

The Evaluation Mechanism for Auditions of the Faculty of Acting in Drama Schools in China

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Abstract: This research addresses the evaluation mechanisms utilized in auditions for acting programs within Chinese drama schools. By employing discourse analysis as its methodological approach, the study examines the perspectives of auditors, candidates, and relevant literature to uncover the intricacies of appearance, believability, and academic performance in the audition process. The research highlights the nuanced role of appearance, influenced by societal beauty standards, in shaping candidates' prospects. It further delves into the multifaceted discourse on believability, reflecting both its inherent qualities and potential for development through training. The study also explores the interplay between academic performance and acting, considering the value of cultural literacy and critical thinking skills. Ultimately, the research advocates for comprehensive evaluation methods that emphasize passion, authenticity, collaborative abilities, and critical thinking skills, offering valuable insights for reforming the audition process and nurturing the growth of aspiring actors.

Keywords: Drama Education; Drama School; Faculty of Acting; Audition.

1. Introduction and Background

Admission to the Central Academy of Drama unexpectedly raised questions about my unique selection among countless applicants. These inquiries continue to arise, particularly when doubting my suitability for acting. My attempts to seek clarity from teachers resulted in vague responses, intensifying my curiosity. My time at the academy, mentoring aspiring performance majors in speech and improvisation, further fueled my aspiration to become an acting coach. This desire led me to pursue actor training in the UK.

Upon my arrival in the UK, I began reflecting on the potential shortcomings of China's audition system and considering its enhancement. Chinese auditions, lasting about 10 minutes, hold immense influence over teenagers' entry into the acting field. A failed audition can shatter dreams of an acting career, leaving no room for recovery. Amid the industry's preference for graduates of specific drama schools, securing an acting career remains precarious, especially for those denied audition opportunities. The absence of institutions catering to amateur actors elevates the importance of auditions for aspiring teenagers.

As research on audition evaluation mechanisms was scarce, I faced challenges during the literature review. Nevertheless, I delved into Zhang Renli's "Question and Answer: Performance Testing and Teaching," which addressed concerns about auditions. Although our perspectives diverged on aesthetics, believability, and academic performance, his work provided a foundation for my exploration.

I conducted interviews with an audition examiner, enriching my understanding of the system. His insights sometimes aligned with Zhang's and other times contradicted them, offering a nuanced perspective. He emphasized that his views didn't represent all examiners or institutions, allowing me to uncover the system's realities and challenges through his discontent.

Concurrently, interviews with audition participants offered invaluable firsthand accounts and insights, contributing to my research.

2. Methodology and Approach

2.1. Discourse Analysis: An Introduction

This research employs discourse analysis as its methodological approach to uncover underlying assumptions of examiners and participants in the context of auditions. Discourse analysis focuses on sentence structure and conversation organization (Wertz et al., 2011, p.205). Given that this study draws from books and interviews, it's crucial to critically analyse the perceptions and narratives of those involved.

2.2. Methodology: Discourse Analysis and More

This research primarily utilizes discourse analysis while supplementing it with interviews and reference readings. The structure of this article involves analysing drama school auditions in China, evaluating the existing evaluation system vis-à-vis the Fourth-generation evaluation theory's negotiation and coordination aspects.

The literature review involves analysing Zhang Renli's "Question and Answer Performance Testing and Teaching," a book by a respected Chinese acting professor well-versed in auditions. The book offers insights into audition concerns from both student and examiner perspectives. Additionally, recent admission brochures from various Chinese drama schools provide official audition information, enabling a comparative analysis to reveal diverse viewpoints.

For discourse analysis, interviews provide representative data. Interviewees include audition examiners and students sharing experiences and insights. Discourse analysis aids in extracting meaningful insights from dialogue, particularly useful when revealing unspoken aspects (Morgan, 2010).

While this study's findings may not generalize to all schools, they offer valuable insights. Similarly, while not all audition examiners were interviewed, key decision-makers responsible for candidate assessment were prioritized. Student perspectives provide intuitive insights into the

audition process.

Some interviews were conducted virtually due to COVID-19, with recorded interactions categorized thematically for analysis. The translation process aimed to preserve interviewee intentions as closely as possible.

2.3. Data Sources

2.3.1. "Question and Answer Performance Testing and Teaching"

This research centers on Zhang Renli's "Question and Answer Performance Testing and Teaching." With over 40 years of experience in performance teaching, Zhang served as the head of the acting faculty at the Central Academy of Drama and trained numerous accomplished actors. The book contains three main sections, with this research focusing on the first part, analysing questions and answers from candidates and the examiner.

Published in 2009, the book remains relevant for its alignment with the audition formats of most Chinese drama schools between 2009 and 2019. Its content remains pertinent, even in the transition to online auditions induced by COVID-19 in 2020, making it a valuable resource for studying current acting auditions.

2.3.2. Selected Drama Schools

The Central Academy of Drama, a pioneer in modern Chinese theater education, significantly impacts Asian theater education. Its acting faculty aims to cultivate performing arts professionals with theoretical understanding, creative mastery, and exceptional artistic qualities. The focus is on representative institutions like the Central Academy of Drama and Shanghai Theatre Academy. While findings might not apply universally, they offer valuable insights.

3. Aesthetics

3.1. Discourse Analysis of Question-and-Answer Performance Testing and Teaching

The role of appearance as a crucial factor in Chinese drama school auditions is a poignant issue. Prospective students, parents, and examiners alike perceive attractiveness as a key attribute for actors. The prevailing notion in Chinese society is that actors must be good-looking, and even the term "actor" is often synonymous with beauty. Research indicates that attractive actors enhance TV show attention and ratings (Zong, 2016), underscoring the unfortunate significance of appearance. While teachings and values urge against solely judging people by their looks, the reality often contradicts this principle when it comes to actors.

In Zhang's book, appearance standards take precedence in the first chapter and the very first question:

1 Ok let me ask you a quick question to start our conversation.

2 It is said that being an actor should be very beautiful.

3 The actress needs to be 1.75 meters tall, and the actor needs 1.80 meters tall,

4 Otherwise, it will not work, will it? (Zhang, 2009, p. 3)

The phrase "quick question" in line 1 seemingly belittles the importance of the query, suggesting an easy response. Conversely, the use of "otherwise" in line 4 emphasizes negative consequences, potentially contrasting with the "quick question" notion. The asker, likely concerned about their appearance, seeks reassurance that appearance isn't paramount. The mention of "quick question" may serve to cushion the blow of potential rejection, with the subsequent

"otherwise" expressing their fear of appearance-related disqualification.

Professor Zhang's responses are illuminating:

1 The height condition of male and female students should not be discussed in such a rigid and straightforward way.

2 It is true, one of the characteristics of actors is to use their bodies to create characters.

3 Therefore, the admission of an acting major must consider his (her) external conditions.

4 If there are visible defects in external conditions, the admission standard cannot be met.

5 If the school is to lower its standards in order to let such students into the school, students will feel less confident in students' studies (because despite students working hard, it is still challenging to get the corresponding affirmation from the audience)

6 It is painful to work in society in the future. (Zhang, 2009, p. 3)

Zhang's response revolves around three themes: he avoids rigid height requirements, justifies consideration of external conditions in auditions, and highlights the implications of appearance standards. His wording indicates that height, while not the sole criterion, isn't entirely disregarded. His emphasis on external conditions acknowledges their significance in acting but also acknowledges the potential negative effects of appearance-based admissions.

Moreover, Zhang asserts:

7 "Beautiful" is a matter of opinion.

8 Of course, being well-proportioned, harmonious, with no apparent physical defects are indeed one of the critical conditions.

9 There are so many examinees, for the external conditions of students, of course, the school should choose the best,

10 However, the examiners do not so mechanically and rigidly delineate a certain height, fat or thin. (Zhang, 2009, p. 4)

Zhang's responses highlight the subjectivity of "beautiful" (line 7) and outline attributes like proportion, harmony, and absence of physical defects as crucial conditions (line 8). These attributes are tied to physical health rather than pure attractiveness. Despite acknowledging that schools do assess appearance (line 9), Zhang dismisses mechanistic and rigid criteria (line 10).

Through this discourse analysis, it is evident that Zhang neither categorically denies nor wholeheartedly affirms the importance of appearance. Instead, he navigates a nuanced approach, recognizing both appearance's role and the necessity of maintaining candidates' well-being, while aligning with industry aesthetics and character-building purposes.

4. Believability

4.1. Discourse Analysis of Question-and-Answer Performance Testing and Teaching

The concept of believability, as discussed by Zhang and its relevance in auditions, highlights the importance of authenticity and conviction in an actor's performance. Zhang's characterization of believability as the ability to present the fake as true resonates with Stanislavski's approach to acting, emphasizing the actor's genuine emotional and psychological immersion into their character.

In the example presented by Zhang, the examiner's test involving bitter medicine underscores the role of believability

in convincing the audience, or in this case, the examiner, that the fictional situation is real. This aligns with Stanislavski's emphasis on achieving emotional truth and experiencing a genuine connection to the character's emotions and circumstances.

4.2. Discourse Analysis of Interview

The examiner's view on believability shared similarities with Zhang's perspective. The examiner stressed the significance of believability in auditions (line 1) and its direct examination during the process. His assertion that believability is challenging to improve (line 2) echoes Zhang's sentiment that it is a unique gift that is hard to replicate through training.

The connection between believability and a sense of security (line 3) suggests that the ability to fully commit to a fictional scenario requires a certain level of psychological comfort. The examiner's acknowledgment of believability's dependence on the student's growth environment (lines 4 and 5) hints at the complex interplay between personal experiences, upbringing, and an individual's capacity to inhabit diverse roles convincingly. The examiner's statement that their assessment is based on a student's past (line 6) further aligns with Zhang's notion that believability is an inherent quality that emerges from an individual's life experiences.

4.3. Drama School's Admission Brochures

The analysis of drama schools' admission brochures highlights the evolving approaches to testing believability and acting ability. The use of improvisation and workshop-style evaluations in auditions reflects a desire to observe students' spontaneous reactions and authentic performance rather than relying on rehearsed monologues. These dynamic evaluation methods are in line with Stanislavski's teachings, emphasizing the importance of being "in the moment" and responding truthfully to the given circumstances.

4.4. The Researcher's View

The researcher delves into the concept of believability, which is an essential aspect of acting, intertwined with authenticity and emotional connection. While Zhang and the examiner advocate for the significance of believability in auditions, the researcher challenges its examination at this early stage of training.

The researcher points out the natural believability children exhibit during imaginative play, highlighting its gradual erosion due to various factors such as decreased playtime and an education system emphasizing logical thinking. The researcher advocates for a rekindling of this innate capacity through performance education. This perspective aligns with Stanislavski's "magic if" approach, which encourages actors to believe in the truth of their characters' emotions and experiences.

The researcher questions the efficacy of testing believability in auditions, as it's a quality that can be nurtured and developed over time through proper training and practice. While acknowledging drama schools' desire to admit students with strong acting abilities, the researcher proposes that assessing students' believability through improvisation and workshops might be a more accurate representation of their potential.

Ultimately, the researcher critiques the current audition system, arguing that the testing of believability at this early

stage may not accurately reflect students' potential, especially given the malleability of this quality through proper training. The emphasis on workshop-style evaluations, similar to Stanislavski's approach, might offer a more insightful glimpse into students' abilities without the undue pressure of immediate perfection.

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding believability in auditions reflects a complex interplay of inherent qualities, training, and the demands of the acting profession. While the concept resonates with Stanislavski's teachings, the researcher raises valuable questions about the appropriateness of testing believability at the audition stage and advocates for a more comprehensive, nurturing approach within drama education.

5. Academic Performance (Word Count: 1492)

5.1. Discourse Analysis of Question-and-Answer Performance Testing and Teaching

Zhang's book delves into the complex relationship between academic performance and pursuing a career in acting. He highlights a common narrative where some students who might not excel in traditional academic subjects are encouraged by parents and teachers to pursue acting as a fallback option. This perspective reflects the societal pressure to obtain a bachelor's degree and ensure future stability.

Zhang's cautionary tone (lines 4 to 7) about the potential drawbacks of solely focusing on acting without cultivating strong academic skills is notable. He links academic performance to an actor's ability to comprehend scripts, analyse characters, and understand directorial instructions. This suggests that a well-rounded education can enhance an actor's interpretive and analytical skills, which are essential for a nuanced performance.

5.2. Discourse Analysis of Examiners

The examiner's perspective emphasizes the importance of education in auditions (lines 1 and 2). The examiner's anecdote about a student from a prestigious school with high college entrance examination scores underscores the belief that academic achievement can correlate with a deeper understanding of scripts and performance. However, the examiner acknowledges the rarity of such students, implying that academic excellence doesn't always align with acting potential.

The examiner's view reflects the broader societal view that high college entrance examination scores equate to better understanding and analytical skills. This view, while prevalent, might not always accurately predict an individual's suitability for acting.

5.3. Discourse Analysis of Students

The students' perspectives offer a personal dimension to the discussion. Their interviews highlight the practical motivations behind auditioning for drama schools. For some students, the decision to audition stems from lower academic performance and the desire to secure a university education. This observation points to a larger trend in China where students seek alternative paths to higher education due to the immense pressure and competition of the college entrance examination.

5.4. The Researcher's View

The researcher critiques the traditional view that academic performance directly equates to cultural literacy. The researcher asserts that while high college entrance examination scores might reflect memorization skills, they do not necessarily indicate an individual's ability to engage in critical thinking or effectively apply their knowledge. This insight is crucial in the context of acting, where a nuanced understanding of diverse cultures and literary works is pivotal.

The researcher also highlights the importance of critical thinking in acting education. Critical thinking enhances an actor's ability to evaluate different performing techniques and choose the most suitable approach. It's also crucial for cultivating academic talents within the acting discipline, as it drives intellectual progress and prevents stagnation.

The researcher's perspective challenges the convention of evaluating actors solely based on academic scores and advocates for a more comprehensive assessment that considers cultural literacy and critical thinking skills.

In conclusion, the discourse surrounding academic performance and acting education reflects a complex interplay between societal expectations, practical motivations, and the actual requirements of the profession. The researcher's critique underscores the need for a broader view of evaluation that values critical thinking, cultural literacy, and the unique demands of acting as an art form.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

The conclusion chapter summarizes the key findings and implications of the research conducted. It highlights the significance of the study in shedding light on issues within the current drama school audition process and providing insights for reform. The chapter also acknowledges the limitations of the research and suggests avenues for future studies.

6.2. Limitations

The limitations of the study are acknowledged, particularly the constrained timeframe of three months. This limitation affected the scope of the research and the depth of analysis. Additionally, the sensitivity of the topic made it challenging to gain access to certain interviewees, potentially limiting the richness of the data.

6.3. Suggestions for Future Research

Future researchers are encouraged to employ case study methods to gain a more direct and comprehensive understanding of the current audition system. Conducting interviews with participants during actual auditions could provide deeper insights into the process and its impact on aspiring actors.

6.4. Advice on Future Audition Practices

The conclusion offers practical recommendations for reforming the audition process. It suggests replacing speech and improvisation with interview and workshop components to assess students' enthusiasm, openness to learning, and collaborative skills. These aspects are deemed crucial for a successful career in acting.

6.5. Personal Achievements

The researcher reflects on the personal growth and insights gained through the research process. The study has prompted

a reconsideration of the researcher's own teaching methods and approach to actor training. The researcher expresses a commitment to supporting students and advocating for changes in the audition process to better identify passionate and dedicated actors.

6.6. Final Remarks

The conclusion reaffirms the importance of this study's contributions to the reform of China's audition system for drama schools. By addressing issues related to appearance, believability, and academic performance, the research opens up avenues for dialogue and change. While acknowledging the challenges of reform, the researcher remains determined to continue advocating for a more comprehensive and fair audition process that recognizes genuine passion for acting.

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