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BOOKS

What's behind stagefright?

Sara Solovitch, in "Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright" (Bloomsbury), says that while she was a good pianist as a child, she fell apart -- sweating, trembling -- when she had to play for an audience. She got through the Eastman School of Music's preparatory program. Then she quit studying piano, grew up, got married, had children, and became a journalist. In her late forties, though, she drifted back to the piano, taking a course at a community college. By this point, she had no professional ambitions. Surely, she thought, she would now be able to perform calmly. But when her teacher asked her, one night,

to play in front of the class, her hands began shaking so hard that she could barely strike the keyboard: "I gazed down at myself from a distance high above the keys, watching a body that was no longer in charge. My fear was at the controls, like an independent organism emerging from inside me, my own Rosemary's baby."

Stagefright has not been heavily studied, which is strange because, as Solovitch tells us, it is common not only among those who make their living on the stage but among the rest of us, too. In 2012, two researchers at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, Karen Dwyer and Marlina Davidson,

administered a survey to eight hundred and fifteen college students, asking them to select their three greatest fears from a list that included, among other things, heights, flying, financial problems, deep water, death, and "speaking before a group." Speaking before a group beat out all the others, even death.

Stagefright has been aptly described as "self-poisoning by adrenaline." In response to stress, the adrenal glands pump the hormone epinephrine (adrenaline) into the bloodstream, causing the body to shift into a state of high arousal. The person's muscles tense, he sweats and shakes, his heart pounds, his mouth goes dry, he has trouble breathing, he may become nauseated or dizzy, and his throat constricts, making his voice rise in pitch. This is the so-called "fight or flight" response, which our species is thought to have developed because it helped prepare the body for forceful action in response to a threat. But what Cro-Magnon man needed upon finding a bear in his cave is not what a modern person needs in order to play King Lear. Without the release of abrupt action, the hyperactivation becomes, basically, a panic attack.

As for the thoughts accompanying the physical response, the most important seems to be a feeling of exposure. The English theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout, in his excellent book "Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems" (2006), compares the situation to that of a snail having its shell ripped off. His countryman Stephen Fry, who, one day in 1995, left London -- indeed, England -- to avoid appearing in the play he was scheduled to perform in, says that, when stagefright hits, the audience sees "the shrivelled penis in your head." And, in the typical case, the performer can do nothing to change the spectators' minds, because he feels utterly empty. In 1989, Daniel Day-Lewis, playing the title role in Richard Eyre's production of "Hamlet" at London's National Theatre, turned on his heel in the middle of the show and walked off the stage, never to return. (In the twenty-six years since then, he has acted only in movies.) "I had nothing in me, nothing to say, nothing to give," he said. Others stay, but only by force of sheer, grinding will.

In a number of ways, stagefright doesn't make sense. Laurence Olivier, when he was in his late fifties, was visited by a spell that lasted, intermittently, for five years, causing him great anguish. At the time, he was the most celebrated stage actor in England. How could he be frightened of failing? Ditto Mikhail Baryshnikov. In the nineteen- seventies and eighties, Baryshnikov was the most famous ballet dancer in the world, and he probably still is, though he ceased classical dancing some twenty- five years ago. Since then, he has built a successful career in modern dance and theatre. But he experiences terrible stage-fright, and says that it has only got worse over the years.

This is another mystery of stage-fright -- that, in so many cases, it doesn't let up with time. If the artist repeatedly goes onstage fearing failure, and instead has a success, shouldn't the fear eventually extinguish? "I am onstage more than fifty years," Baryshnikov says. "Sometimes I do shows every night for weeks. Still, it never doesn't come. Starts four hours before. I don't even try to fight it anymore. I know it will always be there."

A final mystery of stagefright is just how many otherwise capable people suffer from it. A few writers on the subject have suggested that it is a modern phenomenon, born of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But Scott Stossel, in his recent book "My Age of Anxiety," quotes Cicero, ancient Rome's

acclaimed orator, saying, "I turn pale at the outset of a speech and quake in every limb." After Cicero, examples in the literature thin out until the eighteenth century. Then, however, we get some impressive ones, including Thomas Jefferson, who is said to have been mortally afraid of public speaking. As President, he gave only two speeches, his two inaugural addresses. Gandhi was terrified of having to speak to a group: his vision would fog over; he would fall mute.

As for performers, Barbra Streisand, singing in front of more than a hundred thousand people in Central Park, one night in 1967, repeatedly forgot her lyrics. For twenty-seven years thereafter, she refused to perform live except at charity concerts. Adele told *British Vogue*, "I puke quite a lot before going on stage, though never actually on the stage." Jay Z told Terry Gross, on "Fresh Air," that performance anxiety is the reason rappers often grab their crotches when performing. Many of them, he said, are not accustomed to live performance. "You get up there, you feel naked," Jay Z said. "So when you feel naked what's the first thing you do? You cover yourself."

But singers don't have to perform live; they can fall back on recording. The two most famous stagefright victims among concert pianists also took that route. Vladimir Horowitz, probably the most acclaimed piano virtuoso of the late twentieth century, retired from public performing four times, for long periods. (One lasted twelve years.) But he didn't stay home. Some of his finest recordings were made during those sabbaticals. An even more notorious withdrawal, because it was permanent, was that of the Canadian master Glenn Gould. From the beginning of his concertizing career, when he was in his teens, Gould feared and hated the audience. He felt that the spectators wanted him to fail; he was sure that, in any case, he would get germs from them. He retired from the stage at the age of thirty-one and devoted the rest of his short life -- he died at fifty -- to experimental recordings. In a parallel manner, actors like Daniel Day-Lewis who have found that they can't bear the stage have switched over to film. There they needn't fear a muffed scene so much; they can always ask for a retake.

These examples, numerous as they are, are just the ones that appealed to me. There are many, many more: Ella Fitzgerald, Luciano Pavarotti, Mel Gibson. And those are only the people who have been willing to talk about the problem, or whom others have talked about. Performers are often reluctant to discuss stagefright. They think it's bad luck. (Likewise, most baseball players do not want to discuss the yips.) Also, the stories that one hears are usually about the very bad cases, whereas stagefright is not a single condition but a spectrum, stretching from those who may vomit in their dressing rooms but then go onstage, blazingly, to those who are forced to stop performing. In between is a large intermediate group of people whose careers have been not ended but simply diminished by anxiety. Two years ago, before undertaking a one-woman show on Broadway, Bette Midler told Patrick Healy, of the *Times*, that she had wanted to be a serious dramatic actress but had faltered for lack of courage. "I have that terror," she said. "Will people like you? Will they ask you back? Did I make the cut? That's always on my mind." To hear the brash, funny, commanding (as far as we knew) Midler tell of worrying whether people would like her is painful. But, in every group of artists, the insiders can tell you who, among them, should have had a bigger career but, for some reason, was held back.

Forces in the culture may help breed stagefright, by making avoidance of the stage seem a reasonable artistic choice. Twentieth-century avant-garde theatre had a strong anti-theatrical bias, the idea being that to care about the people in the audience -- to want to entertain them or even to make oneself understood by them -- was a forfeiture of artistic status, a lowering of one's sights. In 1958, the serial composer Milton Babbitt published an essay entitled "Who Cares If You Listen?," and, though he later said that the title was invented by an editor, its wording sums up the essay pretty accurately. (In music, the twentieth-century artist's divorce from the general public was probably more bitter than in any other art.)

The popularity, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, of the writings of the communications theorist Marshall McLuhan no doubt increased the estrangement between the audience and performers who were trained to the live stage. According to McLuhan, what mattered in a work of art -- or, at least, what the audience responded to -- was not so much the intended content as the medium through which it was conveyed: whether it was live or broadcast, and, if broadcast, on radio or television, and with what amplification, what splices and inserts, and so on. Glenn Gould was a devotee of McLuhan, and to be a McLuhanite meant that you could abandon live performance without any shame, any talk of fright. You were just doing the up-to-date thing. But, in any discussion of the relationship between technology and stagefright, splices and inserts are a small matter. The crux, of course, was the invention of sound recording and then of film, in the late nineteenth century. These things did not create stagefright, but they fostered it, by enabling performers to do their work without having to appear in front of an audience.

Nicholas Ridout says that stagefright may also have social and political underpinnings. Before the twentieth century, and certainly before the nineteenth, many people onstage were there at the behest not of the public but of private patrons -- for example, the king. Such performers could, of course, lose their patrons' favor, but success and failure were not as coldly calculated as they came to be via the box office. Once that switch occurred, paychecks were at risk, not just esteem and self-esteem. Around the same time, the social class of actors began to merge with that of their characters. With the advent of realism, plays were no longer about the rich or the royal; they were about Uncle Vanya or Hedda Gabler. Meanwhile, with the decline in the power of the Church, a stage career became less stigmatized socially. Actors rose into the middle class. In the words of Ridout, "This means that the 'actual life' the actor is required to simulate is close enough to her own life for her own to become a private resource for public display."

The convergence was hastened by the introduction of the Stanislavsky technique in Russia and its spread to the West as "method acting." Now actors were not just socioeconomically nudged toward identification with their characters; they were forthrightly asked to invest their most personal resources -- their emotions, their memories -- in their enactments, so that when the audience clapped, or not, the actors could easily feel that what was being approved or disapproved was not so much their skill as them. It is no surprise that the person who came up with the image of the audience as a black hole was Stanislavsky. In his treatise "An Actor Prepares," the young actor Kostya, describing a rehearsal of "Othello," says, "I had hardly stepped on to the stage when there loomed up in front of me the immense hole of the proscenium arch, and beyond it an endless expanse of dark mist." An endless expanse, dark:

this is something out of a nightmare, something that could suck you in, swallow you, and your family would never find you again.

Add to these complex factors a simpler one: stagefright may be the product of nothing more than shyness, a disinclination to do one's work in front of a roomful of people. Carly Simon, who had a long history of stagefright -- she once took six years off from live performing -- was asked about this by Charlie Rose. She answered that she wouldn't call it fright. She just didn't want to be center stage. "I would prefer to be a background singer or a tambourine player, or part of the crew," she said. It seems cruel that someone who has been given the gift of singing or acting or dancing should find herself unequipped with the wish to exercise it in public. Some performers displace this cruelty onto the audience. The pianist Charles Rosen believed that the spectators were out there waiting for the performer to slip up: "The silence of the audience is not that of a public that listens but of one that watches -- like the dead hush that accompanies the unsteady movement of the tightrope walker poised over his perilous space."

It's logical that this strong statement should come from a concert pianist. Though many writers on stagefright loyally claim that their own art carries the highest risk, I do not see how anyone could deny that musicians have it hardest. Dancers get relief from anxiety just by moving, and to a rhythm, which restores regular breathing. Actors, when the curtain goes up, usually have some narrative matter that they have to communicate to the audience -- the dinner guests are coming, the kingdom has to be divided in three, whatever -- and this task will help get their minds off their jitters. Furthermore, dancers and actors are usually onstage with others, who cue them for their lines and their steps, and just keep them company. Solo performers of music are up there alone.

Then, there are the special circumstances of the musicians' education. Typically, they have not had what anyone would call a normal childhood. At least by adolescence, a person aiming at a soloist career in classical music is practicing about five hours a day. This means that he is alone for at least a third of his waking hours and therefore, unlike his peers, is not engaged in what psychologists call "ego development." He is not finding out what other people are like; he is not learning how to handle doubt, fear, envy, delay, failure -- indeed, success. And, if the young pianist and his family are ambitious, this curtain will come down long before adolescence. Charles Rosen started piano lessons at four and went to Juilliard when he was seven. Could he open the school's front door? Could he reach the drinking fountain?

There are various ways of coping with stagefright. One is drugs, notably, beta-blockers, which interfere with the binding of stress hormones to their receptors in the sympathetic nervous system and thus weaken the fight-or-flight response. Notably, they quiet pounding hearts. They were first marketed, in 1967, to treat angina, and they are still prescribed for that purpose, as well as for others. But people with heart problems are not the only ones who have palpitations. A 1987 survey conducted by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, which represents fifty-two major orchestras in the United States, found that twenty-seven per cent of its members had used beta-blockers. Today, the figure is no doubt considerably higher.

For years, the drugs were controversial. Some people said they resulted in "phoned in" performances. Some raised the ethical question, asking whether the use of beta-blockers by pianists was any different from the use of steroids by athletes. (There is an important distinction, though. Steroids add to the body, increasing muscle mass in order to improve performance. Beta-blockers remove something from the body -- the flutist's lip tremors, the cellist's hand tremors -- in order to permit the person to produce the kind of performance he has already shown himself capable of, outside the auditorium.) But opposition seems to be dwindling. In 2004, the psychiatrist Michael Craig Miller, who was then the editor of *The Harvard-Mental Health Letter*, told the *Times*, "There's very little downside except whatever number you do on yourself about taking the drugs."

Beta-blockers temper only the physical symptoms of anxiety. Instead of sitting there saying to yourself, "Oh, I'm going to do terribly," and listening to your heart pound, you say those things without listening to your heart pound. If you want, in addition, to eliminate the cognitive components of performance anxiety, you have to look elsewhere. There is a wide range of behavioral and mental exercises that might help, and these are the main subject of Sara Solovitch's "Playing Scared." Few of them have firm scientific support, but Solovitch is kind to them.

At the more reasonable end of the spectrum are the Eastern-derived disciplines, such as yoga and meditation. These do not necessarily cure the stage-frightened but simply comfort them, as they do other people, by getting them to breathe properly, taking their minds off their troubles, and, perhaps, for those who are so inclined, putting them in touch with a higher power. Another approach is cognitive-behavioral therapy, or the guided revision of one's thoughts. Like yoga, this is certainly not something that was invented for stagefright -- it's what people with regular insurance plans are likely to receive today by way of psychotherapy -- but it can, apparently, help some victims of performance anxiety, above all by discouraging perfectionism.

Things don't stay commonsensical for long, however. "Stage fright is passion energy that's stuck in the body," one therapist tells Solovitch. A trumpet player advises her -- she paraphrases -- to "love yourself into excellence by cultivating an internal audience that's loving." Soon Solovitch introduces us to E.F.T (Emotional Freedom Technique), in which you tap various places on your face while uttering restorative phrases, such as "I deeply and completely accept myself," and E.M.D.R. (Eye Movement Desensitization and

Reprocessing), whereby you replace traumatic memories with good memories as the therapist moves his fingers back and forth in front of your face.

With these treatments, though, Solovitch can at least say what is observably taking place. Other teachers and therapists she interviews don't seem to tell her much more, in essence, than that people with stagefright must be induced to "center" and "focus" and move into the "zone." She's not fooled that she's getting clear answers, but she is sometimes charmed by the eccentricities and the enthusiasms that flourish in this corner of the therapeutic community. She tells how one seventy-five-year-old stagefright specialist, a psychiatrist with a side career in jazz piano, runs up and down Mt. Tamalpais four times a

week. She takes detours into the performance anxieties of other cultures: aymat zibur, or fear of saying prayers, among Orthodox Jews in Israel; dhat, or semen-worry, among Hindus. This is fun, but one senses that Solovitch wouldn't be bothering with it if her declared subject, the treatment of stagefright, were large enough to fill a book. It isn't. There seems to be no cure for stagefright.

Maybe it's foolish to expect that there would be. Really, what many of these performers do is almost impossibly difficult. They're right to be afraid. Solovitch repeats a famous story about Pablo Casals. Once, in 1901, he went hiking and a big rock fell on his bowing hand, crushing several fingers. Casals recalled that his first thought was: "Thank God! I'll never have to play the cello again!" By that time, though he was only twenty-four, he was regarded by many as the greatest cellist in the world. He had given a command performance before Queen Victoria; he would soon give one for Teddy Roosevelt. So imagine what it was like for him, year after year -- he lived to be ninety-six -- to walk into concert halls filled with people who had come to see the greatest cellist in the world. Baryshnikov believes that it is the feeling of obligation to the audience that triggers stagefright: "Suddenly the morality kicks in. These people bought a ticket to your show." He thinks it is useful, if he has to give a speech, to say something completely outrageous to himself beforehand: "Like 'What the fuck I am doing here?' You hear your voice. Somehow it helps." Perhaps, by its craziness, it mitigates the morality.

Sometimes, when performers speak of stagefright, one senses that they do not actually wish it gone -- that, for them, it is almost a badge of honor, or, at least, proof that they're serious about their work. As musicians, especially, will tell you, what they are doing up there is not meeting an agreed-upon goal but, rather, creating something new. Horowitz insisted that the notes in the score did not tell you what the music was. The music was behind the notes, he said, and the performance was your search for it: "I play, so to speak, from the other side of the score, looking back." This sounds pretty frightening, and, according to some, it was -- for the audience. André Watts said that Horowitz, onstage, was "like a demon barely under control."

There is considerable romanticism in all this. The idea is that the performing artist is a sort of Prometheus: in order to bring us the fire, he has to agree to have his liver eaten. "A divine ailment, a sacred madness": that's what Charles Rosen called stagefright. He said that its physical manifestations were the same as those described in medieval medical treatises as the symptoms of the disease of being in love. Many performing artists would be embarrassed to go that far. "People tell you that you have to be nervous to do well," Emanuel Ax says. "I don't believe that." He also finds it self-congratulatory: "Playing the piano, it's not brain surgery. If I don't do well, nobody's going to die." And he feels that stagefright is a betrayal of what should be the spirit of concertizing. "What you're trying to do is share music with people who want to hear music." So why all the fuss? "It's a terrible waste of time."

Still, he has stagefright. He doesn't throw up, he says, but his hands go icy cold. "It happens every time, in varying degrees." He thinks he's getting over it, though. Or, "I'm working on it." He's sixty-six."

The key thought accompanying the physical response seems to be a feeling of exposure.

"After a hard day at the office, all Barry wants to do is put his feet up and listen to somebody tell him what to think."

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By JOAN ACOCELLA

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