

The (im)possibility of Performance with(out) Fear. Part 1.

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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 is something wrong; I am not nervous enough." Granted, this comment could give you ideas of murdering such a friend if you are standing in the wings petrified when s/he says it - but it does have some 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; it 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. Nervousness is like water running, sometimes wildly, sometimes smoothly. Nervousness not handled well is water out of control, white-water that can ruin the performance. But without enough excitement, a performance will hardly flow, it will lack zest or passion.

Excitement and nervousness are an ever-present part of performers' lives; depending on how we cope with them, they may be an enemy or an ally.

Before we can cope with our nervousness, we need to witness what it causes in us, to identify the symptoms, to know exactly what it is that our bodies, minds and emotions do under the stress of dealing with performance. The following list is by no means complete but probably at least one reaction will resonate for you:

- dry mouth
- tongue-tied
- heart racing
- butterflies in the stomach
- legs shaking
- sweaty hands
- no breath control

And then, on top of the physical, the mental/emotional joins in a litany of undercutting self-doubt!

- Will I forget the words?
- I did not practice enough
- I will never make it!

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 in 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 onstage.

Know the Enemy

This will help you identify how your nervousness manifests itself, physically and mentally, so that before the next performance you will be able to say instead:

- Ah, 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 nervous manifestations. If your tension builds up in the muscles of the neck, shoulders and upper back, a few stretches will help alleviate tension and pain. If, when stage fright hits, you hold your breath or you breathe shallowly, then doing some conscious breathing exercises will allow you back into your body. Shallow breathing is both a sign of and a cause of anxiety. Take a few full, deep breaths. Immediately you become calmer, more centered. Breathing deeply also quiets the mind and stops the merry-go-round of negative thoughts that invade the psyche of the performer, carrying her/him to a land of “what if”, “if only” and “this is pure hell.”

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

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