain’, which then refines the response.” [Rix p59 1998]. This could explain the existence of universal emotions and universal emotive body language in humans. These body cues precede and determine emotion. The universal basic emotions are innate and easily readable in the body by the person experiencing the emotion and those observing it. The basic emotions are hardwired, etched into our neural circuitry by our genes rather than by our culture.

According to Bloch in any emotional reaction there are three stages that are always interacting with each other: the **physiological**, the **expressive** and then the **subjective**. The autonomic intake of breath however pre-empts the emotion, then the visceral, endocrine, chemical, limbic system and molecular reactions occur. The expressive reactions include the somatic, the muscular, postural, gestural, facial expressions, vocal intonations and then controlled respiratory movement. Finally the subjective reactions occur and include one’s feelings, personal, idiosyncratic, cultural and then come social/personal values and memories.

Emotions and feelings work together. As human beings we are always experiencing an emotion. Thought and language try to communicate this as a feeling. The latter is a product of an emotion. Writers of narratives are in fact doing this. They are plotting the emotional journey, motivational force, personalising goal strategies and personality of a character overcoming or dealing with events in the narrative that best capture the writer’s conceptual, cultural and emotional relevance.

There are **six basic emotions** according to Dr Susana Bloch. These are needed for basic survival and evolution as a species.[Evans 2001] The six basic emotional displays are **acultural**, **ahistorical** and **apsychological**. There is meeting between the mind and the body that is real. These are phasic, transient and stimulus bound reactions.

- **Happiness** (laughter, pleasure, joy – needed to form relationships with others for procreation)
- **Sadness** (crying, sorrow, grief, depression – needed for the understanding of pain in others, therefore makes us empathetic and protective of offspring)
- **Fear** (anxiety, panic – to fight or flee the danger, automatic, reflex-like response with little or no conscious control)
- **Anger** (aggression, attack, hate – needed protection of those we love, procreation and desire to “get ahead”)
- **Eroticism** (sex, sensuality, lust – needed for procreation and continuation of species)

- **Tenderness** (filial love, maternal/paternal love, friendship - needed for procreation, protection and continuation/evolution of species)

Other neuroscientists include:

- **Surprise** (needed to take in as much information as possible, before responding emotionally)
- **Disgust** (needed to turn away from rotting food and faeces that could be filled with bacteria and therefore harmful if ingested)

A definition of Alba Emoting – a psychophysiological method for training actors

“Alba Emoting was developed by neuroscientist Dr. Susana Bloch as a safe, purely physical alternative to emotion memory and other psychological techniques for releasing, maintaining, and controlling emotional states on stage (or screen). Alba Emoting identifies six "basic" emotions from which all others derive. Each of the basic emotions, as well as emotional neutrality, has its own unique, identifiable set of bodily responses or "effector patterns" which are universal to all humans. By reproducing three aspects of these patterns: breathing, posture, and facial expression, an actor can experience and express genuine, organic emotion at will, without the use of memory or images. Most important, through the use of the seventh pattern, called a "step-out," the actor can leave any emotion just as easily and return to psychophysical neutrality. The ability to return to emotional neutrality creates a solid foundation for safe emotional work, in class or in performance, and is therefore central to the Alba Emoting technique. Once learned correctly, the step-out pattern is effective regardless of how an emotional state was initially aroused.” [<http://www.albaemoting.com/> 2004]

According to Bloch, the effector patterns of emotions are universally recognisable and understood. If learned and imitated correctly, an actor can induce an emotion. This is the premise of Alba Emoting. In learning the patterns, one can become an “emotional athlete” [Artaud 1964]. The method provides the actor with a technique for the voluntary control of the body or part of the body involved in the emotional display. It provides the actor with a technique to control the psychophysiological activation that is real and stressful. It can provide the actor with the ability to simulate emotions. This is therefore a perfect tool for the actor to learn as s/he can induce a **real, basic emotion** on stage or before the camera. Above all, the **emotional intelligence** of the actor increases. S/he becomes more aware of personal effector patterns and effector patterns of others, thereby able to display quite complex and subtle mixing of emotions. Their interaction with other actors in a play or film will also become stronger and credible.

History of Alba Emoting

Though unknown in the United States until the 1990's, Alba Emoting has been in experimental use in parts of Europe and South America for nearly thirty years. Development of the system began in the early 1970's at the University of Chile, when neuroscientists Susana Bloch and Guy Santibanez observed universal patterns of bodily response to emotions while systematically recording a wide variety of people's responses to emotional episodes.

The data from these recordings were used to create "prototype" effector patterns of breathing, posture, and facial expression for the six basic

emotions. Naive subjects taught to reproduce these patterns reported experiencing the corresponding emotions. These reports were then confirmed in the laboratory by comparing data from people reliving actual emotional experiences under hypnosis with those using Alba Emoting (then called the BOS Method). The data showed virtually identical emotional responses between the two groups, except that those using the technique were able to return more quickly and easily to emotional neutrality.

Dr. Bloch continued development of Alba Emoting from her post as Director of Research at the Institute of Neurosciences, University of Marie and Pierre Curie (Paris), with actors and students from Denmark, Sweden, and Chile. Only in the early 1990's did she begin to make Alba Emoting available to the theatre community at large. Presentations and workshops at annual conferences of the Association for Theatre In Higher Education beginning in 1991 led to the first open training seminar in Chile in 1993. Several artist/teachers from the US who attended the course subsequently began to organize training sessions in the US with Bloch, attended by actors and teachers from around the world. [<http://www.albaemoting.com/> 2004]

Some details – the physical representation of the emotions

According to Bloch, the 6 basic emotions can be represented, from a postural point of view on two axes, namely tension/relaxation in terms of the overall effort qualities of the body and approach/avoidance in terms of the direction of focus or movement. Happiness remains in the neutral centre, tense and relaxed, approaching slightly. Tenderness and eroticism approach in a relaxed manner. Anger approaches in a manner of tension. Sadness avoids in a relaxed manner and fear avoids in a tense manner.

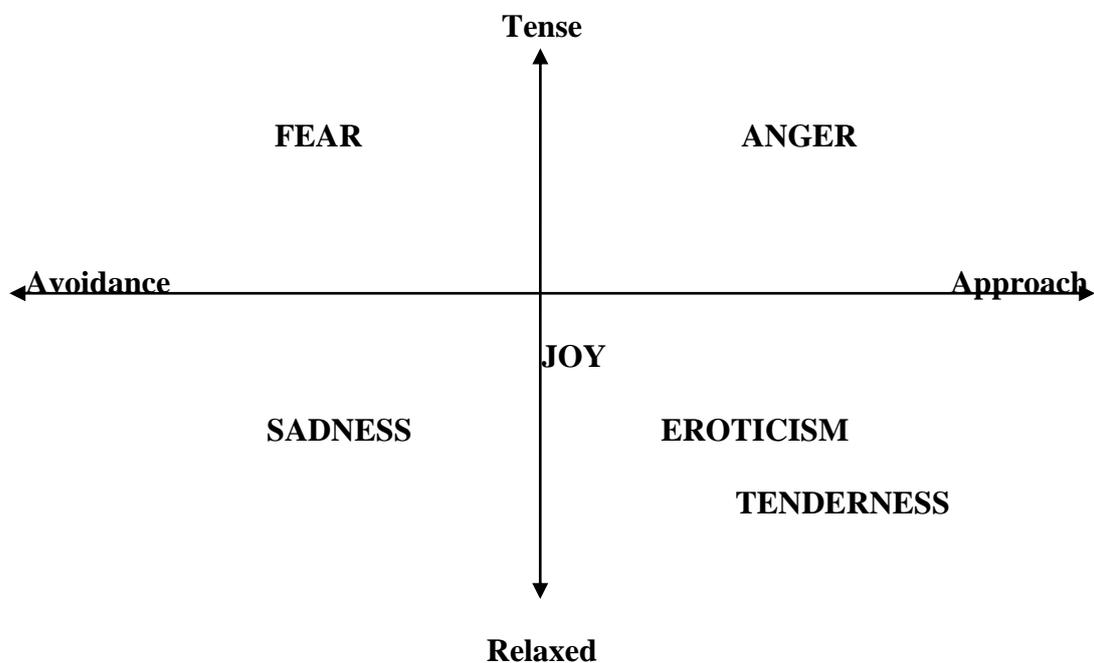


Figure 1 (Bloch 1995)
A representation of the six basic emotions in terms of postural tension/relaxation and approach/avoidance parameters.

Bloch also postulates that each basic emotion has a particular breathing pattern and facial expression. If the breathing pattern is correct often the facial and postural dimension of the emotional display will just fall into place. This is because emotional memory is stored in our bodies, in the endocrine, neuromuscular systems.

The patterns are as follows:

Happiness - mouth open with one main inhalation and short saccadic expirations. Eyes and brows up and open.

Sadness - mouth open with saccadic inspiration and long expiration. Eyes half closed, face down and brow furrowed

Fear – mouth wide open with inspiratory apnea, brows lifted, eyes wide open.

Anger – mouth closed tight with hyperventilation, face closed, forward, lower eyelids closing up to upper lids, eyes half closed.

Eroticism – mouth open, small, shallow breaths, eyes half closed, head tilted back.

Tenderness – mouth closed, small shallow breaths, small gentle smile on lips, head tilted slightly to one side, eyes soft and open or closed completely.

Feed back from the effector patterns plays an important role in the building up of subjective phenomena. This is the “how I am feeling” part of our conscious self. So there is a tangible relationship between bodily reaction and feelings. The cognitive response which we commonly describe as the “subjective” experience of emotion, has, two distinct parts: recognition of the emotion being experienced and the connection of that emotion to the stimulus. An emotional response to a stimulus is in fact a three part process: 1) visceral response 2) internal recognition of an emotional state 3) cognition of its connection to the stimulus.

Variety in emotional expression comes from the habitual mixing of emotions and with Alba Emoting the actor can decide to mix consciously the basic emotions, no longer limited by personal habits and blocks. [Rix 1998] The actor can engage with emotions “quickly, easily, and reliably.” [Ibid] There is more engagement on an emotional level as the communication is organic and interaction with others is credible. The focus on others is always present and in the moment. There is no faking it!

Psychological resolution of life experiences according to Rix, is necessary for any actor to achieve emotional freedom. Alba Emoting breaks down defence mechanisms and the intense feelings that emerge during training require an emotional maturity and stability. Habitual blocks are broken down and expression of emotion becomes fuller and integrated into the performance. Finally the basic emotional patterns are no longer visible in the performance. The actor has trained and fine tuned the nervous system to such an extent that the emotional displays are well integrated in the role of the character, in the moment and real.

Three remarkable things start to occur when Alba Emoting has been used in a performance:

1. The actor performs his/her with more emotional clarity and strength. The actor can monitor and manage the performing body.
2. This will in turn optimize the creation of emotional response in the audience. The audience is engaged and entertained by emotions. The clearer the emotions are, the more the audience will be able to ‘read’ the performance and respond accordingly.

3. The audience gives the actor emotional ‘feedback’ as they emotionally engage with the character on stage. On the screen this is impossible but desirable.

Alba Emoting and the higher cognitive emotions

In addition to basic emotions, there are culturally specific emotions and higher cognitive emotions. These categories are not black and white. There is a spectrum of innateness. The basic emotions are ‘very innate’ and the culturally specific ones are the ‘least innate’ ones. A third category exists, called higher cognitive emotions and divide the spectrum into three sections not two. Higher cognitive emotions are less innate than basic emotions but more innate than culturally specific ones. Higher cognitive emotions are “not so automatic as basic emotions, and nor are they universally associated with a single facial expression. Love is a case in point.” [Evans 2001 20]

Emotions like love are higher cognitive emotions because they involve much more cortical processing than basic emotions. Basic emotions are dealt with in the subcortical areas of the brain, emotions like love are dealt with in the neocortex. The neocortex is the part that is the youngest – it has evolved the most over the last five million years of human evolution and supports most of our complex cognitive abilities, such as explicit logical analysis. This means that higher cognitive emotions are more capable of being influenced by conscious thoughts and therefore higher cognitive emotions are more influenced by cultural dictates.

However despite their greater cultural variability, the higher cognitive emotions are still universal to some degree. They are part of human nature and are shaped by our common evolutionary history. They were designed by natural selection to “help our ancestors (to) cope with and increasingly complex social environment”. [Ibid 21]

The higher cognitive emotions are:

- Love
- Guilt
- Shame
- Embarrassment
- Pride
- Envy
- Jealousy

All these emotions are fundamentally *social* in way that basic emotions are not. You can be afraid alone, disgusted by an inanimate object and non human animals but love and guilt require social interaction with other people for them to exist.

The actor would do well to examine each higher cognitive emotion, jealousy, for example, and attempt to break it down into its basic emotional components. Jealousy is a mixture of: fear, anger, sadness and eroticism. The actor would have to contract the body down and back, as in fear and sadness, while breathing with the anger pattern and at the same time to open the eyes so as to give the part of the facial pattern of fear, whilst tilting the head back and exposing the throat, as in eroticism.

These elements of basic emotional display that make up the higher cognitive emotions could be ‘played’ with until the right effector pattern induces the emotion in the actor. The actor no longer has to think jealousy, but **is** jealous. The actor is displaying an emotion **in the moment**. The actor can learn the details of expression for each

emotion. Alba emoting “returns the body to its presocialized ability to express emotion purely and directly.” [Rix 1998 64] Alba Emoting is concerned with the creation of **emotion** in the actor and the audience. It galvanizes the body in performance and hence real the emotions drive the character forward. It concerns itself in engaging the audience emotionally.

Other acting techniques

This is a summary other acting techniques. All have beneficial elements and a mixture of some of these elements are useful for training the acting student.

Konstantin Stanislavsky’s Method Acting is more concerned with the **role** and demands therefore a dual consciousness from the actor. The actor brings the actual onto the stage but fences it in fiction, imitation, representation - a seeming emotional reality. The focus is on the actor not the audience. The conclusion arrived at was “that all the spiritual and physical nature of the actor must be centred on what is taking place in the soul of the person he is representing on the stage.” [Stanislavsky 1950 21] Subconscious powers of the actor are brought into the play. Other elements that make the Stanislavsky system are: “imagination, attention, relaxation of muscles, pieces and problems, truth and belief, emotional memory, communication and extraneous aids.” [Ibid 32] The actor must make use of his own feelings; however these emotional memories are brought to the surface by psychological work. The criticism of this technique is that the actor tries to find the **cause** of the emotion, the conditions that produced the experience and they must never think about the feeling itself. In my mind s/he is therefore at a distance to the emotion.

Jerzy Grotovsky claimed that “**the body functions like a brain**” and can record and recall movement and emotion instinctively. [ed. Zarilli 1995 150] He therefore discouraged verbal learning because the brain does not record the emotional quality of an action when it was learned through an emotional process only. Learning kinaesthetically incorporates both the physical precision and the emotional quality of the action. This is also true of vocal work. Repetition is also another basic principle of learning of kinaesthetic awareness - the body internalises information this way. Alba Emoting, I think, also works this way.

Vsevolod Meyerhold devised the **Biomechanical 16 Etudes** causing the actor to experience an entire gamut of emotions owing to a constantly **changing arrangement of musculature**. [Ibid] Therefore the actor could establish precisely the relationship between his physical appearance and his own nervous feeling. The actor could perfect his ability to realize an externally prescribed task with the minimum amount of forethought. His actors practised psycho/physical exercises without music. He tried to produce and predetermine audience reaction and create a state of mind in the audience.

Antonin Artaud claimed “if an actor does not have a certain feeling, he can probe it again through the **breathing**...Breathing accompanies feeling and the actor can penetrate this feeling through breathing, provided he knows how to **distinguish which breath suits which feeling**. (-) We must allow audiences to identify with the show breath by breath and beat by beat.” [Artaud 1977 92 &101]

Emotional memory, the audience and the actor

A pure emotion can bring up a “souvenir” or an emotional memory that has been stored in the body – in the neuromuscular, cardiovascular, glandular, respiratory systems and in the facial and postural muscles, **in the actor and in the audience**. Body memory is therefore a potent tool for the actor to tap into. Likewise, the

audience registers the emotional memories in their bodies. They too have experienced these emotions as they have lived or are living in a body with “souvenirs”. These are stored and brought up to consciousness by going to the theatre or cinema and watching a character dealing with or solving a certain problem. In AFDA terminology – the character has undergone an explosion at an event and is in a vacuum, s/he displays a reaction or emotion, which in turn set off a chain of events that will in turn require further emotional adjustments of appropriate or inappropriate emotional displays.

There is an empathetic reaction by the audience to the actor displaying emotions. The audience has come to the theatre or cinema to experience such souvenirs and/or experience new ways of behaving. The play or film may present a novel solution to the problem that the actor is dealing with. The audience will react empathetically and respond to the “new pattern of behaviour” or emotional response displayed by the actor at the event that challenges the character in finding fulfillment. The audience will therefore find the film or play groundbreaking in that the narrative and the character within the narrative has provided a novel solution to a problem and has displayed an emotional pattern that is different to the “norm”. This is inspiring to the audience and the character in the narrative is acknowledged as aspirational.

The audience also goes to the theatre or cinema to see their favourite actor managing the problems that they encounter, displaying and manipulating emotions to become more effective and engaging. They want to see their favourite actor mixing, managing or manipulating their emotions on stage or screen. It is this that the audience is putting money at the door for: how Meryl Streep in *Bridges over Madison County* displays her emotions to her lover and her husband that she is betraying, how Meg Ryan in Jane Campion’s film, *In the Cut* manipulates her emotions in the event and character narrative so that you never quite know, never quite trust or believe the character in this film that is dealing with a conceptually relevant binary of suspicion vs trust.

This is what excites the audience. They pay money to see and feel the emotional displays that their “star” is busy dealing with in a certain role and to see and feel how they manipulate and mix their emotions. The actor has to be an “emotional athlete” with emotional craft skills enabling her/him to display credible nuances and mixtures of emotion. The engagement and entertainment of the audience is therefore partly a stimulation of their emotional memory. The compression of emotions, of a character dealing with emotions within a narrative at events to finding fulfilment is likened to a learning experience. Narratives and story telling since the beginning of human time, whether around a fire, in dances, etched out on walls to films on a screen are our way of passing on compressed bytes of information. We are hard wired into learning like this, for our evolution - our genes demand it.

Alba Emoting – a summary

- 1) The actor should become an emotional athlete.
- 2) You have the emotional reigns of the character in **your** hands.
- 3) It is through specific breathing patterns, facial expressions and body posture/gestures that emotions are induced and then displayed. There is no other cognitive process. It is a pure, immediate and physical induction of an emotion.
- 4) A pure emotion can bring up a “souvenir” or an emotional memory that has been stored in the body. Body memory is a potent tool for the actor to tap into.

- 5) Unlike Method Acting, that stresses truthful behaviour in imaginary circumstances, Alba Emoting accesses the emotion **through and with** the body, making the emotional display immediate and real.
- 6) The complex neuromuscular system, neuro-endocrine system and viscera of the body all work together to produce observable patterns of basic emotion.
- 7) The six basic emotional displays are **acultural**, **ahistorical** and **apsychological**. They are innate and universal.
- 8) An Emotional Melody of a text or song is worked on in order to identify the basic emotion that drives the narrative forward, the reason for the text. From here the more complex mixed emotions are identified and worked on.
- 9) After experiencing, learning, teaching and performing with Alba Emoting, I can state that: using Alba Emoting makes an actor, dancer, performer and/or singer perform in a more focused and powerful manner, that you engage the audience more with more emotional purity and clarity and that you encourage and allow the audience to give you emotional feedback.
- 10) “Step out” is vital if you do not want to suffer from “an emotional hangover”!

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