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**Stage Fright: Exploring Performance Anxiety
In an MFA Professional Acting Program**

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by

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Thesis

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Abstract

Stage Fright: Exploring Performance Anxiety In an MFA Professional Acting Program

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Although the topic is rarely discussed, performance anxiety is a debilitating condition that sometimes even successful actors face. This thesis chronicles my experience dealing with performance anxiety in four productions as an actor in the M.F.A. acting program at The University of Texas at Austin. It includes an overview of research on the topic and calls for additional study from researchers of psychological disorders and practitioners of the acting craft.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE THREEPENNY OPERA SPRING 2011.....	3
THE PAIN AND THE ITCH SPRING 2011.....	6
THE CHERRY ORCHARD FALL 2011.....	10
THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM.....	14
LOVES LABOUR’S LOST SPRING 2012.....	19
ANXIETY AND PUBLIC PERFORMANCE.....	22
CONCLUSION.....	27
Bibliography.....	29

INTRODUCTION

Since I was young I have been a silent sufferer of performance anxiety. Although I didn't often speak up about it, I continued throughout my life to have jobs that required public speaking and I performed as an actor in various theatrical productions. As an undergraduate, I won various state, regional and national awards as a public speaker; as an actor, I was recognized as a regional finalist in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival's Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship competition. I was constantly told I was a talented performer, yet with each performance I felt like a moth drawn to a flame. I loved performing but each experience included the added obstacle of anxiety to overcome. I often wondered how much better I could be if I got the anxiety under control.

In 2009 I was prescribed atenolol, a beta-blocker used occasionally for anxiety, and Lexapro (escitalopram) for treatment of anxiety and depression. After a few months, I noticed less anxiety while performing, but also noticed side effects relating to sexual dysfunction. My prescription was then changed from Lexapro to Zoloft (sertraline) and things were well for a while. In the spring of 2010, I was accepted as a MFA Acting candidate at the University of Texas at Austin.

Regardless of talent or years of experience, performance anxiety can be a debilitating complication for any performer. Robert F. Moss, the author of three books on film, reports in *The New York Times* that performance anxiety is the "commonest disease known to the acting profession. Its symptoms are as widespread as pulled hamstrings and separated shoulders in the N.F.L. Nor are awards or years of experience inoculation against the illness" (Moss 4). Performance anxiety includes "onstage jitters, stage or camera fright, fear of public speaking or performing in anything from an interview to a major performance," says Dr. Brobson Lutz (Lutz 44). It does not just occur in acting or

music, it can affect any career where speaking publically is part of the job. It can even strike jugglers or mimes; performers who don't have to speak. Dr. Lutz identifies the symptoms:

... A pounding heart, butterflies in the tummy, sweaty palms and a dry mouth. Muscle tremors, quivering lips and a breaking voice are more visible manifestations of performance anxiety. All these signs and symptoms are caused by a surge of adrenaline-like chemicals related to an important animal survival trait – the fight or flight response. These evolutionary responses primes our ancestors to run from bears and to stay and fight if an exchange of blows seemed advisable. Muscles contract to protect vital organs. Blood shunts from gastrointestinal organs to muscles. Blood pressure rises and the heart rate races. Pupils dilate to improve distant vision. If humans had hair like dogs, it would stand on end. All these physiological responses are geared to handle unexpected stress or excitement but this same release of stimulants can cause anticipatory havoc when a planned performance is the goal (Lutz 44).

This paper chronicles my battle overcoming performance anxiety as an MFA Acting Candidate at the University of Texas at Austin. I will share my experience in the productions of *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Pain and the Itch* and *Loves Labour's Lost* – all produced by the UT Department of Theatre and Dance. I will explore the role of curriculum and how it has affected my confidence in my talent and training. Because performance anxiety in actors is seldom talked about, I will also share research findings on performance anxiety and reflect on my own experiences dealing with it. Understanding how the phenomenon has affected my personal journey may educate others. My aim is that this paper will encourage discussion among researchers of psychological disorders, actors and those who work with them.

THE THREEPENNY OPERA SPRING 2011

Auditioning for *The Threepenny Opera* was challenging yet one of my favorite auditions simply because the process was different than the standard play audition. It consisted of acting, dancing, and singing; typical for a musical production. I excelled in the acting portion of the audition, and after the first callback I was certain I was cast as Peachum. The singing portion was challenging because I had not sung at an audition in years. My dancing was not so great, however I never showed defeat at picking up choreography; I simply went with the flow and made it fun.

The rehearsal process started over winter break. Because of health concerns during the previous semester, I was weaned off of my anti-anxiety and depression medications over break as well. My body would need time to adjust and I did not realize this would play a part in the rehearsal process. I worked hard on my lines, realizing Peachum had more speaking lines than almost any other character. When rehearsals reconvened, I realized lines were not a problem; confidence was. At times, I could do a monologue on the spot, but a few minutes later I would struggle with the same speech. I started having panic attacks and the pressure was on.

Once in a music rehearsal Lyn Koenning, the musical director, chastised me for not knowing the song lyrics to *The First Threepenny Finale*. I explained to her that I knew them but was panicking and she reminded me that it's one thing to struggle with something that only affects you, but when you're doing a number with other people, you really have to have it together. This song was performed by the three Peachums: husband, wife, and daughter. I was devastated and close to tears as I apologized to my co-stars. Afterwards, as I was leaving the building, I ran into our director Halena Keys. She asked

me how rehearsal went as she could tell that I was upset. I felt defeated. I told her about my issues and she insisted that I should just focus on having fun during the process. I told her I was aware that in the real world, I would most likely be fired. I truly felt like a letdown to the cast, my fellow graduate students and the program itself. She told me she would meet with Lyn and see if there was something they could do to take away some of the pressure.

The following rehearsal, Halena approached me with a proposal: They would make some adjustments to some of my songs by having me share the spotlight or give another actor a given verse. She said she didn't want to insult me or make me feel worse, but she really wanted me to focus on what I was good at – acting, with less emphasis on singing and dancing. She gave me the choice and I felt a huge weight was lifted off of me. Jennifer Adams as Mrs. Peachum was amazing and these changes would give her more time to shine. I felt much better; happy and relieved at the same time.

As a way to combat my anxiety with my lines, I rehearsed them using a tennis ball. I would throw the ball against a wall as I recited my lines and this prepared me for those times when I would get distracted and panic. This way of practicing speeches has become standard now in my rehearsal process for any production. By nature of the ball being unpredictable as it bounces from the wall, it symbolizes the unexpected things that happen during live performances. Chasing a ball unrelentingly during a speech really allowed the text to take shape in my body and further increased my confidence. The ball exercise increased my tenacity and Peachum's character grew to be an intimidating villain to those who crossed him.

This was a valuable experience for me. I had not performed in a musical in fifteen years and my insecurities got in the way. Getting through this truly taught me that I can do anything I set my mind to; a lesson that will take me further in my career. I am not

necessarily proud of every part of the journey, but I am truly proud that I overcame the challenges. Even the reviewers were kind: “Lead actors are all sharp, with a particularly strong interplay between Christopher Reese and Jennifer Adams as the vengeful Mr. and Mrs. Peachum” (Young). “Likewise Liz Kimball as Polly Peachum, Christopher Reese as Mr. Peachum and Jennifer Adams as Mrs. Peachum had the vocal finesse to make the best of Weill’s urgent yet haunting melodies” (Ryzin). “These are marvelously talented, larger-than-life actors and singers. Reese as Peachum is large, robust, comic and emphatic” (O’Brian).

The reviews from the Austin theatre community are nice; but more important are the reviews from the cast and crew who were sometimes awed. I also had many conversations with audience members who loved Peachum. After our closing performance, a music teacher came up to me to tell me what a wonderful job I had done. She said that *Threepenny* was one of her favorites and she had seen it staged many times. This was her favorite and she actually thought I was the best Peachum! She asked how many years had I been singing and I told her honestly that I didn’t consider myself a singer. “Well you should now! You were marvelous,” she said.

I know I won’t be knocking down doors anytime soon to audition for musicals, but I do know that with confidence and hard work, anything is possible. This was not an easy experience and I am not proud of the struggles; but I am proud that I managed to get through it. Because of the way I dealt with the challenges and because I did not maintain open communication with the Acting Faculty during the process, I was disciplined.

THE PAIN AND THE ITCH SPRING 2011

After the struggles and challenges of *The Threepenny Opera*, I was informed that I would be placed on probation until further notice. The news was devastating yet expected. At that same time, as part of the MFA Acting program two productions were slated to showcase our actor talent and training. We actors would participate in either Bruce Norris's *The Pain and the Itch* or *Clybourne Park* by the same author. Casting was not predetermined so the faculty directors, Lee Abraham and Lucien Douglas, insisted on having an official audition which would also serve our training.

The audition process was the standard cold reading type and most of us accessed the scripts in advance for a quick read. Apparently my type generally reads as serious, because both directors seemed surprised by my approach to the characters, and impressed with my comedic timing and ability. I could have easily been cast in either production, but ultimately was cast as Mr. Hadid in *The Pain and the Itch* due to my physical presence and what I hoped was Lee's enthusiasm to work with me. Hadid is an immigrant from Somalia. In the play the rest of the cast are all related in some way, but Hadid is the outsider whose wife previously worked for the family whose home is the setting.

After the casting was announced, I met with Lee Abraham who informed me that all eyes were on me and I had to prove myself. He said he believed in me, but a lot rode on this production for me. Of course he was speaking truth, but the conversation did little to alleviate some of the concerns I had. This role would be very challenging for a number of reasons: 1) It was my first performance since being placed on probation, 2) It is directed by Lee Abraham who's known for his high standards, 3) The character required

the employ of an accent, and 4) All eyes were on me; I had to prove myself worthy of being in the program; in other words I had to redeem myself.

Already suffering from anxiety, I would have to figure out ways to overcome it. The first goal was to get off-book, having lines memorized, as soon as possible and focus on Hadid's Somalian accent. I started meeting with Vocal Studies Professor Pamela Christian to facilitate the accent work. What seemed intimidating at the start was slowly becoming doable to me in my mind; it was becoming easier to visualize success – an important concept when dealing with anxiety.

Studying the text phonetically was the first step to gaining a comprehension of the accent. *Accents and Dialects for Stage and Screen* by Paul Meier was a key component of study as well as the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) website. With Pamela Christian's guidance, I worked the text until the sounds started to become consistent. The next step and key to success was the use of improvisation in order to strengthen the accent. I would read various texts aloud with the accent; texts not related to the play; in order to mentally and verbally give the accent voice. I spoke to friends using the accent as well, and as the process continued, Hadid's voice started coming to fruition.

After a quick few weeks, Lee informed the cast that our off-book date was at hand and he again lectured about being professional and prepared. He warned us all that the standards were high and he expected each of us to be prepared. Separately, he reminded me again of how much I had riding on this production. On the specified off-book date, Lee did something I had yet to experience. He sat with the cast around a table and he told us to put our scripts away. He didn't even want us looking at them even if we were not in a given scene. I remember being really anxious about it internally but tried my best to not let it show. We dove in and it became apparent pretty quickly that we were not all as

prepared as we would have hoped. By the end of the reading, Lee was satisfied overall by the male cast members, including myself. Unfortunately the ladies received such a tongue-lashing that I felt bad for them, yet relieved that it wasn't me. Somehow I got through it; my only struggle was the huge monologue Hadid has in which I had some of the chronological events out of order.

Although the tongue-lashing was directed more at the female members of the cast, we were all affected by its message. That lecture set the tone for the rest of the rehearsal process. The reminder that Lee was not allowing excuses due to schedules, etc., forced us all to prioritize the production at all times. Not only was the standard set as actors, but we were all also responsible for the technical aspects of the production including set design, costumes, sound, lighting, etc. Having so much to do in addition to our jobs as actors and students served to bring us all closer – even to Lee.

Besides the challenges mentioned above, there was an additional physical challenge I had to endure. Lee wanted Hadid very formal and upright; uptight even. I was tasked with never sitting casually which meant no slouching, no crossing of legs when seated, and no leaning – either forwards or back in a chair. This was a huge challenge because my character starts the show and stays onstage until the very end. Even when there were flashbacks not including Hadid, he watched from the downstage area. This meant I was never given a moment to relax. People may take this for granted but it is very taxing on one's body. However, this proved successful as Movement Professor Andrea Beckham remarked positively about my posture throughout the show.

Mister Hadid has been one of the most challenging roles I have played to date. Besides the pressure of being watched while on probation by the faculty and department as a whole, the character was a tough, strong character holding it all together until the very end when he shares the story of how and why his wife died. His emotional

breakdown was an additional challenge, building from a very controlled retelling of his plight, to tears as he recounts his son and wife being mistreated at the hands of police officers.

Through this production I learned so much about myself; as an actor and individual. I was reminded that I am talented and worthy; otherwise I wouldn't be in an MFA Acting program to begin with. I was reminded that I have the discipline of a veteran soldier and that discipline serves me well today. The biggest boost to my ego was being reminded that I am capable of not letting anxiety win. This production resulted in me getting my self-assurance back; self-doubt now replaced with renewed and warranted confidence. The icing on the cake? I was officially taken off of probation and my future in the program was beginning to feel re-secured.

THE CHERRY ORCHARD FALL 2011

Upon learning of being cast in the production of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* I was elated; somebody wanted me, and I would continue to learn and apply the principles and techniques of the craft. Here was another opportunity to redeem my reputation as a competent actor and yet again show that I was conquering my anxiety. Already on probation, I would either impress or disappoint the show's director Dr. Brant Pope, also the Chair of the department. The pressure was on and I knew I could certainly pull this off. Would it be easy? Definitely not; however, I was up for the challenge. Although Chekhov isn't necessarily an easy undertaking, I was ready to make it happen – or go out fighting.

The first step toward success, as with any other production, was research. Since this was my first time performing Chekhov outside of scene work, I had to gain a better understanding of his approach to language. It was also essential to gain some perspective about my character, Boris Semyonov-Pishchik. He is a man of privilege, with great pride; yet he is smart enough to swallow that pride to ask for what he really needs. Additional research included understanding how currency worked in Russia and what the current exchange rates are today. This was the key to understanding the stakes since Pishchik is constantly trying to pay his mortgage and even states "... the only thing I ever think about is money! (Chekhov, 362)"

Brant told me to not play up Pishchik's age; he reminded me that I would never be cast to do that in the professional world. I agree, but I would never be cast in that role to begin with, so why not play him as a "character," albeit an older one? With that option out the window, another question was raised: Although Pishchik is a freeloader, how can

I stray away from making him a con artist given that he plays up his physical ailments to gain favors? Pishchik's dialogue often refers to his age. How can I talk about gout, strokes, have memory lapses, etc. if I'm playing him as a younger man?

Overall, the rehearsal process was like being a participant in an amazing master class. It was interesting to have things brought to us from different approaches. Although the goals of successful acting were the same, the terminology in some cases was new. Here are a few gems that have better informed my craft:

Define other characters from your characters point of view. Doing this will inform your own character. Your character behavior is based on how you see others. The way you perceive a character's problem, and fix their problem – reflects you. You never change – you change others' behaviors and responses. The concept of “covering energy” is presenting a positive energy because a character can't deal with the dark underneath. Positive does not mean happy here; but it is something that reveals to the discerning eye what really is going on. And finally, focus on being interested instead of interesting. Many actors make this mistake; I have been guilty of focusing on being interesting at times myself. Oddly enough, it is far more compelling to watch an actor being interested in something; preferably the other actor in the scene. Additional things to consider: 1) Am I playing the problem? 2) Am I playing the conflict or trying to solve it? 3) Am I trying to change the other person? 4) Am I playing the idea of the character? 5) Am I playing the story or the need? 6) Am I playing negative energy or mood?

During the rehearsal process, my notes were about specificity. It wasn't that I wasn't making choices; I was simply not making the right ones for this production. Brant insisted on working with me outside of regular rehearsal to address this. It became clear, however that, like most directors, he had an idea of what he wanted from the character long before this production even started. He had once talked with James Earl Jones who

played Pishchik in a production Brant was somehow involved in. Brant loved his performance and talked to him about his approach to the character.

Working one on one with Brant, I realized he was very specific with what he wanted; it was really about choreography. From the way Pishchik walked, to the way he breathed; from his posture, to the way he sneezed. It was all clear to Brant but elusive to me. Eventually I learned that I was not alone in my feelings toward the production process. Once I recognized this, I realized I needn't take things personally (a common mistake for anxiety sufferers) and my acting improved tenfold. Beyond the initial part of the rehearsal process, I didn't feel any overwhelming anxiety.

On opening night, Brant gave me a note that read: "Hey Chris: Thanks for your great work in *The Cherry Orchard*. A really, really, difficult role and you worked very hard on making him specific and clear. Thank you, Chris for being really dedicated and professional. Happy Opening! Brant." This note of a few words really mattered to me. Also, working with actress Laura Lane was monumental to most of the students since she is known for her role on the television series *The Nanny*. It mattered to me even more as Laura was one of my undergraduate professors at Texas State University and has always been a huge supporter of mine, including my work. It was interesting to see her in action as she handled what came her way right alongside the rest of us. Her professionalism was inspiring.

Consistent with the point of a professional graduate acting program, this production was a great experience as it allowed us the opportunity of working with professional actors and introduced us to a director that shared knowledge of his professional experiences and included additional terminology and theories relating to the craft of acting. Dr. Pope was very specific with what he wanted and it further boosted my confidence to give him that. In regards to anxiety, it is important to understand that others

have the same concerns and challenges as you do. Once you get past taking things personally, you are free to explore your creativity and truly bring your talent to the forefront.

Certainly *The Cherry Orchard* was a learning experience just as important as the productions of *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Pain and the Itch*. Performance experience is vital to any actor, especially in a professional actor training program. Equally important to production experience, however is the program of study. Together, they worked in tandem to prepare me for my final role in *Loves Labour's Lost* which I will discuss later.

THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM

As an actor, it is essential that I understand my voice and vocal abilities in order to function most efficiently in character. In *Voice and the Actor*, Cicely Berry states that “the voice is the most intricate mixture of what you hear, how you hear it, and how you unconsciously choose to use it in the light of your personality and experience” (Berry 7). Thus, it is the voice that adds to the uniqueness that each of us possess.

My awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of my voice is the key to gaining better control of its usage. It is not enough to just rely on its richness. In order to get the most out of it, I must work at it. We all must. My training has forced me to acknowledge that I have a tendency to tighten up and restrict sounds when I am nervous or put on the spot; this tightening up results in garbled or mumbled sounds. This is a result of my anxiety and is the first challenge I must overcome. By being aware of this, I can work towards fixing it. It is imperative that I continue working on this, as I have already made improvements.

I have also been made aware of what seems to be a “too-relaxed” musculature when considering my voice (perhaps a Texas thing): I don’t consistently use articulators to clean up the sounds I produce, and that also contributes to the garbled and mumbled sounds I sometimes produce. As training progressed, I became aware of the improvements I have continued making. The vocal warm-ups and exercises I have learned thus far have been crucial to the development of my voice and the efficiency it gives as an actor. In recent productions, I was proud that I was one of few actors not getting notes on volume and clarity. This was because of the vocal awareness I learned and the effects of a good vocal warm-up before hitting the stage.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, I also find that my body tenses up more than most probably because of my anxiety. So exercises involving relaxing the body are also beneficial to me. Paying particular attention to my neck and shoulders generally helps to release unwanted tension. In addition, breathing exercises also help to calm me down.

It is important to acknowledge my most prominent challenges. Most actors would include here their physical and vocal problems. That approach doesn't serve me as well. I have to consider my challenges as mental and physical; with vocal issues being addressed along-side my physical shortcomings. Mentally, I have often had anxiety issues. It is important to address these first; as not acknowledging them can lead to heightened physical manifestations not useful to performance.

Which of my habits serve my character? Which only serve as a hindrance? Habits to consider include bad posture, reservation, rushing and mumbling. With posture, I have a tendency to slump a bit when performing which minimizes my presence. My reservation is me holding back. My friends and family see me as larger than life – that's the person I should be presenting in performance. My tendency to rush happens more so when I am not truly in the moment. Lastly, I mumble when I am not truly using the text to propel my objective and actions. Just recognizing these habits before a performance will help me avoid using them. The key is not to obsess about them; but to accept them as things to be aware of; thereby avoiding them.

It is important to remind myself of the notes I have received; directors don't want to repeat the same notes to actors. Take in the notes and find solutions to problems until the problems no longer exist. Expect the unexpected: things will happen; from a missing sound cue, to another actor dropping lines. Be prepared to keep the scene moving in a way that honors the playwright and addresses those things that come out of nowhere.

Remember this: “*Everyone involved, including the audience, is rooting for me. They want me to succeed!*”

In *Three Uses of the Knife*, David Mamet asserts: “It is difficult... not to see our lives as a play with ourselves the hero...” (Mamet 12). Although Mamet covers the “nature and purpose of drama,” the idea of the hero is used throughout the book. It is the “quest of the hero” that elicits good drama and the quest of the actor to elicit a good theatrical experience. “That which the hero requires is the play....” Mamet says. “Every incident either impedes or aids the hero/heroine in the quest for the single goal” (Mamet 22)

As actors, we interpret this in two ways. First, we have a responsibility to the playwright and his play. This requires us to receive the playwright’s words in relation to the director’s interpretation as well as our own subjective interpretation of the script. Awareness of this keeps us from going into “actor’s fight – for – our - character mode” whereby some of us, then, have the tendency to want the play to be about us; our character’s wants and needs. Many actors struggle with this because we naturally want our characters’ motivations, as well as our personal commitment to the collaborative project to be recognized. This can lead to hilarious and humbling discoveries as our egos are then put in check. Not always humorous, these exchanges often lead some actors to friction with collaborators including, yes, other actors.

Secondly, we actors are trained to always see our character as the hero of the play. With each actor giving full commitment to his role, no matter how large or small, the playwright and the script are served because the importance of each character serves the story. The unnecessary character does not exist in good plays. Thus the actor has to find balance in these two approaches; they must coexist. “And the cleansing lesson of the

drama is, at its highest, the worthlessness of reason. In great drama we see this lesson learned by the hero.” (Mamet, 70)

Like many actors, I suffer from my own personal baggage. It is through my involvement in theatre that I learn more about myself. Indeed, I learn a lot about my own insecurities by learning about the insecurities of the characters I portray. I see myself as the hero of my life; the same applies to the characters I play. Today’s actors have a variety of demands made of them and it is important that they are prepared to address them. Sometimes an actor has to appear to be racist or even a rapist. Other times, he may play a part different than his own sexual orientation. An actor has to be willing to act and take on characters far different than himself.

The demands an actor faces are many. Because there are many television and film projects that are fantasy based, an actor has to be able to use his body as an extension of self. Fight scenes, car chases, and any other physically challenging actions are quite common in a world where many actors are now doing their own stunts. The recent resurgence of the popularity of musicals in television and film also require many actors to sing and learn choreography in addition to memorizing lines.

As an actor, the combination of my voice and size allow me to take on strong characters often with authority. I am strong yet vulnerable; evident in the roles I have portrayed over the years. I am also very loving and protective of people I care about. These qualities can and will serve me well. Others see me pretty similarly to how I see myself. In class, over the years, these same qualities were mentioned by my peers. They also described me as a warm Dad-type with a strong masculine vibe. They said I can be really happy or really dangerous; which expands on the idea of being powerful. In addition they can see me as a villain.

Part of the curriculum included understanding one's acting type. There are many actors in the business playing the types of roles that seem to fit me: Romany Malco, Nelsan Ellis, Jesse L. Martin and Richard T. Jones. These actors don't necessarily represent me, but the roles they have played offers insight to my own actor type. They are strong black men as am I. Realistically there are parts that I can see myself being called to audition for. For the stage, I can see being called to play Tom Collins in *Rent*, Harpo in *The Color Purple*, and Jim in *Big River*. I can also see myself auditioning for roles in *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Top Dog Underdog*, *Purlie*, *The Exonerated*, or even David Mamet's *Race*.

It is not easy to consider one's type in such a competitive market; which is exactly why this awareness is so very important. I have many friends who are unaware of their type and they do not get much work. I have been lucky to have insight from colleagues, faculty members and other professionals that have a better sense of the business than I do; and thus have made me consider my future career in terms of reality. My MFA curriculum consisted of various techniques and approaches to movement, voice and acting. Combined with past productions, the program of study would allow me the confidence to tackle my next role: that of King Ferdinand in The University of Texas Department of Theatre and Dance production of *Loves Labour's Lost*.

LOVES LABOUR'S LOST SPRING 2012

During the rehearsal process of *Love's Labour's Lost*, my nerves were awry; my biggest nightmare was becoming reality: I was losing it. I was experiencing a breakdown, of sorts, so overwhelming that I knew my tenure as an MFA Acting candidate would have to end one way or another.

After the first rehearsal following table reads, we were berated for not being professional enough. Even with scripts in hand, we were stopped and corrected when even one word of text was omitted or out of order. The director had gone from the charming guy we couldn't wait to work with into some other being entirely. I was shocked. I was proud of what I brought to the table and my colleagues as well. We were prepared and had been looking forward to the experience. The director then looked at someone in my vicinity and asked angrily: "Jerome, do you have a problem with that?" The rehearsal room was silent for a moment. Finally, I looked around to see who this Jerome was he referring to, and what he had to say. The director then looked directly at me and said "I'm talking to you. You have a problem with me or what I said?" Again I was shocked, and now, insulted. As the only black man in the room, he was indeed speaking to me. I had met this man several times and he called me by name, Christopher, each time. Christopher does not sound like Jerome.

Before exploding I took the time to take a big breath; reminding myself that I was part of a training program where professionalism was expected. I didn't need to draw negative attention to myself by insulting a guest director. "Well, my name isn't Jerome," I replied, "and I can't say that I agree with you, but it is what it is." I left it at that. I knew better than continue. Some things are best left unsaid.

I am not insinuating racism of any kind. In his defense, this Caucasian director is currently married to an African American woman; yet the exchange would set the tone for the rest of our working relationship. As a Shakespearean stage director, he was brilliant; but as a human being he was one of those directors that seemed, in my opinion, to lack people skills. He was tough on everyone. No one was immune. Yet with me it seemed so personal at times. Eventually, I started dreading rehearsals. Anxiety was starting to become a prominent player in the production game. Outside of rehearsal, when running lines with other actors, all was well. As with *The Threepenny Opera* I would even use the ball technique when working on lines alone. This added to my confidence and I would go into the next rehearsal thinking it would be the day that things changed for the better. It never did. This director would praise me for one thing and then berate me for something else. It was humiliating. Because of his policy of having the stage manager instantly correct the actors whenever there was a text error of some sort, I found myself constantly having to start over and rarely got through a long speech successfully from start to finish. I had more lines than any other actor and the need for perfection every time I spoke contributed further to my anxiety. The results were embarrassing.

A few weeks later, our director realized his methods were probably having an adverse affect on me. He took me aside and I confided my battles with anxiety. He asked what he could do to make things better and I suggested getting line notes after rehearsals instead of in the middle of line delivery. I didn't want to suggest it since being the only exception to the rule would draw more attention to me and my plight. Yet, I thought it best at the time as I was nearing the end of my rope. Anxiety was getting worse and depression was becoming a factor as well. Two days later, the head of the Graduate Acting Program, Fran Dorn, called me and informed me that the acting faculty had been alerted of my struggles and she needed to know how I felt. I told her honestly that

(understanding the consequences of my decision) it was in my best interest to no longer continue working on the production. I knew by saying this that my standing in the program would become null and void; I had already been placed on probation as a result of how I dealt with anxiety. Though it was a hard decision to make, it was the best decision for my own personal well being. I simply had to walk away to preserve my idea of sanity. I did not know if or when I would ever feel like acting again.

ANXIETY AND PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

I am not alone. Among actors my experiences are not uncommon. Many successful actors deal with performance anxiety and the defeatist thoughts that accompany it. “My courage sank and with each succeeding minute it became less possible to resist this horror,” says the great actor Sir Laurence Olivier describing the frozen terror of his 1965 opening as Solness in the National Theater’s production of *The Master Builder* (Aaron, 61) In fact anxiety is quite common among professional actors. Sufferers include Meryl Streep, Kim Basinger, Nicolas Cage, Edie Falco, Cherry Jones, Stephen Fry, Jason Alexander, Olympia Dukakis, Robin Williams and many others (Berry 33, 99, 243; Ebry 1; Lahr 42; Salomon 3). The condition is not related to inexperience and, in fact, many actors become afflicted in the middle of their careers, or after years of successful performing (Marshall, 133).

John Lahr writes in *The New Yorker* that stage fright is a “traumatic, insidious attack on the performer’s expressive instrument: the body. Psychoanalyst Donald Kaplan says stage fright leads to ‘blocking’ - the “complete loss of perception and rehearsed function” (Lahr 38). This results in the physical manifestations common with people suffering from anxiety attacks. According to Lahr:

The actor’s feeling of physical as well as mental coherence disintegrates. Instead of being protected, as usual, by the character he is playing, he suddenly stands helpless before the audience as himself; he loses the illusion of invisibility. His authority collapses and he feels naked... (Lahr 39)

Psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas says: “You lose your radar- like a surfer. You can ride a ten foot wave with real confidence, not thinking about it, just doing it. Then, all of a sudden, you become too self-aware. You think too much. You get wiped out” (Lahr, 39). Once the need for perfection is acknowledged, focus becomes less clear. Lahr continues: “The paradox of acting is that, like surfing, it requires both relaxation and concentration. If there is concentration without relaxation, or relaxation without concentration, the performance doesn’t work.” (Lahr 39)

Gordan Goodman, an actor and singer, wrote a dissertation on anxiety while earning his PhD. in psychology. For his study, Goodman surveyed 136 actors that had membership in at least one performers’ union with, in his words, a “wealth of experience.” The results of his study show that “more than 80 percent of professional actors have suffered from stage fright at least once in their careers” (Salomon 2). According to the study, Goodman asserts that actors “should never try to manage the thoughts of those who are evaluating them. The more the person concentrates on the end result, the worse they perform” (Salomon 3) I found this to be the case in my experience with *Loves Labour’s Lost*.

In *The Impact of Stage Fright on Student Actors*, researchers noted eight aspects of performance affected by acting in public. These include: memory, movement and posture, voice production, enjoyment of acting, breath control, character projection, attention to detail, and emotional involvement. Almost all the students listed voice projection, movement and breath control to be influencing factors. (Steptoe 31) Personally, memory, posture, attention to detail, emotional involvement and enjoyment of

acting were all less effective when challenged. In my experience, constant corrections during rehearsals signified that I was not good enough or worthy of succeeding.

Tara Wohlberg reports in *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) that the feelings of dread and fear of failure associated with anxiety can be overwhelming and lead one to “never try that again.” She advises:

Get a good night’s sleep. Avoid alcohol and other sedatives. Avoid caffeine and other stimulants. Practice some form of meditation or prayer to focus thoughts. Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques. Deep diaphragmatic breathing. Get regular aerobic exercise. Practice, practice, practice. Be extremely well prepared, know your material. Engage in positive self-talk. Engage in positive visualizations, imagining a successful outcome. (Wohlberg R8)

The survey on stage fright in student actors indicates that stage fright is “at least as common among student actors as musicians, and that it is associated with disruption of technical aspects of performance, health-related problems and maladaptive cognitions.” Researchers also found that little evidence exists that “strategies such as relaxation that are commonly invoked by performing artists have any impact on stage fright in general, although they may for certain individuals (Steptoe 38). I find, in my experience, that relaxation exercises helps with transitioning into performance mode, but does little to actually alleviate anxiety. For that, I advise seeking the help of a qualified therapist. Some sufferers may even find solace in popular books like *The Stress Answer* by Dr. Frank Lawlis or *The 10 Best-Ever Anxiety Management Techniques* by Margaret Wehrenberg.

Actor Jason Alexander suggests a mantra that includes the key words: strength, courage, conviction and joy. This includes the strength to be yourself; the courage to understand that “others fight greater battles and risk far more than you do;” the

conviction to “believe in what you are doing,” and commit by doing it fully; and joy, the most important. “Be grateful for something that challenges you,” he advises. “Challenges make life worth living. They make life sweet. So take joy in your ability to challenge yourself and succeed” (Berry, 37).

For actors suffering from anxiety, I recommend a multi-faceted approach. Do anything that works for you to build extra confidence in yourself and your abilities. In my experience, I now rely on character improvisation, the ball technique, relaxation exercises, a personal mantra, self-help books, and, perhaps more importantly, a therapist.

Improvisation in character can be practiced onstage and off. Improvise with your friends in social situations and, when allowed by your director, improvise in character when you flub a line. Don’t allow yourself to get flustered; the key is staying in character at all times. This builds the confidence that whenever something goes wrong, you can keep the story moving without making the audience aware.

Run lines whenever and wherever possible: in your car, at a bus stop, in a waiting room, or while shopping. Do not worry about what other people think. Getting over what others think will help minimize the judgment you perceive from others while performing. Use the ball technique to help you stay focused.

Employ any relaxation techniques that work for you. Anything you can do to increase breathing and decrease tension is helpful. Start with a general warm-up and continue with meditation or relaxation exercises specific to you and your habitual areas of tension. In addition, find yourself a personal mantra that works; it may and should change over time.

Seek help from the experts. A qualified therapist may help you directly or you can seek help through self-help books. Each offers insight and various approaches to wellness. Keep looking until you find which approaches work best for you.

CONCLUSION

Performance Anxiety is a condition that affects public speakers, musicians, actors and others. For actors, it can affect memory, posture, attention to detail, and enjoyment of acting. Even professional actors are not immune; performance anxiety may strike even in the middle of a successful career.

Although performance anxiety is acknowledged as a challenge for many, the phenomena has not been studied in actors as thoroughly as it could be. Current research of performance anxiety focuses more on public speakers and musicians. I recommend further study by both researchers of psychological disorders and practitioners of the acting craft. Additional research may shed light on what approaches work to alleviate or minimize the impact performance anxiety has for actors. This will be beneficial to directors, teachers, and others who work with actors in a creative capacity. More importantly, further research will provide useful techniques for student and professional actors who encounter anxiety or stage fright.

What a strange and interesting road I have travelled. Although I performed a few months after the *Love's Labours Lost* experience, it took nearly a year for me to do it again. Although I had reservations, I simply had to get back on the proverbial horse. A trained actor is a more confident actor, and the program of study served me well. My insecurities are behind me but always lurking in the shadows awaiting a moment when the light is dimmed or unfocused. Within the program I managed to turn in some wonderful performances both in and out of the classroom. Academically, I was a stellar student; however inconsistencies in dealing with anxiety in production affected my standing. I work even harder now and my confidence is well-earned.

My passion, besides acting, has always been teaching. My recent experiences make me even more empathetic to students. I'm familiar with the signs of anxiety and panic attacks and I recognize the importance of making student actors feel supported in the classroom. Some of my proudest moments as an Assistant Instructor have been watching the shy and hesitant student actors blossom. As a result I plan to continue researching this topic, eventually offering workshops on the subject to both acting students and instructors.

Going forward, I will continue to act. I now recognize my strengths as a performer and I understand my own limitations. My nearly three decades of experience in the field have consisted of acting in straight plays and some screen and voice work. Although I have a good singing voice, performing in musicals is not one of my strengths. And although I enjoy Shakespeare, you won't find me performing as a Shakespearean lead any time soon either. Not every actor can sing and dance or pull off Shakespeare successfully. What I find is that I must control my own destiny as a performer. I can not leave it up to a graduate acting program to assign me roles or approve them when I have little or no control to decline. If I feel a role is not right for me I don't have to accept it and I won't. That is the true nature of the business. However, I will continue to challenge myself. I am aware of my type and I know better than anyone when to play against it.

Within the acting program, I was challenged almost daily and I excelled. I have learned more about myself as an actor and as a man just trying to figure things out. I will not let two negative experiences cloud my judgment when considering the program; as there were hundreds of positive ones in the two years I was part of it. In those two years, I have learned more about the craft of acting than I ever would have otherwise. I am indeed an actor and thanks to the UT Department of Theatre and Dance, I am a better one. Performance anxiety doesn't define me; how I deal with it, perhaps, does.

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