

The (im)possibility of performance with(out) fear

BY ELISABETH POMÈS
Performance without fear: is it possible? Well, in a way, no, it's not; because fear is an intrinsic part of the performance.

Everybody gets more or less nervous before a performance. If not - well, as one of my friends said, "There's something wrong; I'm not nervous enough." Granted, this comment could give you ideas of murder while you're standing in the wings petrified - but it does have a lot of truth in it.

Every artist needs to feel the adrenaline charging through their blood and to feel the energy running through the body before and during a performance: that sense of excitement propels us forward; enables us to dare and to take risks; to do things we've never done in our studios; and to share that excitement with the audience.

We can compare a performance to a river - we know it needs to flow; nerves are like the water running, sometimes wildly, sometimes contained. Nerves not handled well are water out of control, a flood and the performance is often ruined. But without enough adrenaline, performance will hardly flow, will lack zest or passion.

An ever present part of performers' lives, nerves can be our allies or our enemies, depending on how we cope.

COPING WITH NERVES
Before we can cope with our nerves we need to witness them, to identify them, to know exactly what it is that our bodies do under the stress of dealing with performance nerves. The following list is by no means complete but probably at least one reaction will resonate for you:

- mouth gets dry
- tongue-tied
- the heart races
- butterflies in the stomach
- legs are shaking
- hands become slippery
- breath control disappears.

And then on top of the physical, the mind joins in!
Will I forget?

You'll never make it!

I didn't practise enough!

If this is beginning to sound more and more familiar then I would like to suggest this exercise:

Take a pen and paper with you backstage prior to your next performance and take the time to make your own personal list of the things, small or large, you experience in your body as well as your mind. Then as soon as you can, after you leave the stage, again write down, in point

form, everything you can remember about how you were feeling.

KNOW THE ENEMY
This will help you identify how your nerves manifest themselves, physically and mentally, so that before the next performance you will be able to say instead:

- "aah, my heart is running a marathon now"
- "oops, my hands are dancing the twist"
- "my mouth is so dry I could drink a gallon of water"
- "my knees are shaking like an autumn leaf"

The next step is to use simple tools to cope with these manifestations of the nerves. If your tension builds up in the muscles of the neck, shoulders and upper back, a few stretches when you feel nerves building up will help alleviate tension and pain. If, when stage fright hits, you hold your breath or breathe very shallowly, then doing some conscious breathing exercises allows you back into your body. Instantaneously you become quieter, more centered. Breathing deeply also quiets the mind and stops

the merry-go-round of negative thoughts that invades the psyche of the performer exiting to a far-away land of "what if," "if only" and "this is pure hell."

Next month's article will outline in detail the exercises that can truly help you overcome stage fright and mental blocks and to turn pre-performance jitters into a powerful energy.

Elisabeth Pomès is an award-winning soprano, a voice teacher and a certified yoga instructor. She has created a series of classes called Performance Awareness and a workshop called Performance Without Fear which she presents at the Glenn Gould Professional School (Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto).

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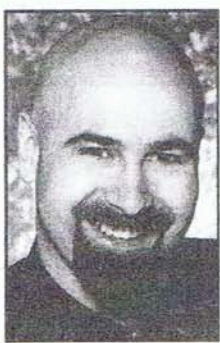
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