

The Peak Performance Experience in Professional Screen Acting

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Abstract

A substantial body of literature exists investigating the psychological states underlying peak performance in sports. However, performance excellence among performing artists, particularly actors, has received less empirical study. Thus, this investigation explored what the subjective peak performance experience is like in the context of professional screen acting, and how it is achieved. Adopting a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professional screen actors exploring a subjective peak performance experience. Transcripts were analysed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis. Two master themes represented peak screen acting performance experiences and described how actors achieved them. The first theme revealed how actors achieve peak performance through preparation processes that afford self-efficacy and acceptance to perform freely. The second theme illustrated that subjective peak screen acting performances were a present, connected, and heightened state where actors felt like they cognitively and physically lived as their character whilst attention resources monitored technical performance factors. Evidently, subjective peak screen acting performance involves an interaction of skill-based and psychological factors. Additionally, the peak performance state involves both cognitive and physical components. Not only can these results offer actors increased self-insight, but educators and directors can use findings to support actors in reaching their performance potential.

Keywords: Peak Performance; Professional Acting; Screen Acting; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Introduction

Since the emergence of positive psychological research, there has been an emphasis on understanding optimal human experiences as a way to enhance human functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Performance excellence has been particularly researched in the context of sport (Swann, Keegan, Crust, & Piggott, 2016). By understanding the psychological states underlying outstanding performance in sports, psychological enhancement strategies have improved performance outcomes among athletes (Kruk, Blecharz, Boberska, Zarychta, & Luszczynska, 2017). However, compared to sports, performance excellence among performing artists, particularly actors, has received less empirical study despite the competitive nature of auditioning. This may be owing to acting being process, rather than outcome driven, whereas performance excellence is typically measured by results. It may also be due to the subjectivity (and therefore variability) in the judgment of acting performances in contrast to the objective outcomes used to assess sports performance. Despite the difficulty in objectively classifying acting performance excellence, it is essential to explore this experience so that actors can also adopt evidence-based performance enhancement strategies.

The Acting Process

The skill of acting requires the rigorous analysis of a script to develop and embody a character, to tell a story delivered in a theatre or via a screen (Trenos & Michalowicz, 2014). Although acting performances can be watched, it is difficult to define what excellence in acting performance entails. Part of the challenge is due to the multiplicity of acting theories and styles that define acting differently (Mamet, 1999; Stanislavski, 2013; Trenos & Michalowicz, 2014). Despite this challenge, empirical researchers explored the psychological processes underlying learning lines

and acting performance, revealing that acting involves two processes: script analysis and rehearsals/performances (Noice, 1991; Noice & Noice, 2002). Script analysis involves cognitively exploring a script's sub-text (Noice, 1996).

Rehearsals/performances involve an actor being in a reactive state of active experiencing that entails being in the moment and behaving in a way implicit to the character (Noice & Noice, 2002). Active experiencing is suggested to extend beyond the mental processes used during script analysis and requires the cognitive, emotional, and motor processing present in normal human interaction (Noice & Noice, 2002). Supporting the concept that actors actively experience as their character, actors have shown reduced brain activity related to self-processing when performing, suggesting reduced self-embodiment (Brown, Cockett, & Yuan, 2019).

Since these early studies, few empirical papers have examined the psychological processes associated with acting performances. Research that has investigated acting experiences is limited to the context of theatre (Robb & Davies, 2015). However, technical differences between screen and theatre performance will lead actors to have different experiences when performing (Tucker, 2003). Thus, what outstanding screen (i.e., film and television) acting performance experiences are like and how they are achieved are questions that remain unanswered (Noice & Noice, 2002). The current study proposes that this type of outstanding acting performance is a form of peak performance.

Peak Performance

Privette (1983) first defined peak performance as a demonstration of superior functioning resulting in optimal outcomes that exceed prior levels of performance. Since this original concept, the study of peak performance has evolved to include not only excellence in performance outcomes, but also perceived subjective experiences

(Swann et al., 2017). An individual's subjective experience and psychological state have been suggested to be primary determinants of achieving excellence in performance outcomes (Anderson, Hanrahan, & Mallett, 2014). This highlights the importance of understanding the subjective peak performance experience in screen acting to support performers in reaching their potential.

Peak performance experiences in sports, music, and dance contexts have been associated with various psychological states. These states include common factors such as an altered state of consciousness, absorption and less self-awareness, heightened positive emotions, effortlessness and relaxation, competitiveness, and having focused, non-judgmental, and present moment thinking (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke, Lisboa, & Williamon, 2014; Cohn, 1991; Flower, 2016). Moving beyond the experience itself, skill-based, psychological, and interpersonal factors have been evidenced to influence peak performance experiences. For instance, preparation and planning, skill mastery, and experience are skill-based factors shown to facilitate peak performance (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991; Flower, 2016). Psychological and interpersonal factors such as confidence, self-efficacy, focus, mindset, self-awareness, self-talk, comfort, trust, expectations, a sense of control, emotion-regulation, and resilience have also shown to facilitate performance outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991). Finally, inhibitors of peak performance include inadequate preparation, negative emotions, a negative mindset, negative self-talk, uncertainty, social comparison, pressure, high expectations, too much feedback being provided by a coach, and a lack of enjoyment, confidence, or focus (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991). Evidently, an interaction of psychological, interpersonal, and skill-based factors influence peak performance experiences.

The Current Study

Limited empirical research has examined psychological states and processes associated with performance excellence among performing artists. To overcome this knowledge gap, this study explored subjective experiences of peak performance in the context of professional screen acting. Moreover, this study sought to determine how actors achieve peak performances and thus, provide a better understanding of the factors that contribute towards and are associated with the experience. Semi-structured interviews with professional screen actors were conducted and the resulting transcripts were analysed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Based on the broad aim to investigate the experience of peak screen acting performance, this study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the subjective experience of peak performance in screen acting like? and (2) How do actors achieve peak screen acting?

Method

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy (where criteria had to be met) was used to recruit participants (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were recruited if they were professional actors who had worked as a regular role in a television series for more than one season and/or a lead role in an international feature film. Actors were also required to have worked as a regular or guest role over the last 12-months in order to have a recent performance experience to reflect on. Due to the competitive casting process involved in attaining such roles, it was determined that actors who met these criteria would be expert participants with a recent peak performance experience to recall. Moreover, it was determined that this sample would provide rich data related to

the study aims. Referral sampling strategies were used and comprised of emailing agents, contacting actors directly, or via a familiar contact known to the first author.

Prior to commencing the study, permission was sought and granted by the research institution's human ethics committee. The research was conducted according to the institution's Code of Responsible Conduct of Research. A primary ethical consideration was providing actors sufficient space to make voluntary and informed consent regarding their participation. Participant identities are also anonymous (and their quotes de-identified) due to personal and professional implications that, despite being unanticipated, could occur due to involvement in the research. Transcripts were de-identified following data collection and were stored securely for 5-years once being published.

Five professional Australian actors were recruited aged between 23 and 63 years ($M_{Age} = 43.60$, $SD = 14.17$; three females and two males). Four out of five participants had a tertiary qualification in performing arts. On average, participants had worked professionally in screen for 27.80 years ($SD = 14.41$). Participants had experience working in screen as evidenced by their number of credits in television ($M_{Episodes} = 257.00$, $SD = 153.83$), film ($M_{Films} = 14.20$, $SD = 14.04$), television mini-series ($M_{Episodes} = 8.00$, $SD = 9.06$), and television movies ($M_{Films} = 5.20$, $SD = 4.09$). Data regarding professional experience was collected from IMDb Pro and excluded short film and pre- and post-production credits. The first author knew one participant prior to the study from having worked together professionally on set. This participant was contacted and recruited using the same sampling strategy as all other participants.

Sample size was determined based on the data analysis technique used in this study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The analysis technique implemented was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is focused on the detailed

analysis of an individual's experience (Smith et al., 2009). This is because an individual's experiences can provide increased insights into a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Due to this, samples collected for IPA research are small and homogenous in size to represent a particular experience in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Smith et al. (2009) offer that between 4 to 10 participants can be used as a sample size guide for IPA research. This study recruited participants until this sample size was reached and a sufficient gender balance achieved. Confirming a sufficient sample size, data saturation occurred during the analysis of the fifth participant's interview (Smith et al., 2009). Data saturation was signified by no new themes emerging.

Procedure

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with participants. Interviews varied between 60 to 90 minutes in length. Three interviews took place in-person, one via Skype, and one via telephone. The purpose of the study was described to participants followed by informed consent and rapport building. Interview questions were: (1) What does peak performance in screen acting mean to you? (2) Tell me about one of your recent roles. (3) How did you prepare for this role? (4) During this role, think of a scene where you did a peak performance and describe what happened during the scene. (5) Describe what you experienced before the performance. (6) Describe what you experienced during the performance. Prompting and clarification interviewing strategies were used to enable further exploration of peak performance experiences. Upon interview completion, participants were debriefed and thanked for their contribution.

Data Analysis

The data analysis technique used in this study was IPA (Smith et al., 2009). IPA focuses on a close examination of people's experiences to discover commonalities within an abstract experience (Smith et al., 2009; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Moreover, IPA is concerned with understanding phenomena within specific contexts (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA was chosen because peak screen acting performance was considered an unexplored phenomenon in a specific context that may be understood by investigating lived experiences. Additionally, this form of enquiry was determined the most suitable to examine the current research questions. This is because IPA would allow a structured and thorough analysis of what actors experience during peak performance and how they achieve it. Additionally, by examining experiential content, it was considered that IPA would produce a highly valid and unbiased understanding of peak screen acting performance.

Due to the use of an interpretive framework, the background of each author has been reported. Collectively, the three authors had research and applied experience in acting and psychology settings. The first and second author both have undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications in psychology. The first author is currently undertaking a doctorate and has 12 years of experience in research. The first author also has 26 years of experience as an actor in professional and independent contexts (in both screen and theatre). The second author has a doctoral degree and is a senior academic staff member in psychology at a tertiary education institute. With an expertise in performance psychology, the second author has 23 years of experience in research and has published over 200 papers. The third author also has a doctoral degree, with undergraduate and post-graduate qualifications in drama and arts. The third author is an academic staff member in performance studies at the same institute

as the second author. The third author has 25 years of experience as a director, playwright, and dramaturge in professional and independent contexts.

As the first author is a professional screen actor, their own assumptions of peak performance were documented and bracketed prior to conducting the interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Initially, this involved acknowledging that the first author viewed peak screen acting performance as an intangible concept because it was previously an undefined occurrence. To overcome this pre-conception, the first author employed the mindset of a pioneer; attempting to explore the truth of an unknown experience. This involved adopting a sense of curiosity during the interviews to explore new ideas presented by participants. Any ideas about peak performance that were different to what the first author thought were received with fascination rather than judgement. To ensure a commitment to bracketing, the first author recorded diary entries after interviews and reflexively commented on emerging biases during data analysis. The two co-authors reviewed written commentaries and questioned the first author's assumptions during data analysis (Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2000).

Once all data was collected, IPA was conducted using the processes outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Interviews were first transcribed verbatim. Each transcript (analysed separately) was then re-read whilst listening to the interview recording. The next step of analysis (initial noting) typically involves reporting descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments simultaneously. The current study segmented each level of commenting to produce a thorough idiographic analysis of the language and meanings produced by each participant. This was because the first author felt the analysis process was too rushed when all levels of the initial analysis were combined at once. Hence, a rigorous commitment to understanding participant experiences was undertaken.

Following initial noting, emergent themes were developed for each participant that captured the psychological essence of their peak performance experiences. Subsequently, superordinate themes were developed for each participant by searching for similarities and dissimilarities among their emergent themes. From this, a list of superordinate themes was produced for each participant. Once each interview was analysed, they were shared with the co-authors for peer de-brief (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After all interviews were analysed, master themes were produced. Master themes were developed from themes that were present in at least three out of five participants superordinate theme lists (Smith, 2011). Themes have been interpreted below and supported by data extracts. Data extracts had references to identities omitted. Repeated words, excessive pausing, or repetitive use of the terms, “you know” or “um” were removed from quotes for clarity of expression.

Results

Results revealed two master themes as representing the subjective peak screen acting performance experience and how it is achieved. These were ‘Preparation Precedes Performance Freedom’ and ‘The Peak Performance State: Being the Character’. See Table 1 for a summary of the themes followed by the IPA thematic findings, accompanied by supporting quotes. Refer to the Supplementary Materials for all additional supporting quotes.

Preparation Precedes Performance Freedom

Preparation – Lines, character, script. All five actors stated that preparation was the most important factor enabling them to achieve peak performance. Moreover, actors described a paradox of how they needed to be prepared before they could feel secure and let go during performance. For instance, when asked to confirm if preparation enables them to peak perform, Actor 1 stated:

Definitely and the older I get, the more experience I get, the more I realise [that] being able to be free and in the moment doesn't happen because you don't know what's coming next, it happens because you know absolutely what's coming next. You know what the shape of the scene is, you've explored it from every angle. You have made decisions; well, I make decisions about what I think is the best kind of shape of the scene and that's what I'll go in with.

Table 1

Peak Performance Master and Superordinate Theme Summary

Master Theme	Superordinate Theme
Preparation Precedes Performance Freedom	Preparation – Lines, character, script Self-efficacy Accepting no control
The Peak Performance State: Being the Character	Present moment focus Connecting Heightened state Being the character

Despite variances in preparation routines, all actors described preparation as involving learning lines, exploring who the character is, and script analysis. In relation to knowing the lines, it was apparent that this was the foundation of performance preparation for the actors. Knowing the lines meant knowing the words well enough to enable flexibility during performance. Additionally, learning the lines appeared to offer a sense of security so that actors were confident to perform. Illustrating this, Actor 3 responded to the following question, “So how could you summarise being in a peak performance”, by stating:

I always say preparation. The hundred percent preparation, and that means that you are at your most prepared as in words, just simply words, so you're not struggling for words physiologi if

you're struggling to get the words right, then you're struggling from day one. So, the words have to be just ready to go and they have to be ready to go in any direction.

Detailed cognitive and physical character exploration was also identified as part of the preparation process that enabled peak performance. Part of this exploration involved knowing the character's history, backstory, behaviour, and other facts. For example, Actor 4 listed the detail that went into their character exploration for their peak performance:

By reading the script a lot and character notes and character breakdowns obviously. Synopsis will give you information about character, back story, and then it's up to me to see how far I wanna take that. Do I wanna know more about her? Do I want to invent things or endow her with things? How is she different to me? How is she similar to me? What makes her tick? Where is she from? What's her world? What's her family? So, I explore all of that in my own head before... but I always really think it comes down to the script. That [the script] so much informs how does she talk? What's her behaviour? How does she react to other people, herself? Who is she in her private moments? Who is she in her public moments, you know, her worlds, her inner world, her immediate world, her outer world?

As illustrated above, the script acted as a guide for actors in terms of developing their characters and understanding the storyline. Using the script stemmed from the belief that the writer had provided the clues that actors needed to understand the story and character details. Additionally, actors expressed a deep respect for the writer and their vision. Actor 1 encapsulated this, stating:

And you know there was also this desire to serve the text as well. So, having been to drama school and had that training I really respect the text, I really respect a writer's vision, and I want to honour that, and honour that for everybody involved because that's what's written on the page. That's what everybody's been working on to that point and I want to be able to deliver that for them as well.

Self-efficacy. When describing their peak performance experiences, actors explained that once they felt prepared, they felt self-efficacious and confident in their

ability to perform. Additionally, once feeling confident in their ability to perform, actors described feeling capable to adapt their performance based on direction received. For instance, Actor 1 stated, “Then if a director wants something else, I can change it because I’ve looked at it from every angle anyway so I’m happy to change it”. Moreover, preparation gave actors a sense of security; that no matter what happened on set, even if they weren’t connected to their co-actor or the circumstances, that preparation would give them confidence in their own ability to perform at their peak. For example, Actor 2 offered that:

I have learned that you have to do your work because regardless of what you do, I have to be able show up and if I know someone well enough, I can have enough prepped that if they don’t come up with an offer, I am going to be able to still be okay and not flounder.

Accepting no control. Actors described that as part of their peak performance experiences, once they felt prepared, they accepted that they had done what they could control and could let go of performance pressure. This acceptance enabled a sense of trust in their own ability and a knowing that all they could do was put in their best effort on the day of their performance. Part of this acceptance was that actors acknowledged that they do not control the direction they are going to receive on set, the way other actors are going to perform across from them, or the edited outcome of the show. Highlighting this, actors expressed that they were ‘material’ and that they had no control over how their performance would be edited. Actor 1 described it in this way, “You can only do your best on the day and then you have to let go because they’re gonna cut it in ways that you couldn’t have even imagined”. Actor 4 emphasised the importance of being open as part of accepting a lack of control over the performance:

I can prepare for a scene, but I don’t know what the other actors gonna do, I don’t know what the director’s gonna say, I have no idea. So, if I’m held on tight then it doesn’t allow any

outside factors to come into my world, to the characters world. So, open-mindedness and open-heartedness are really, really important for me when I'm working.

Actor 4 further described that having self-awareness released performance pressure and facilitated acceptance. Actor 4 explained it in this way:

I have a self-awareness, I'm aware of myself, I know who I am in this world. I try and be the best person I can be every day in all areas of my life and that includes my work, and so I think when you have that sense of self-awareness... those times where you're not feeling so good [on set], the weight of it is kinda deflated in a way.

The Peak Performance State: Being the Character

Present moment focus. Actors described an optimal psychological state that occurred during their peak performances that was identified as living as the character. Part of this state involved a present moment focus. Actor 2 explained it as:

It's just such a cliché thing to say because so many people use it, but I genuinely was totally tuned in to that moment and didn't have, "Oh at fourth, I got to pick up this and da da da". I didn't have that, and I was really just present and free to play.

Actors described feeling present due to being focused on what they were doing during the scene rather than being self-focused. Actor 3 explained how during their scene, they focused externally, specifically on other people, "It's all about speaking to those other people and when you're talking to somebody else, you're not thinking about yourself". Confirming this, another external focus that actors described was achieving their character objective (see Actor 2's quote below). Further to focusing externally on people and objectives, actors highlighted the importance of listening and reacting. Actor 4 highlighted, "It's about listen and react, listen and react. Acting's not just about talking. Listening not only with my ears, but with my body, my senses". Thus, listening appears to be a tool that actors use to live presently. Actor 3 further reiterated this point when being asked, "It sounds like preparation's really important so that you're ready to go, connect, and ready to play?"

Yeah, and ready to react. Everyone says that acting is reacting, but it really is. Like that's gotta be the first time, you know, the eighth take has to be the first time you've heard those words, first time you've used those words, you know, the ninth take, you never get nine takes. But you never know, something could be wrong with the lights, something could be wrong with the sound or something. But [it] has to be the first time every single time. Ah and you can't pretend it's the first time, it has to be the first time. Your brain does have to be kinda an etch-o-sketch. You just gotta forget everything that's happened before.

As a result of being present during performances, actors described becoming so immersed in what they were doing that they lost conscious control and spontaneous outcomes of the scene occurred. For example, Actor 4 described an unexpected emotional release during their peak performance recollection, "I didn't know I would get as upset as I did, so the emotional release, I didn't know that was gonna happen in the scene and then it did, so that took me by surprise". Actor 2 also shared that they and their scene partner were so present during their performance that the scene ended contrary to how it was written. This quote from Actor 2 highlights this and summarises their experience of being present during their peak performance:

My objective was to get him to kiss me, I just wanted him to, and so, [I was] doing that and I was just getting really up in his face and everything like that, and when it came to that point, he said, "Aw you just broke up with him", and I said, "Yeah which I should've done ages ago", and he said, "What?", and I said, "It's always going to be you Hunter", and he grabbed me and kissed me then, and he wasn't supposed to, and then they called cut and he was so in the moment that I went, "You didn't let me say my last line", and he was like, "What?", and I said, "I'm supposed to have that bit at the end", and he was like, "Oh", and I went, "I won the scene, I got my objective, I made you kiss me, that's great".

Connecting. Actors recalled connecting to the set, circumstances, and other actors during peak performances. Connecting to these factors enabled actors to live in the present circumstances as their character, experience the reality of their characters, and feel what their characters would have felt. Actor 3, who played a real-life

character, described this connection to the set and circumstances in detail when recalling their peak performance:

From the moment I walked into the court room it literally felt like, and it was supposed to be, that everybody was just looking at me and everybody had different reasons for looking at me. Some people were looking at me going, “What are you doing?”, other people were looking at me going, “I hate you, you’re the worst person in the world”, and then I had all my... you know, all the characters friends were there as well, so I had a lot of support [laughs] but they were like way back, at the back of the room. So, I very much felt when I walked in there as [my character] that I had a job to do, and I just had to be succinct, and I just had to say what happened, and then everything would be alright. And then you get put up in the actual Sydney court rooms in Taylor Square where the actual event took place, and you’re standing in this witness box, and your so much higher than everybody else in the room. Jury and people pretending to be journalists, and everyone’s looking at you, and then of course you’ve got your cameras and everything like that, and directors wanting to have chats to you during it, and all that sort of stuff. So, for me I felt very much like I was in a little bit of a zone.

Immediately after Actor 3 recalled their connection to the set and circumstance they described how they also needed this same connection with their co-star for their performance to be authentic:

I turned to the director and I said, “Where’s [my co-star]?”. And he went, “Oh I think she’s in the make-up van getting ready for the next scene”. I said, “So who am I looking at?”, [the director said] “Just pick a spot”, [the actor then said] “I’m not gonna pick a fucking spot [laugh] get my lead, get my actor who I’m acting opposite in to sit here. It’s a really important moment for me and for [my character]. I’m not gonna look at spot just because someone had a big night and so the actor that I’m playing opposite has to be in a make-up van when normally they wouldn’t”. So, they went, “Okay well”, and someone raced out and grabbed her, and she came in with her hair in a hair net and stuff like that, and it was just one of those moments where I guess at any other stage I could’ve gone, “Oh yeah you know it’s alright I’ll play the game”, but I was in such a zone on this particular day because how I was feeling about being ostracised as [my character] was feeling ostracised by everybody. I guess some of that sort of

seeped into me as well, so I wasn't gonna take that. I was gonna go, "No, no, no, no, this is what I need for this performance to actually be real, to be authentic, to work. Which is, give me the person that I'm talking to".

Heightened state. Actors reported peak performances were a heightened experience. This involved the experience being consciously active and intense. Actor 1 described the experience as, "You're on in a very conscious, you're very consciously on, that's a heightened state of consciousness when you're absolutely at that peak". Additionally, the peak performance experience was described by actors as feeling different or unexplainable. Supporting this, Actor 3 described their peak performance as, "It was a really different scene that happened", and Actor 2 described what it feels like to be in the zone of peak performance as, "An odd thing, it's almost unexplainable". These findings suggest that peak performance experiences sound outside of the realm of 'normal' experiences.

However, two actors contradicted this idea by stating that peak performance is a normal performance experience for them. Despite Actor 5 describing their peak performance as, "A pretty full-on moment", they also stated, "From page one on, it's peak performance as far as I'm concerned, because that's what I... that's what I do [laughs]. I'm in that zone all the time". Also, Actor 4 put it this way:

I don't turn up to a job going, "I'm gonna peak perform here". Do you know what I mean? So that's a tricky question, I just do it. It's my profession. I've been acting a really, really long time so for me it's like breathing. It's not some strange place I step into. It's just what I do.

Actor 4 continued on to describe their peak performance scene as having high stakes and emotional intensity:

And there was a strong emotional connection between the two characters and the secret would affect their lives dramatically. So, the stakes were very high and as an actor when the stakes are high you have more fun [be]cause you've got more to work for or against.

Consequently, the peak performance experience may be psychologically and physiologically intense, marked by increased cognitive processing, and higher physiological and emotional arousal. However, there may be divergence in terms of how the experience is lived compared to how it is perceived as evidenced by the conflicting statements provided by actors. That is, whilst peak performances may be experienced as a 'heightened' state, the occurrence may be viewed as 'normal'.

Being the character. Actors described they felt their self, merge with the character during peak performances. Actors described peak performances in terms of a cognitive and/or physical embodiment of their character. For instance, Actor 2 described the thoughts that they experienced during the scene, was what they felt their character would have experienced in that same situation:

When you think about it, that's what my character would've been experiencing. Like, "Okay look I really, I'm just dying for you to kiss me, what can I do to make you kiss me?", and the whole, you know, "I might just lean in and hope he's gonna do it and what if that doesn't work?". Like that sort of mentality is what I was applying as an actor.

Actor 5 stated, "That's what I would call absolute peak performance, is when you actually get to the point where you forget you're you, and you actually think you're the other person". Supporting this, Actor 1 described the peak performance experience, "Like you live inside somebody else's body and you see the world through somebody else's eyes". Moreover, actors described experiencing the same feelings as their character. Hence, the peak performance state appeared to resemble an immersive experience where actors became absorbed into the character's circumstances and lived as if they were their character. Demonstrating this, when asked, "What feelings or thoughts do you remember from being in that environment during your peak performance?", Actor 5 recalled:

Just the feeling of what it's like to be... about to die and [be] hung. Um... and trying to put myself in that position, and [I'd] say, "I'm gonna feel like I'm gonna die in five minutes". So, it wasn't the nicest place to put myself, but my feelings were what he was feeling, well what I thought he would be feeling. Hope what he was feeling. I'm pretty sure we went close.

Although all actors agreed that the self and character merge during peak performance, Actor 1 stated, "You gotta be aware of where you are in relation to the camera without, you know, being too aware", suggesting that the self is omnipresent during peak performance when considering technical performance components. Consequently, despite the peak performance state being associated with living as the character, there appears to be a dual cognitive process occurring. This dual cognitive process is where the actor has thoughts related to the situation in the scene 'as the character', but thoughts occur in relation to technical aspects of performance 'as the actor'. Actor 4 described this dual consciousness, stating:

As an actor you always have a dual thing happening because even though when you're so in the moment... you don't have a multiple personality. Even though you're embodying that character, you still have [your own] brain there going, "At this point I need to hit my mark because the cameras gotta get there. I've gotta sit down or...". It's like your brain is working on two levels. You're in the moment completely as that character yet at the same time you, [the] actor, who you are as a person, is still there as well. So, your brain is continuously working.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the subjective experience of peak screen acting among professional actors. The theme 'The Peak Performance State: Being the Character' identified what the subjective experience of peak screen acting performance is like, whilst 'Preparation Precedes Performance Freedom' identified how actors achieve peak performances. Whilst the overall findings were consistent with prior acting research, this study has provided additional insights into the lived

experience of the phenomenon of peak screen acting in a way that other empirical studies assessing acting performance have not.

The first major finding was that actors undergo a cognitive process of role preparation through script analysis to achieve peak performance. Actors reported how this is the only factor that they can control in relation to the outcome of a production. This finding confirms earlier research that reported that script analysis was the first step in an actor's performance preparation (Noice, 1991; 1996; Noice & Noice, 2002). Similarly, Noice and Noice (2002) proposed that this first step was analytical, involving a detailed analysis of the script to learn lines and understand the character. Additionally, this finding supports research from sports, music, and dance contexts that have reported that preparation and planning facilitate peak performance (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991; Flower, 2016).

The current findings extend upon the understanding of an actor's preparation by revealing the psychological beliefs attained from preparation. That is, self-efficacy, acceptance, and freedom, with these beliefs enabling actors to enter an optimal state where they can perform at their peak. Although psychological factors such as confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of control have been shown to facilitate performance outcomes in other performance settings, they have not been previously identified as the by-product of an actor's preparation (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991). Thus, the interaction of skill-based and psychological factors that influence peak performance in other contexts also exist in subjective peak screen acting experiences.

The second primary finding of this research was that subjective peak screen acting performance felt like an immersive state of being the character. Actors described peak performance experiences as a present, externally focused, heightened,

reactive, connected, and spontaneous state. Actors also reported thinking, feeling, and being motivated as their character whilst physically embodying character traits. Consequently, peak performance experiences were driven by thoughts (i.e., they were a cognitive experience) whilst physical experiences occurred (i.e., a heightened physiological state and character physicality). This finding supports research by Noice and Noice (2002) who reported that the second stage of performance is rehearsals/performances which involve moving beyond cognitive processes and into active experiencing, where actors live in the moment as their character during performances. This finding also supports research indicating that when performing as a character, actors display reduced brain activity related to self-processing reflecting reduced self-embodiment (Brown et al., 2019). Despite actors describing living as their character during peak performances, actors in this study still identified that they had self-awareness regarding technical performance factors. Hence, this research extends on past empirical literature by suggesting that a dual consciousness occurs during peak screen acting performances; where actors experience a situation as their character, yet self-related attention resources monitor actions and technical components of performance.

The current descriptions of peak performance reported here are consistent with psychological states experienced during peak performance in sports, music, and dance (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991; Flower, 2016). Similar to other performance contexts, subjective peak screen acting was associated with an altered state of consciousness, absorption and less self-awareness, a heightened state, and having focused, non-judgmental, and present moment thinking. However, what was unique to the peak performance state experienced by actors compared to other contexts was that they experienced connectedness. Additionally, competitiveness,

effortlessness, and relaxation are peak performance experiences reported in sport contexts (Anderson et al., 2014; Cohn, 1991), yet these were not expressed by the actors in this study. The connectedness that actors mentioned appeared to heighten their peak performance experiences whereas for sports, a heightened state has been suggested to result from competitiveness (Anderson et al., 2014). Furthermore, relaxation and effortlessness may be relevant psychological states for activities that are more physical in nature (such as sports), but not as significant for actors. Evidently, peak performance experiences illustrate consistent psychological states between performance contexts, though differences may occur due to variations among performance settings.

Implications for Applied Practice

This study explored the subjective peak performance experience in the context of professional screen acting. Findings revealed that, similar to athletes, musicians, and dancers, that an interaction of skill-based and psychological factors are associated with peak screen acting. Preparation was identified as how actors achieve peak performances and this highlights that actors require a highly developed skill set for role preparation. Moreover, these findings support the fundamental nature of actor training where actors are trained in preparation practices.

In addition to adequately preparing, it is suggested that to optimise performances that actors can have an external and present moment focus when performing. Findings also revealed psychological beliefs related to peak screen acting performances and could offer actors increased self-insight into what psychological processes they can strengthen as a performer. For instance, actors could build their self-efficacy using simple and empirically effective exercises and manage performance pressure by practicing acceptance (Anderson et al., 2014; Gardner &

Moore, 2012; Moffitt, Neumann, & Williamson, 2018). Furthermore, teachers and directors can adopt these findings in both education and professional settings to assist actors in reaching their performance potential.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contribution of this research, there are limitations. One being the purposive criterion sampling strategy employed. A limitation of using this sampling strategy is that the participants were not selected at random. Thus, the geographical nature of the sample was narrow as all participants resided in Australia, limiting the cultural scope and external validity of findings. Another disadvantage of using purposive criterion sampling was that it made the participant pool difficult to access. All interviews had been intended to occur in-person due to the rapport building and non-verbal cues that face-to-face interviewing offers. However, as participants were a hard to access sample, this led to missed data collection opportunities. Thus, in order to gain a sufficient sample size, ethical clearance was gained to conduct interviews via Skype and phone calls. Although it would have been more consistent to have used one mode of interview format, there is no evidence to suggest that the results were negatively influenced due to this. For example, interview length did not vary between formats. Face-to-face interviews were 79 minutes, 64 minutes, and 61 minutes in length, whilst the Skype interview took 81 minutes, and the phone interview, 73 minutes. Consequently, interview mode did not hinder participants' abilities to express themselves or the depth of the experiential content explored/analysed. Nonetheless, it is recommended that future studies employ online video platforms when conducting interviews for a consistent and feasible data collection method.

Future research extending upon these findings is also recommended. In this study, it was identified what the subjective peak performance experience in screen

acting is like and how it is achieved. However, the factors that influence peak screen acting were not explored. A critical area requiring investigation is the performance factors that facilitate or inhibit peak screen acting performances. One such factor is interpersonal influences. Prior research has demonstrated that interpersonal influences, such as trust or post performance feedback, impact performance outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Clarke et al., 2014). Therefore, future research investigating interpersonal and other factors that may influence an actor's processes could offer a more complete understanding of peak screen acting performance. Replication of this research using a larger sample and quantitative design to clarify the relationships between skill-based factors and psychological beliefs is also suggested.

Conclusions

This research contributes to the current literature by revealing what the subjective peak performance experience for professional screen actors is like and how it is achieved. This study supports that subjective peak screen acting performance is achieved via preparation and illustrated that the experience is one of living as the character in a present, connected, and heightened state. Findings confirm that acting involves the combination of cognitive and physical processes. Moreover, the interaction of skill-based and psychological factors enabling peak screen acting was identified from an experiential perspective.

This research offers an increased understanding into the process of achieving peak screen acting performance so that actors can gain insight into preparation practices and the state of peak performance. Moving forward, the aim for researchers is to develop evidence-based psychological performance enhancement strategies for actors that target self-efficacy, acceptance, and freedom. Further understanding of how professional actors can excel in performance contexts is still encouraged

considering the negative mental health outcomes associated with a career in acting (Robb, Due, & Venning, 2018). Thus, further research may not only be beneficial, but essential to support professional performing artists.

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Declarations

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Declaration of Competing Interests/Conflicts of Interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2016/447).

Consent to Participate

Informed written and/or verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews commencing.

Consent for Publication

Participants all consented to submitting findings for publishing purposes.

Availability of Data and Material

Supplementary materials have been provided.

Code Availability

Not applicable.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conceptualisation and research design. Material preparation, data collection, and data analysis were performed by Kylie Loveday. Supervision of material preparation, data collection, and analyses were undertaken by David Neumann and Linda Hassall. The first draft and revision of the manuscript was written by Kylie Loveday. All authors commented on subsequent

versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript submitted.

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Supplementary Materials

Table 2

Additional Supporting Quotes for Master and Superordinate Themes

Master Theme	Superordinate Theme	Emergent Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Preparation Precedes	Preparation	Actor 1	
Performance Freedom		<ul style="list-style-type: none">I absolutely need to be prepared.I need to be prepped so that anything that comes my way I'm okay with. Actor 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">I've had some really interesting stuff arrive, research has come into it a lot, I think not just to understand the visuals of it or anything, but just to understand the mindset of these people. So, I really looked into self-harmers and their attitude of like, justification for what they do, and the reasons behind it, and the fears of telling their story and all of that... and sort of the good and the bad. I think even for another storyline I had when my character um who's 16 at the time, she got pregnant, and had an abortion, and it was the first abortion ever on the show. So, I was like okay this is a big deal, I wanna tell the story, and I found it was the first time I ever started using the pod cast app on my phone, and I literally just search[ed] the word abortion and there's an abortion pod cast called [name omitted] and it's for women, because it's such a taboo subject, it's about women to share their stories. It was really interesting because there's women of all ages who have had them [abortions] you know in the 50s and 60s to now. And it was pro and against, and I really wanted to get as much information about the details of it because there was a scene where my character was being explained what would happen, and I myself something I could relate	

to is that I get quite nervous around medical situations, and there was a scene where a nurse was explaining the details of it, and I could connect to just the fear that anyone, let alone a young girl would feel around that, but I really wanted to understand what was being said, the type of abortion that was being done, so I'd understand, so it was really clear. But also, just the things that go through someone's head during that time before and after. And then this ended up, after she got the abortion, my character ends up cutting herself again, and all of that. So, I had done enough research beforehand. Anything that's sort of something I haven't experienced in my own life I sort of go elsewhere.

- So, something in terms of prep that my partner and I worked out, was that over the year and a half these two have had, this time we've been told 'this time' they're getting back together, it's for real, no more mucking about, no more questioning and we wanted it to be, it was around the time that we were working on primal stuff and we were like, we want it to be, rather than a cutesy, like they're older now and it's like, "We know this is right", and we wanted it to be quite a sexual thing.

Actor 3

- Again, that's preparation, so all of that has be ready to go before you walk on set. Who am I? Who am I about to deal with? What am I gonna say?

Actor 4

- I always prepare like in terms of approaching a role. For me it's about the preparation and working on the script and then when I actually am doing it, to let go of the work.

Lines

Actor 1

- **Interviewer:** What kind of tools would you say you use? Do you have any kind of things that you like using in your practice? **Actor 1:** Well certainly being absolutely 100% familiar with the story and this is
-

really basic but knowing your lines. Knowing my lines well. So, I can, so I don't, that's not a factor that will affect my day. I'm not worried about that. I'm not thinking, "Oooo I don't know that scene", I'm not worried about that bit. I think that's fundamental.

Actor 2

- For me in particular I'm someone that I will learn my lines backwards.
- [Be]cause learning your lines, that's step one.

Actor 4

- Then with television a lot of it is about learning lines, fronting up on the day, and being free.

Actor 5

- Actors have got two things to do, learn your lines, and try not to bump into the furniture.
- I know my lines before I get there [to set], so they're never a problem.

Character

Actor 1

- She did write a book and that was just full of ah... a sort of a wealth of information about the kind of person that she was, and I really wanted to capture the essence of her. I didn't want to worry too much about getting her voice right or, you know, her shape right. They were obviously things that we had heated. We didn't ignore any of that, but I didn't want to make her a caricature and when you've only got images of people you tend to sort of, tend to see them as a certain type, a certain kind so I wanted to try and give her, like find her heart. She had such a beautiful heart, she has, she's still lovely. So, that was my main goal.

Actor 3

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- How did I prepare for it? I read that novel from start to finish again, I re-read that novel six years later. Then when I came back to Sydney, I walked the streets, basically I walked all of the Darlinghurst [and] Surry Hills streets, just to get a feel physically, get a feel for it, and yeah that that was my first initial preparations for finding who [the character] was and the sort of world he lived in, you know, almost 100 years later.

Actor 4

- I approached that like any other job I approach really. I mean initially it's about character, who is this character? Who is this person? And scripts.

Actor 5

- This simply goes back to understanding the character before you turn up... that's what it's all about. It's not about lines, or what you say, or how you say it. It's about being absolutely certain of the character, to know who the character is. And um... and the lines, if they don't work for you, it's probably [be]cause they're not written right for the character, and you have to change it. So, getting the character right is all important and the best way to do that is to give the character a backstory from birth, to page zero, as I said, and then once you feel fine with the character, then you say, ok, how much of me can I put in there, you know? How much of my experience is anything that character did, that I did, so that you can put yourself in there, and then by putting yourself in, it's more truthful. And that's the whole thing you aim for. Sometimes you get a character that is miles away from you and you have to work your bum off, but that's the essence of doing it right, is to know what you're doing.
 - I went out the front of this building and strutted along the landing, looking out at the moon, and with my hands behind my back, and I suddenly thought, "I'm being [my character]", and I wasn't even aware of it.
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Script	<p>Actor 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm very interested in what the writer has written, and why the writer has written it, and so I use those words to help me find [the] character. <p>Actor 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For me the script is the blueprint. That's my everything, that's where my story is, so I always look to that first, and I look to clues about the character within that script, and what's been said about the character when she's not in the scenes, and that's [where] my research goes, and that's where a lot of my work goes. <p>Actor 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The writer will have an idea of all the characters. Interviewer: It sounds like the script is really important in your development of your character? Actor 5: Well, it's the foundation of the whole project. And it's like building a skyscraper without any foundations, it usually falls down, so you gotta have the script.
Self-efficacy	<p>Actor 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I just feel more confident that I've done as much as I can. I think that in certain circumstances I'll learn all the lines and sometimes you plan your reactions because depending on who you're working with and everything like that, but I think when you're that prepped then you can walk on and go, "Oh I'm prepped, anything that's thrown at me, I'm going to be okay", and then that allows for if a surprise does come I'm not gonna break out [of] the moment [be]cause I don't know what to do, [be]cause I don't know what's coming next. So, it's a fine balance between playing like you don't know what's coming next but knowing. So that gives you confidence.

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- But in this particular case it's that prep, and that confidence, and that experimentation, and that unpredictability, and when it all sort of falls out in a way you didn't expect that still works, that's empowering.

Actor 3

- As the actor I have to be adaptable to just go okay, I'm just gonna lose all that, and I'm gonna go onto this and do it just as well.
-

Accepting no control

Actor 2

- I've really learnt that I've done enough prep that when it comes time to step on set, it's going to come.
- Yeah, [be]cause sometimes you can do as much prep as you like, but sometimes you walk on and you just can't get there for whatever reason is, whether it's a really happy scene or whatever. So, you go, "Okay what else can I do?", [be]cause you either sink or swim in this sort of environment, especially when we shoot as quickly as we do. But I've learnt that if you're open to the things around you, whether it be a tool, or a person, or an environment that you really can swim.

Actor 3

- Remember that film and TV is so little to do with the actor when it comes to the end result. So, whatever we do in front of the camera may not necessarily make it to the screen.

Actor 4

- I can think of one scene where I did that and often you know, I have an idea of how I think the scene's gonna be, but then when I'm actually filming it, it can go somewhere completely different so it's about being open-minded and open-hearted. So, to put in the work and then to let go of everything and be taken
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		and transported by wherever that goes which is completely beyond my control and out of my hands, that's when I think great work happens.
The Peak Performance State:	Present moment focus	<p>Actor 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I think it's just really focusing on the moment. I'm someone, who between action and cut, because I've done all the work for myself, I'm really focused on the other person and affecting the other person. <p>Actor 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviewer: What does being in the moment feel like? Actor 4: Just means being present, means not being in my head. So, not only listening to words, I'm listening with my vision, you know? What is this other person doing? I'm listening with my senses, what is it feel like? What's the vibe? So, I can listen in many different ways.
	Connecting	<p>Actor 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> My character was being cyber bullied and sort of blackmailed into staying in her bedroom and the person was threatening that if she told anyone or left the room, they would upload a sexual video of her, and they were saying take your clothes off, and so I had to start taking my dress off. Before I pulled it down, I was like, "I can't do it", but I had to be really in a really vulnerable place and when we shot it, they had to take down this wall of my bedroom, and there's a camera right where the computer would be, and 50 men around [laughs], you know what I mean? And that's not a private, insecure like moment, but I could go, "Oh this feels very exposing", and sort of take that. And sometimes it really is... learning, you know, taking what is required of the moment, but also taking in your circumstances around you to help you get to that.

	<p>Actor 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have to have a connection with every single person that you're talking to, and it has to be a real connection that exists between your characters. <p>Actor 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I stood on the same trap door that [my character] stood on, with the noose around my neck at the same place. And I thought well, if there is anything in the spiritual world and [my character] doesn't like what I'm doing, now's the time to pop the welds on this...on the...um...trap door. It was welded shut [laughs], even still. And it was the only time I knew that my two feet were on the same spot that [my character's] two feet were, and that was when he was being hanged.
Heightened state	<p>Actor 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yeah, it is. It is a double sort of world. I think that's why it's so... that's why it is so hard to judge, to judge it, to judge your performance [be]cause you are doing... you know, you're in a couple of places in your head at once. <p>Actor 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I had goosebumps at the end of the thing, and my God I forgot I was [myself]. I think that's a peak performance. I'm always in a peak performance. I don't say, "Wow, this is a peak performance coming up". As opposed to all the other ones.
Being the character	<p>Actor 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel what the character feels. <p>Actor 5</p>

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- **Interviewer:** Being in that environment, it allowed you to be in the same space. **Actor 5:** Yeah, well as close as I ever got, to being to being at one with that character.
-