**Diderot’s**[*Paradox of Acting*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Paradox-of-Acting)

The most significant statement on acting is Diderot’s *Paradox of Acting.* Because of its polemic brilliance, it remains the most widely known essay on the subject. In the 20th century it provided the guiding precepts for the influential work of the French director and actor [Louis Jouvet](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Jouvet). Outside France it has found little acceptance within the profession, though its famous paradox—that in order to move the audience the actor must himself remain unmoved—is still highly regarded.

However disputable the solutions it proposes, Diderot’s essay contains an excellent description of the actor’s problem. What bothered Diderot was the unsolved problem of how the actor, if he were full, really full, of feeling, could play the same part twice running with the same spirit and success and yet be worn out and cold as marble at the third performance. Diderot confirmed this phenomenon by noting “the unequal acting of players who play from the heart. Their playing is alternately strong and feeble, fiery and cold, dull and [sublime](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublime).” This was the case with an actress who in her day was the outstanding example of emotional acting. “She comes on the stage without knowing what she is going to say; half the time she does not know what she is saying; but she has one sublime moment.” Diderot knew that actors do feel and experience; but he also knew that some actors refused to recognize the need for craft, for training.

Diderot asked how the actor, if he is himself while he is playing, is to stop being himself: how he is to catch just the point at which he is to stay his hand? Diderot demanded unity in a performance; he demanded respect for the author’s concept, and he understood the difficulty of repeating a performance. He demanded a definite course to the passion—a beginning, a middle, and an end. In Diderot’s day, however, the problem of developing a technique for creating inspiration in the actor remained unsolved.

The difficulty of solving the problem is illustrated by the work of the 19th-century French teacher [François Delsarte](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Francois-Delsarte), whose influence was widespread not only in France but also in the United States. Delsarte became dissatisfied with routine acting techniques. He observed their mechanical and stultifying character and realized that under the stress of natural instinct or emotion, the body assumes appropriate attitudes and gestures quite different from those described by his teachers. But when he attempted to formulate laws of speech and gesture, on the basis of years of diligent observation and study, he created a series of elaborate pictorial descriptions that were just as mechanical as those he had originally criticized. Knowledge of affective behaviour had not advanced far enough to serve as an aid in solving the problem of the actor: there was still too little understanding of [human behaviour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-behavior), of the relation between the conscious and unconscious, and of the role of the senses.