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Minding the Gaps: The Wings, Stage Fright and Superstition

Somewhere between
Dressing room and stage:
An actor leaves his room
A king enters the play,
And at this I've seen the stage hands
Laugh out loud with their bottles of beer.

*Bertolt Brecht*¹

In the previous chapter I analysed the experience of performers working within the practitioner spaces of theatre buildings. Couching my description of performers' practices within a discussion of their employment conditions, I argued that performers' encounters with theatre buildings are profoundly hermetic, taking the form of various spatio-temporal journeys. Arguing that performers 'make' spaces for themselves, within backstage areas, both to 'feed' their own creative needs, and in response to their desire to bring about a more hestial mode of inhabitation, I described

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Poems on the Theatre*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (London: Scorpion Press, 1961), 7.

how dressing rooms in particular provide important nodes for performers' pre-performance preparations.

In this chapter I turn my attention to the spaces that lie at the edge of the backstage, on the boundary between offstage and onstage, and engage with performers' experiences in these marginal spaces. Paying particular attention to the dangers and tensions inherent in the 'wings,' I describe the compensatory tactics that performers deploy in response, their routines and superstitions, playfulness, and games. An appraisal of these marginal spaces is of particular importance to this thesis, for, as McAuley has observed, "it is at the outer edges of a given space and particularly at the interface between two spaces, at the border zones that the analysis becomes most interesting."²

Definitions

Martin Harrison has noted that the term 'wings' "generally designates the areas to either side of an *end-stage* or *proscenium arch* stage which are obscured from the audience's view."³ These areas are referred to as 'wings' after the moveable panels of scenery – 'wing flats' – that were traditionally housed within them. These panels were developed in Italy in the seventeenth century "to enable an unlimited number of dazzling spectacles or scenes to succeed each other."⁴ The smooth changing of scenes was made possible through a system of grooves, panels and winches that allowed the simultaneous withdrawal of one scene from the stage and the establishment of another.⁵ The pervasive influence of this staging system – referred to as the 'Italian stage' or 'la scène à l'italienne' – saw it become the standard form for European theatres for three hundred years.⁶ The architectural legacy of this once popular staging system is still present in the physical form of many theatre buildings today.

² McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 86.

³ [Italics in original] Harrison, *The Language of Theatre*, 309.

⁴ Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*, 222.

⁵ Part of the illusion, and therefore the success, of this scene-changing system derived from the absence of workers visibly manipulating the scene. Similarly, once a scene had been removed from the stage its wing flats could be replaced with those of another scene thereby offering a steady stream of new scenic elements.

⁶ Mullin, *The Development of the Playhouse: A Survey of Theatre Architecture from the Renaissance to the Present*, 28.

The twentieth century has witnessed the emergence of a diverse range of theatre buildings, a situation evident in the documentation I presented in Chapter Three. This means that many theatres today no longer retain ‘wing’ spaces in the traditional sense of the term. This does not, however, render the term obsolete; architecturally, the term ‘wing’ can denote any space that lies immediately adjacent to a performance space, often being architecturally continuous with it, but obscured from an audience’s sight by the hanging of masking cloths or the intervention of a stage set. Similarly, the term ‘wing’ can also denote a particular situation where an individual or entity stands “ready to act or make an appearance; (for the moment) taking no part in the action.”⁷ In such situations, an individual or entity is commonly referred to as being ‘in the wings’ or ‘waiting in the wings.’⁸ In this chapter I use these two senses of the term to investigate the space of the ‘wings.’ First I focus on the ‘architectural wings,’ describing the particular ‘perceived’ spaces that might be termed ‘wings.’ I then focus on the ‘situational wings,’ describing performers’ particular spatio-temporal experiences as they begin to perform. As in the previous chapter, this is a purely heuristic distinction; in the lived experience of performers these two senses coalesce.

Architectural Wings

Architecturally, wing spaces take on a variety of forms, all of which are intended to enable the smooth progress of theatrical productions. The wings provide an area for the management and monitoring of a performance, they provide access for performers and crew to the performance space itself, they provide an area for the execution of any mechanical and technical procedures necessary in creating stage effects and they allow for the storage of set and stage properties in a position proximal to the performance space. Every theatre is unique in terms of the particular performances it is built to house and therefore the actual physical form of wing spaces varies dramatically. Designer Derek Nicholson has argued that, “The dramatic space

⁷ “Wings,” In *OED Online*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.library.usyd.edu.au/> (accessed 7 April 2006).

⁸ This usage, of course, is often extended metaphorically to situations outside the theatre: In its listing for “Wings,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes *The Times* of 19th January 1985, “Yesterday’s huge jump in the share price suggests there is a buyer in the wings.” Ibid.

functions to its full potential if it is informed, surrounded and serviced by ‘other’ spaces of equal or similar volume.”⁹ For Nicholson, a “good stage” is that which,

is reasonably serviced by off-stage spaces, such as: stage left and stage right to be half the size of the performance area available on each side; up-stage space to be the same area as the performance area; access to under stage to be at least one-third of the acting area; and above the stage to have a minimum proportional volume equal to one-third the volume of the performance area.¹⁰

More specifically, Roderick Ham states that the grid in a flytower should be “two and a half times to three times the height of the proscenium.”¹¹ Not surprisingly, the provision of large offstage support areas can add significantly to the construction costs of a new theatre.¹²

Given the limitations imposed by budgetary constraints and site restrictions, modern proscenium arch stages are often served by various wing arrangements; two common solutions for large-scale purpose-built theatres are the provision of stage-sized wing spaces at the rear and on one side of the stage, or half-stage-sized wing spaces on both sides combined with a stage-sized wing space at the rear.¹³ Beyond these solutions, designers and practitioners undertake any amount of compromises to insert theatres into existing ‘found’ spaces. For such theatres, the limitations imposed by their often idiosyncratic support spaces impact upon the performative genres that may be housed there and influence the development of distinct ‘house styles.’ For many theatres that eschew traditional forms, being housed in ‘found’ spaces and possessing open stages, wing spaces are minimal, often only providing enough physical space to serve as performers’ entrances and for small stage properties and small set items to be brought

⁹ Derek Nicholson, "Design Constrictions," in *Performance Design in Australia*, ed. Kristen Anderson and Imogen Ross (Sydney: Fine Art Publishing, 2001), 217. Nicholson’s term ‘dramatic space’ is synonymous with McAuley’s ‘performance space.’

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹¹ Ham, *Theatre Planning*, 72.

¹² Indeed, ‘ideal’ conditions are more likely to be found in opera houses given the large-scale nature of operatic productions and the higher subsidies (both public and private) afforded to such an historically ‘high’ art form. The Metropolitan Opera House in New York is a theatre that boasts extensive wing space, equal in size to the stage on both sides and at the rear of the stage. Izenour, *Theater Design*, 219-20A.

¹³ The Lyric Theatre in Pyrmont is an example of the former, while the State Theatre in the Victorian Arts Centre (Melbourne) is an example of the latter.

on and off.¹⁴ In such cases the practitioners who work within these theatres must skilfully adapt their own work methods and negotiate their own artistic visions to *make* the building function as a theatre. In many Sydney theatres the lack of traditional wing spaces has led to what Nicholson suggests constitutes a “Sydney method of staging design.”¹⁵ This ‘method’ is characterised by collaboration between directors, designers and actors during rehearsals, minimal scenographic changes during performance, a greater emphasis on lighting design and a corresponding “heavy reliance on the performer to carry the scenic information of a production.”¹⁶

Two factors largely dictate the working conditions of theatre practitioners in the wings. The first is the aforementioned proximity of these spaces to the performance space itself, while the second is the need for practitioners to remain hidden. Because of the proximity of the wings to a performance, what occurs in the wings can distract attention from it. Added to this, the history of western theatrical performance contains a strongly representational, illusionistic strain; spectators are frequently invited to suspend their disbelief at what they witness onstage and instead accept it as constituting an alternate reality.¹⁷ They are also frequently invited to wonder at how any attendant stage spectacle might be brought about. For practitioners it is therefore important that the knowledge of how theatrical effects are created and executed remains hidden from spectators. Any work in the wings must therefore be carried out carefully so as to remain unseen. To this end wing spaces are only dimly lit, often in blue tones, to prevent light spilling out or shadows being cast onto the performance space. Similarly, noise levels are carefully monitored and the technical crew working on any production (mechanists, electricians and stage management) traditionally wear black, minimising the chance that their presence and activities are visible to spectators. The wings are a space that must remain invisible to all except those who work there.

¹⁴ The Stables Theatre, Ensemble Theatre, Belvoir Street Theatre and Wharf Theatre are all examples of this type of theatre. See chap. 3 for my documentation of each of these theatres.

¹⁵ Nicholson, "Design Constrictions," 219.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁷ As Bert States has written: “Behind the representational mode of performance, and our perception of it, is the shared sense that we come to the theatre primarily to see a play, not a performance.” Bert O. States, “The Actor’s Presence: Three Phenomenal Modes,” in *Acting (Re)Considered*, ed. Phillip B. Zarilli (London: Routledge, 1995), 35.

The wings are therefore a space of significant physical danger to the practitioners who work within them. Being dimly lit, and often physically confined, the wings are spaces in which both performers and technical crew must coexist while at the same time working with the tight timeframes and unpredictability of live performance. In Australia, increasing Occupational Health and Safety regulations have successfully lowered the amount of serious injuries and deaths in theatres through the standardisation of work practices and the compulsory practice of prior risk assessment.¹⁸ Despite this, accidents can still occur through the seemingly inevitable human error of practitioners. Peter Carroll described one incident:

I've been in music theatre where you have something like [a] blackout ... People run quickly to exits as people are running quickly on for the next scene and I have observed a situation where an understudy was on and was momentarily fazed and ran into the entrance where someone came on and collected them and their nose ended up over there ... it was really quite a bad accident. And that sort of thing can happen a lot. It's because the productions are really quite complicated.¹⁹

The more complicated a production, the more chance any momentary mistake by one practitioner can result in an accident. Many performers rely on a strict adherence to routine to avoid this. Peter Carroll again:

It's very important in big productions to have a trail backstage. And it's very important that that trail doesn't vary ... [In reference to a 2000 Bell Shakespeare production of *Troilus and Cressida*] ... it was very important that you always kept to the exact place because someone might be running very quickly to make an entrance around another way, and it's dark and corners are involved, and if you're even twenty seconds later then there might be a collision. And there are health and safety issues involved with that. Certainly in big musicals, you never vary your trail, ever, for safety reasons. The smaller the number of people in it, it becomes more casual I suppose. But it's certainly ... the patterning of movement, of bodies backstage, is as precise as it is onstage."²⁰

¹⁸ The two most recent fatal accidents in Sydney theatres were the death of a deputy stage manager at the Star City Showroom in 1998, and the death of a mechanist at the now demolished Her Majesty's Theatre in 2001.

¹⁹ Carroll, interview.

²⁰ Ibid.

The development and maintenance of routine ‘trails’ is a standard way of managing such a potentially dangerous “organic, shared space.”²¹ As Carroll mentions, smaller-scale productions can afford to be more casual because of the lack of potentially dangerous technical procedures and the lower number of persons involved. As a rule, the more complex the choreography required onstage, the more complex the supporting choreography offstage.

Some dangers are simply beyond performers’ control and accidents can occur as a result of equipment failure or technical procedures gone awry. Camilla Ah Kin suffered a severe accident during a Sydney Theatre Company production of Friedrich Durrenmatt’s *The Visit* at the Drama Theatre in November 1993. Ah Kin recollected:

[A] piece of scenery came down and nearly ended my life. And I thought ... it was kind of life changing in that the safest place for me to be in the world up to that point was in the theatre, I thought, because I knew how everything worked, I knew my place in it, I knew ... it was home. And then all of a sudden, this thing happened where I suddenly felt terribly unsafe, and didn’t know whether I could do it again. Suddenly backstage was filled with all sorts of demons I couldn’t see. I needed the production manager to take me through every prop, everything that clicked and whirred, to really feel safe again in that environment. And it took quite some time to do it.²²

This accident broke Ah Kin’s confidence in the safety of theatres and led her to re-evaluate her understanding of the wings. Subsequent to the accident, her view of theatres now is,

They’re building sites. There’s no question about that [...] Everything always has to happen in such a rush leading up to opening night. Very rare is the production where everything is running to time and opening night is looming and everything is on schedule. For the most part, stuff’s gone wrong and the rain machine won’t work and, ‘Will we use it or won’t we?’ and so you don’t find out what the pitfalls are going to be backstage until preview time.²³

²¹ Bell, interview.

²² Ah Kin, interview.

²³ Ibid.

The “rush leading up to opening night” that Ah Kin alludes to is a temporal symptom of the centripetal pull exerted by the stage. As I described in the previous chapter, preparations for live performance are almost always carried out in the face of looming deadlines, and the creative processes of practitioners often rely on deadlines as a way of forcing decisions to be made. It is therefore rare that everything for a production is ready on schedule without a significant increase in effort being made. For performers, the intense focus on the performance itself, and its spatial correlate, the performance space, subtly draws their attention away from their immediate surrounds. During the course of a performance this can increase the physical danger of the wings. Deborah Kennedy, using her experience of performing in Sydney’s Belvoir Street Theatre, reported that in various productions she has been in the wings, preparing to make her entrance onto the stage, only to have her concentration broken by collisions with “odd protuberances” and “fire extinguishers on walls.”²⁴ Similarly annoying for Kennedy is that at Belvoir,

The backstage area is also a thoroughfare to the accounts offices, so that in the middle of a performance in the middle of the day, like matinee performances, of which we had a number [...], you’d be just about to step onstage and a couple of secretaries would just breeze past, just in front of where I was going to step. And that was just like a no go zone because if there’s one thing that you need, it’s safety.²⁵

The specific danger identified by Kennedy was that, as a performer, “Your concentration is on what you are doing up onstage and not what you are doing backstage.”²⁶ Importantly, this is even the case *whilst backstage*. In Kennedy’s experience she may be physically offstage, in the wings, while still effectively participating in the onstage performance. The tangible pull exerted by a performance can draw a performer’s attention away from his or her immediate surroundings, resulting in possible collisions with offstage objects or persons and an increased risk of subsequent injury or loss of focus.

²⁴ Kennedy, interview. The current working conditions at Belvoir are unique given the lack of a differentiated circulation system within the building for performance staff and administrative staff.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

In many ways, the wings are the domain of technical practitioners. It is they who spend the most time in the wings, often because their duties involve the manipulation of sets, trucks and electrical items in these spaces, along with the execution of stage effects and the maintenance of a generally safe working environment. Consequently, it is the technical crew who are often more aware of what is occurring in the wings and what the dangers may be. Performers, of course, do have a good knowledge and awareness of what is being done by technicians in the wings and flies, but, for performers, the wings are encountered in the context of travelling to or from the stage whilst their focus is primarily on the performance itself, not the wings.²⁷

Within the context of travelling to or from the stage, many performers may still spend extended periods of time waiting in the wings. Often this is through necessity, specifically because they lack the time between cues to reach their dressing rooms.²⁸ For others, the wings are useful as a space of education, attunement and monitoring. Some, like John Bell, use the wings to observe more experienced performers at close quarters. While working for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Bell performed in the 1965 production of *Timon of Athens*. Bell has written of this time: “Every night I’d stand in the wings watching [Paul] Scofield as Timon when I wasn’t in the scene, marvelling at his vocal cadences and peculiar intonations.”²⁹ Performers will often pre-empt their cues so as to be able to stand in the wings and monitor the flow of a performance and the reactions of the audience. This is variously described in terms of “gauging” an audience,³⁰ or making “contact” with them.³¹ Listening to the audience is common, “listening for what kind of mood they’re in, how many coughers there are in, whether they sound perky or whether they sound a bit bored.”³² Indeed, many performers will also attempt to observe the audience prior to performing.³³ Performers also take time to attune themselves to the pitch or energy of the performance before

²⁷ In the course of this research it became apparent that a number of practitioners’ work experience has included both performance *and* technical work.

²⁸ In some theatres (the Opera Theatre in the Sydney Opera House being one prime example) the lack of space available in the wings means that performers are only allowed into the wings when called by stage management.

²⁹ Bell, *The Time of My Life*, 63.

³⁰ Bell, interview.

³¹ Kennedy, interview.

³² Ibid.

³³ Deborah Kennedy admits, “One of the things that a lot of actors do, and I suppose, to be honest, if I have the opportunity I do it too, and that is to watch the audience ... from the peephole in the bit of the set that’s got a little chink that you can have a look through.” Ibid.

entering. Such attunement and monitoring often entails self-conscious preparatory activities on the part of performers, specifically adjustments to costume, makeup and posture, and such activities inevitably precede the initial entrance of performers into the performance space. Sandy Gore summarised that for her, the wings are where “you just listen ... it’s not a place to converse. It’s just about where you are in the show and what you’ve got to go on and present.”³⁴ For this reason, the wings are a place of tension where performers are heavily involved in the performance at hand, and yet still need to physically negotiate the dangers of this marginal zone.

Situational Wings

In performers’ lived experiences the wings do not automatically correlate to an architecturally defined space. Instead, to be ‘in the wings’ is foremost to experience an embodied sense of spatial and temporal proximity to performance. Peter Carroll has identified that within any theatre there is “always a demarcation area, a blocks, like a starting block feeling and [prior to performing] that’s usually where I’d like to be.”³⁵ Carroll’s reference to a feeling as well as a physical space is instructive. Architecturally the wings can be highlighted on a building plan, and viewed by performers as simply “where I walk from being backstage to onstage.”³⁶ However, within any such architecturally defined space, each individual performer encounters their own particular threshold, marked by an intensification of feeling. Environmental or architectural cues may, of course, also affect the experience of such a threshold. The presence of an expansion joint in the floor on the prompt side of the stage at the Lyric Theatre [See Image 8.6] made a noticeable difference to the behaviour of cast members in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*.³⁷ On the stage side of the joint, performers were more likely to be focussed on the performance and displaying a more performative bodily stance. On the dressing room side of the joint, performers were

³⁴ Gore, interview.

³⁵ Carroll, interview.

³⁶ Davies, interview.

³⁷ An expansion joint is a flexible link between two different building materials, in this case the concrete flooring of the wings and the wooden flooring of the stage. Different construction materials expand and contract at different rates in response to environmental stresses; an expansion joint prevents cracks and structural damage.

more likely to be engaged in chatting, stretching, or reading – more everyday activities.

Increasing temporal proximity to performance is the major factor that determines whether a performer is ‘in’ the wings; only in the context of an imminent performance and the prospect of exposure before an assembled audience do performers experience being ‘in the wings.’ However, given the discussion in the previous chapter about spatio-temporal journeys, it is largely impossible in a performance context to separate temporality from spatiality. Performers become aware that they are entering or ‘in’ the wings through the emergence of seemingly involuntary psychosomatic cues. Amongst these, performers notice how “your heart rate goes up when you’re in the same room as the audience.”³⁸ Other changes can include a restriction of breath, increased perspiration, ‘butterflies’ in the stomach, and feelings of nervousness or muscular tension.³⁹ These experiences are further intensified by increasing temporal proximity to performance and the architectural markers that reinforce the awareness of this, such as passing through doors *en route* to the stage and entering the restricted space and darkness of the wings. In my own experience of attending academic conferences, where I have been about to be called on to present, am in full view of my potential audience, but have not yet commenced ‘performing’ (presenting), I, too, am in a situation analogous to that of a theatrical performer about to commence performing. Similar to such a performer, I, too, may experience an intense feeling of being ‘in the wings,’ with attendant psychosomatic phenomena – nervousness, increased heart-rate, shortness of breath – even though architecturally I am not in any wings but am both in the same room as my potential audience and am fully observable by them. What I write here, then, although derived from fieldwork within conventional theatre buildings, may be applied to any form of social or cultural performance in any situation where a performer ‘assumes responsibility’ to an audience. These distinct feelings associated with proximity to performance are a “human experience that occurs in everyone who places himself in front of an audience of other people and demands their attention.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Kennedy, interview.

³⁹ The idiom ‘butterflies in my stomach’ refers to the sensations associated with the activation of the human body’s ‘fight or flight’ mechanism, in which adrenalin is released into the body and blood-flow increases to the extremities in anticipation of life-threatening activity.

⁴⁰ Glen O. Gabbard, “Stage Fright,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 60 (1979): 385.

To further flesh out the experiences of performers in the wings I now turn to reflect upon performers' experiences onstage in the act of performing. By establishing an understanding of what is involved in the act of performing I can subsequently focus more precisely on the position of the wings as situated on the margin between 'on' and 'off' stage. In the context of the performance genre I am investigating – that is, western text-based theatre – performance involves the performer entering a “heightened”⁴¹ or “altered”⁴² state of being. The metaphor of height is indeed apt and reflects the embodied experience of performers who report feeling like they ‘go up’ to the stage and then ‘come down’ afterwards.⁴³ In many cases, performing is also accompanied by feelings of engagement or belonging. One actor commented, “Once I get onto the stage I just feel great, I feel right at home. I feel nervous before, but I just love being on the stage.”⁴⁴ Other actors echoed this sentiment with statements like, “In the wings I get nervous, but when I am up onstage, I just get on with it,”⁴⁵ and, “I belong onstage.”⁴⁶ Dick Cavett has written:

We performers rediscover continually that we are more at home onstage than anywhere else, we know what we're doing there, we are in control ... For those blessed few hours of the day, the true, born performer can, cry without shame, experience deep emotions he inhibits elsewhere, and be totally himself, beyond the reach of and utterly forgetting for a merciful time the ulcer, the impending divorce, the accountant's grim report.⁴⁷

This is not to say that performing is in any way an easy pursuit. Instead, it demands a high degree of concentration. British actor Tom Conti has stated:

⁴¹ Kennedy, interview.

⁴² Eberhard Scheiffele, "Acting: An Altered State of Consciousness," *Research in Drama Education* 6, no. 2 (2001).

⁴³ In interviews with performers there was a consistency between descriptions of performers' physical surrounds – on stage is 'up', backstage is 'down', and performers' descriptions of their own psychophysical states – feeling 'up' onstage and having to 'come down' afterwards.

⁴⁴ Papademetriou, interview.

⁴⁵ Luba Kadison quoted in Luckhurst and Veltman, eds., *On Acting: Interviews with Actors*, 59.

⁴⁶ William H. Macy quoted in *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁷ Dick Cavett, "Stage Fright," *The Atlantic* 257 (1986): 83. Cavett adds that, once the performance finishes, “we are adrift again in that sea of uncertainty, laughably called real life ...”

[A] performance, whether it lasts thirty seconds of a take for a movie, or two hours on the stage, has got to be done with the same concentration as a driver of a Formula One racing car. That's how hard you have to think.⁴⁸

Similarly, Patrick Dickson compares performing to being “like a downhill skier and you’ve got to get through all the gates and you can’t stop and it’s sort of out of your control after that.”⁴⁹ Performing necessitates total concentration and engagement with the task at hand.

Ideally, a performance is experienced as an organic unfolding of action in which a performer is engaged in the task at hand, unconcerned by either the past or the future. In such circumstances, performers speak of being “totally present in the moment”⁵⁰ or “living [...] in the moment.”⁵¹ Similarly, in common parlance, performers speak of being ‘true’ to the moment or the text. In such situations the training, rehearsal, and preparation that performers have engaged in, although still informing their actions, effectively disappear. Instead, performers experience a spontaneity and oneness with both their fellow performers and with spectators. At such moments, performers may feel like they are, “plugged into the energy of the universe,” emitting “communicative energy” that can be measured in “kilowatts per instant.”⁵² Simon Callow provides a description of this, which he terms ‘A Good Performance.’ This consists of:

A feeling of power, but not power *over* anyone or anything: simply energy flowing uninterrupted and unforced through your body and your mind. You are the agent. You are above the performance – *it* is performing, not you. You sense the audience’s collective identity and speak directly to it ... You are the master of time and rhythm, and you play with them like a jazz musician ... The text is sunk into your bones, so that it comes unbidden ... Above all, there is dazzling mental clarity ... The numbers of levels on which you are thinking is uncountable ... Life can sometimes seem a sad second.⁵³

⁴⁸ Tom Conti quoted in Carole Zucker, *Conversation with Actors on Film, Television and Stage Performance* (Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 2002), 100.

⁴⁹ Dickson, interview.

⁵⁰ Luckhurst and Veltman, eds., *On Acting: Interviews with Actors*, 3.

⁵¹ Eberhard Scheiffele quotes the Living Theatre: “Acting is not make believe, but living exquisitely in the moment.” Scheiffele, “Acting: An Altered State of Consciousness,” 179.

⁵² Harrop, *Acting*, 112.

⁵³ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 199-200.

By way of contrast, Callow includes an example of what he terms ‘A Bad Performance.’ Such a performance is:

The Opposite. Disjointed, stale; behind the beat all the time; sluggish. Excess external emotion, mental fog. Self-consciousness. Awareness of the audience out there, and the lack of communication with them. A sense of being out-of-focus, as if, musically, you were slightly flat or slightly sharp. Uncoordinated. On these performances, you bump into the furniture, trample on other actors’ lines, walk through such laughs as there might accidentally be.⁵⁴

In performance, theatrical performers consciously seek to enter a state of being that provides the joys of the former experience and avoids the pitfalls of the latter.

Theatrical performers seek to create onstage a situation akin to that described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as a state of ‘flow.’⁵⁵ For Csikszentmihalyi, “Flow denotes the wholistic sensation present when we act with total involvement [...] We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next.”⁵⁶ Csikszentmihalyi’s explanation of the elements present in a flow experience can be applied to the situation of a performer in the act of performing, and indeed, Callow’s description of ‘a good performance,’ part of which I included earlier, displays many of these elements. Csikszentmihalyi’s first element is “the experience of merging action and awareness,”⁵⁷ such that individuals experience themselves as non-dualistic psychophysical continuums; Callow’s experience is that of “energy flowing uninterrupted and unforced”⁵⁸ through his body. The next is “a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field.”⁵⁹ Excluding extraneous stimuli through concentration or the establishment of rules facilitates this; Callow’s experience is that, “You become nothing but a pair of ears,”⁶⁰ listening and responding to fellow actors. A “loss of ego”⁶¹ and a paradoxical feeling “of being in control and being merged with the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 15, no. 3 (1975): 43. Further descriptions of flow may also be found in chap. 4 of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1975).

⁵⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," 43.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁸ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 199.

⁵⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," 47.

⁶⁰ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 200.

⁶¹ Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," 49.

environment at the same time,”⁶² are two more elements, as is the observation that a flow experience, “usually contains coherent, noncontradictory demands for action, and provides clear unambiguous feedback.”⁶³ Here Callow’s experience is that the play “has played you,”⁶⁴ and whilst performing he senses the audience’s “collective identity” and speaks “directly to it.”⁶⁵ Finally, flow experiences are autotelic: “it appears to need no goals or rewards external to itself.”⁶⁶ Given the conditions of employment for the vast majority of performers, it is the actual experience of performing, “being exercised in a very demanding way,”⁶⁷ rather than extrinsic monetary rewards, that encourages them to continue. Indeed, as Csikszentmihalyi writes, experiences of flow are fundamentally *enjoyable* ones:

By limiting the stimulus field, a flow activity allows people to concentrate their actions and avoid distractions. As a result, they feel in potential control of the environment. Because the flow activity has clear and noncontradictory rules, people who perform in it can temporarily forget their identity and its problems. The result of all these conditions is that one finds the process intrinsically rewarding.⁶⁸

Ideally, performers step into a performance that provides them with an experience of flow. Especially if it is sustained, such an experience is a thoroughly engaging one that, once over, invites subsequent attempts to enter back into that state. Performance involves a simplified and intensified mode of being which, aided by strong structuring principles (for instance, (a) a rehearsal process that has identified and set in place certain objectives and directions, (b) a dedicated space and time in which performance takes place, and (c) a guiding sense of rhythm and timing to what is to be performed), is a state that is often experienced as *more rewarding* than everyday life.

The flipside to this is that nothing is guaranteed and a sense of flow may not be encountered or may be interrupted during a performance. Deborah Kennedy explained this from her own experience. For Kennedy, when she enters the stage, “all of a

⁶² Ibid., 51.

⁶³ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁴ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 200.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Csikszentmihalyi, "Play and Intrinsic Rewards," 53.

⁶⁷ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 200.

⁶⁸ Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, 48.

sudden you lose all consciousness of who you were the second before. It all goes, it all completely goes.”⁶⁹ However,

If it comes back while you're onstage, oh it's hard. It's very hard ... that's when you know you're not in the moment and if you're still thinking about stuff from the backstage area whilst you're performing it's very hard [...] when you're not completely engaged, in the moment, yeah, it's tricky.⁷⁰

Such lapses of concentration can be worsened through mishaps occurring. Lines can be missed, actors can laugh ('corpse'), and accidents can occur onstage. Worst of all, an actor can 'dry,' forgetting their lines or missing a cue that is vital to the progression of the performance. The possibility of failure is always present. Ralph Richardson, speaking of acting major roles, has stated, "You know you have a famous horse which many great jockeys have ridden. You make all possible preparations, but then there is always a 25 per cent chance that you won't get over the jumps."⁷¹ The risk of performance is heightened by the experience of success in the past. Each time an actor steps onto the stage there is a contingent element at work: they are different, the audience are different, the time is different. There are no guarantees of success. As is the case for professional sportspeople, "You are only as good as your last performance."⁷² Brian Bates quotes Glenda Jackson as stating, "You risk the whole of yourself – I mean, you do actually take your life in your hands and walk out there to see if that ravaging beast is going to snatch it from you."⁷³ The possibility of failure is made worse by the fact that it is public, witnessed by an audience who may be hostile to the performer's efforts. This makes the wings a space of significant psychological stress and danger, a situation I focus on shortly. First, however, I return to consider performers' experiences of the transition from offstage to onstage.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, interview.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A New Path to Personal Knowledge and Power*, 143.

⁷² Glen O. Gabbard, "Further Contributions to the Understanding of Stage Fright: Narcissistic Issues," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 31, no. 1 (1983): 425. This saying can take various forms. Recently British actor Parminder Nagra was quoted stating a different version: "But there's that old saying, 'You're only as good as your next job'." Maureen Paton, "Princess Parminder," *The Sunday Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, 13 February 2005, 29. The only accurate guide to an actor's skill and standing is the last performance they have given, combined with the next job offer they are made; a decidedly uncertain situation.

⁷³ Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A New Path to Personal Knowledge and Power*, 149.

Performers encountering the wings engage in a transition from one state of being to another, moving from a relatively certain space of everyday activity into a relatively uncertain space in which every action is framed as meaningful. Arnold Aronson has described a performer's entrance onto a stage as "a profound – can we say life-threatening? – event."⁷⁴ Richard Schechner has characterised the move from offstage to onstage as a 'leap': "The warm-up takes place on the ordinary-life side, preparing the performer for the leap, giving the performer the courage to jump into the performance."⁷⁵ Performers' descriptions underline the suddenness of this transition, in effect 'jumping' or 'leaping' from one state into another. Many choose to draw analogies with other areas of life. Actor Dorothy Tutin, utilising a phrase coined during the trench warfare of World War One, has spoken of how stepping onstage is a feeling that "you're going over the top."⁷⁶ Patrick Dickson, drawing on the Ridley Scott movie *Gladiator*, described his feelings of being in the wings as similar to that of Roman gladiators "where they say, 'We who are about to die salute you.'"⁷⁷ Dickson also described the transition as like, "being a parachutist I imagine. You're in one space and you know it's about to happen, then at some point you pass the point of no return [...] You've got to go with it. So it's an unusual thing and it must be the same for sportspeople."⁷⁸

The analogy of parachuting is also used by Antony Sher to describe the insecurity of transition and the faith necessary to make it, "a sense of you knowing that the parachute's going to open, it's going to catch you, you're going to land alright. It's just that unnatural thing of stepping off into mid-air."⁷⁹ Michael Crawford removes the parachute from his analogy, explaining that, "it was like jumping off the top of a building, without a parachute, hoping that you landed on a haystack."⁸⁰ Wayne Blair offered a description that draws upon his experience as a football player, "It might sound a bit weird, but it's like I'm running on for a football game, which I've

⁷⁴ Arnold Aronson, "Their Exits and Their Entrances: Getting a Handle on Doors," *New Theatre Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2004): 336.

⁷⁵ Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 205.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Tutin quoted in Peter Lewis, *The Facts About a Theatre Company* (Ultimo: G. Whizzard Publications, 1978), 39.

⁷⁷ Dickson, interview.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Antony Sher quoted in Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A New Path to Personal Knowledge and Power*, 172.

⁸⁰ Michael Crawford quoted in Roland, *The Confident Performer*, 3.

experienced. I don't mind that, you get an adrenalin ... I get an adrenalin rush all the time."⁸¹ Another performer's analogy centred on ideas of freedom and rising; the transition from offstage to onstage was described as being "like flying. It's like a bird taking off. If you can imagine being in one of those abseiling things and running off the side of a cliff and taking off, that's how I feel."⁸² Blair Cutting presents an interesting image, one that for him seems to capture both the feeling of transition as well as the difference between the original offstage state and his onstage state: "It's not like jumping off a bridge with a bungee rope attached to your leg. It's not that extreme a transition, but it's a little bit like jumping into a warm bath, not a hot bath, a warm bath. Not a cold bath either. Things warm up."⁸³

Such a transition does, of course, take place within the context of performers' preparations in other backstage areas and so the leap that performers make in the wings is situated within a larger, more gradual process of preparing for performance. Opera singer Natalie Jones explained the context within which she encounters the wings:

I tend to be very quiet in the wings and before the show too, I tend to be very introverted, in a way. Other people have different ways of dealing with it, but I tend to be very quiet and keep to myself so then the transition from being in the wings to being on the stage is not, it's not all of a sudden I'm someone else; I start back in the wings and I start to lose myself there. I'm not standing around talking about what I did yesterday. Part of it happens in the makeup room and then in the dressing room, that also ... that's another kind of step. But most of it happens once I get into the wings of the wings [...] because it's dark and because you're already listening to the show so you're starting to be in the music and the environment ... and there's nothing to do to distract you between that place and the stage.⁸⁴

Jones' experience is that part of her preparation occurs before she reaches the wings, but "most of it" happens in the wings.

⁸¹ Blair, interview.

⁸² Farrugia, interview.

⁸³ Cutting, interview.

⁸⁴ Jones, interview.

Many of the analogies related above suggest the absolute nature of the change involved as well as the sense that the change is instantaneous. To this view the wings appear to be a line in the sand with one side being ‘off’ and the other ‘on.’ From my own observations it was certainly apparent that performers would often ‘snap’ or quickly ‘gather’ themselves into a different performative embodiment as they entered a performance, whilst their exit was accompanied by a slower ‘fade’ back to their everyday mode of comportment. But, it is my contention that the wings themselves are a separate space, both from the more everyday environment of the backstage and the performative environment of the stage. In speaking of the transition from offstage to onstage, Camilla Ah Kin described “a definite kind of line that you cross to get on, and it’s like there’s the line there and there’s this moment between there and there ... and that moment is really, really exciting.”⁸⁵ For Ah Kin, this ‘moment between’ is the moment of decision, the moment where thoughts like “I could not go on and I could just go home and I hope I know all my lines,”⁸⁶ can enter a performer’s consciousness. It is in this moment that a performer must make his ‘jump’ in the faith that his performance will succeed.⁸⁷ The wings are therefore a space encountered in the moment ‘between there and there,’ a threshold between onstage and offstage. For this reason, while as an observer I can immediately identify physical spaces that lie offstage, immediately adjacent to the physical spaces in which performances take place, what is more important for performers is the experiential space that lies neither fully offstage nor fully onstage. This identification of the wings as lying between accords with Simon Callow’s observation that, “the actual state of an actor in the wings is curious – half in character and half out – like an athlete on the start line.”⁸⁸

Performers therefore experience the wings as a liminal space, a space of transition and transformation between two different states of being. Victor Turner has drawn a distinction between a state – “any type of stable or recurrent condition that is

⁸⁵ Ah Kin, interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ British director Declan Donnellan uses the term ‘faith’ to describe the state of an actor in the wings. Donnellan writes “... the actor can be certain of nothing. Going over and over lines in the wings is a fairly reliable way to forget them on stage. All the actor can do is to have faith that, when needed, the lines will be there. The search for certainty actually destroys this faith.” Declan Donnellan, *The Actor and the Target* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), 33-34.

⁸⁸ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 207.

culturally recognized”⁸⁹ – and the transitional or transformational situation encountered when an individual or group moves from one state to another. Based on Arnold van Gennep’s three-phase understanding of rites of passage – “separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation”⁹⁰ – Turner views the limen or threshold as “a no-man’s-land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural future.”⁹¹ This is the experience of performers in the wings. The wings are a space where anxiety, superstition, and playfulness reach their heights and where joking, play, and sexually risqué behaviour that elsewhere is unacceptable somehow becomes acceptable. In the wings performers may look like the characters or onstage personae they will portray; they are costumed, made up, and sometimes bewigged; but, in the wings a performer is, “neither this nor that, and yet is both.”⁹²

Stage Fright

Stage fright is a blanket term that denotes the psychological dangers performers face, dangers that are experienced most acutely in the wings and are themselves intimately related to the interstitial situation of a performer in the wings.⁹³ The term ‘stage fright’ also describes the various levels of fear and anxiety that performers experience, accompanied by such physical symptoms as “tremor, sweating, palpitation, ‘butterflies’ in the stomach, dry throat, or even incontinence.”⁹⁴ As Donald Kaplan puts it “stage fright is a state of morbid anxiety disturbing the sense of poise.”⁹⁵ Stage fright is a widespread phenomenon that finds its roots in the everyday social and self-presentation anxieties that can afflict individuals. Psychologist Mark Leary has provided an account of such anxieties that serves as a suitable point of departure for

⁸⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94.

⁹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 94.

⁹¹ Victor Turner, "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

⁹² Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 99.

⁹³ Glen O. Gabbard notes that the descriptor ‘fright’ (which according to Freud describes a state that one is unprepared for) is perhaps a misnomer given that stage fright is both expected and prepared for. He uses the term only “because of its popularity and vivid connotations.” Gabbard, "Stage Fright," 383.

⁹⁴ Glenn Wilson, *The Psychology of the Performing Arts* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 147.

⁹⁵ Donald M. Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," *The Drama Review* 14, no. 45 (1969): 60. I will further explain this statement in the course of the present argument.

this discussion. According to Leary, “social anxiety is hypothesized to occur when people (a) are motivated to make particular impressions on others, but (b) doubt that they will be successful at doing so.”⁹⁶ Intensifying this is the perceived importance of making a particular impression and the perceived consequences of failing to make that impression.

Not all performers suffer the extremes of stage fright, and it is interesting that performers’ experiences of the intensity of stage fright are quite widely divergent. Indeed, Dick Cavett has commented, “One of its mysteries is how little, if any, some people have.”⁹⁷ Investigations of stage fright tend to focus on the most severe (and therefore most interesting) symptoms and cases. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, most performers do experience some form of nervousness or minor anxiety prior to performance that quickly dissipates once their performance begins. Indeed, most performers’ experiences of stage fright do not detrimentally affect their performance and, contrastingly, their anxiety frequently contributes “a unique dimension to the vitality of live performance.”⁹⁸ However, no matter what their experience, performers can never eliminate the possibility of suffering from extreme stage fright; it is not simply suffered by inexperienced performers. Renowned actors including Maureen Stapleton, Ian Holm and Laurence Olivier have all experienced career-threatening bouts of stage fright. All performance involves a level of risk and “anxiety is part of the phenomenology of taking risks.”⁹⁹ Indeed, Kaplan observes that “the intensity of stage fright tends to diminish when a performer is resting on his laurels or consolidating his artistic development,” while each new challenge or ‘phase’ in a performer’s career “is ushered in by intensified anxiety,”¹⁰⁰ the companion of any desire to make a good impression.

An understanding of stage fright as it affects actors and theatrical performers begins with the observation that such performers are both artist and instrument.¹⁰¹ Unlike

⁹⁶ Mark R. Leary, *Understanding Social Anxiety: Social, Personality, and Clinical Perspectives* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983), 66.

⁹⁷ Cavett, "Stage Fright," 80.

⁹⁸ Gabbard, "Further Contributions to the Understanding of Stage Fright: Narcissistic Issues," 440.

⁹⁹ Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," 82.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1.

musicians, actors “sketch characters and colour them in with themselves.”¹⁰² This extends to physical performers and singers as well, whether they are involved with the formation and portrayal of a distinct character or not. Using one’s own physical and psychological resources in the act of creation and performance involves significant risks to one’s sense of self and self-esteem. Any adverse judgement of performers’ work can easily be perceived as a direct personal criticism; they can feel that they are being judged, not just their work.¹⁰³ Furthermore, actors must attempt to judge themselves even in the act of creation: Stephen Aaron observes that an actor “must create (the state of inspiration) and evaluate (the state of elaboration) at the same time.”¹⁰⁴ For this reason, Aaron is in agreement with Kaplan that, “stage fright is ultimately a creative problem the performer must solve along with other problems of performance.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed Aaron goes further, contending that stage fright is “not merely an occupational hazard, an unpleasant effect of performance: it exists in the art of acting.”¹⁰⁶ Aaron’s view is drawn from his own background as a performer, director, psychologist and psychoanalyst and has developed through observing a large part of the performance process, taking into consideration rehearsal, preparation and performance. However, while his understanding of character actors’ processes demonstrates that they are particularly susceptible to attacks of stage fright he does not demonstrate that this is in anyway significantly different from other attacks of social or self-presentational anxiety that may be suffered by a wider range of individuals.¹⁰⁷ Similar to actors and performers, individuals in a variety of contexts also suffer when they are required to simultaneously act as both creator and evaluator of their own (social or cultural) performances.

Still, taking seriously Aaron’s observation that stage fright does exist in the processes of professional stage actors, within the context of this study of backstage spaces it is interesting to note that the wings are the space in which performers suffer the most

¹⁰² Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A New Path to Personal Knowledge and Power*, 119.

¹⁰³ This is especially the case in auditions, where performers can suffer rejection for any number of factors that are beyond their control (most particularly their ‘look,’ a combination of physical appearance, age and personality at the time of the audition).

¹⁰⁴ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," 82.

¹⁰⁶ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, ix.

¹⁰⁷ The argument that stage fright might be considered a more universal aspect of performance is strongly argued by Glen O. Gabbard who, like Aaron, also uses a psychoanalytic method. See Gabbard, "Stage Fright."

acute attacks of anxiety or stage fright. Aaron himself notes this on the basis of numerous accounts provided to him by performers.¹⁰⁸ British playwright David Hare, performing solo in his own play *Via Dolorosa*, recorded his experience when one performance was delayed by over twenty minutes:

On the dot of 7p.m., after a careful preparation and deliberate calm, I was absolutely ready to go. But by 7.19 I was a dish rag. Those twenty minutes were like lying on the floor with an articulated truck parked on your chest. It wasn't the entrance which killed me. It was the prolonged wait for the entrance.¹⁰⁹

For Hare, the experience of waiting in the wings had a pronounced physical effect. Actor Julie Hamilton, also performing solo, recalled the loneliness of the wings, and the strong temptation to simply leave the theatre prior to the start of her performance:

I would stand back in the wings, the stage manager was out in the box right out the front, and I would be there, standing there, waiting for the green light to go on ... no one was backstage with me. And I remember looking one night at the red light, waiting for it to go green, and thought 'If I leave now, no one will even know. I just won't go on.' I could walk out, just walk out of there and there was nobody, not a soul to talk to me or to say anything to me, or to look after me in any way.¹¹⁰

Aaron relates a comment from an anonymous actor who left stage acting for film and television acting: "It wasn't the stage fright that got me; it was the fear of having to go through all that crap before the curtain."¹¹¹ While it emerges from a fear of performance, stage fright particularly affects performers in the wings rather than on the stage itself.

That the wings are the space in which anxiety and fear reach their apogee can be attributed to a number of factors. In the performance process, stage fright begins "with the scheduling of a performance"¹¹² and performers' growing awareness of an impending deadline, an imposed limit to their preparations. Rehearsals, as Aaron

¹⁰⁸ For Aaron's observation on the wings as the space of acute attacks of stage fright, see Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 76-79. For his references to the experience of performers, see Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 59-69.

¹⁰⁹ Hare, *Acting Up*, 64.

¹¹⁰ Hamilton, interview.

¹¹¹ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 60.

¹¹² Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," 61.

notes, involve a move from the private to the public; the creative freedom of the earlier stages of rehearsal give way to the later more public process of repeating and setting what has been discovered and created.¹¹³ The uncertainty and the difficulties of rehearsal may result in performers harbouring fears about the resulting performance. These fears will be greater if the performer in question places particular importance on the success of the performance, or doubts that they possess the skills to successfully perform their part. In such cases Kaplan notes that delusional thinking may occur: "The delusion has it that the audience is convening for an occasion of devastating ridicule and humiliation for the performer."¹¹⁴ Performers' dreams in the time leading up to the opening of a production often reflect this; Callow relates that his dreams can be "filled with the unending and increasingly meaningless recital of your lines on a never-ending loop, interspersed with allegories of impotence."¹¹⁵ Alec Guinness has written that while he doesn't dream about film acting, he regularly dreams of theatre,

[W]hen nearly always the dreams have been nightmares of inadequacy – going on stage not knowing a line, thinking I could cover up some obvious mistake by executing an amateurish little dance, realising my fly isn't zipped, even appearing in the wrong theatre before an outraged audience and nonplussed cast.¹¹⁶

Throughout rehearsal, an actor or performer must rely less on outside help and more on their own instincts and awareness of what constitutes a good performance. Once in the theatre, notes Aaron, the director shifts from being a co-creator to an outsider, largely belonging "out there, not in here."¹¹⁷

It is only when the time finally comes to perform for a public audience that the anxieties and fears present during a rehearsal process develop into the physical symptoms of stage fright. At the prospect of having to perform, and fearing failure, an individual's self-protective mechanisms, the 'fight or flight' response, come into play. Each performer seeks a state of equilibrium or, as Kaplan terms it, seeks to regain

¹¹³ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*. See chap. 2 of Aaron's account for his detailed description of this process.

¹¹⁴ Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," 63.

¹¹⁵ Callow, *Being an Actor*, 189.

¹¹⁶ Guinness, *Blessings in Disguise*, 198.

¹¹⁷ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 38.

their 'poise.' In an everyday social situation this is easy to manage through the avoidance of what makes an individual anxious, or through all manner of habitual gestures and postures that help an individual regain a sense of poise.¹¹⁸ For a performer in the wings, however, the proximity to the audience and the need to prepare for an imminent performance largely removes these possibilities, placing them in a tense situation. Actors involved in portraying distinct characters need to adopt a physicality and outward appearance in keeping with their character. Other performers likewise need to suppress themselves and adopt whatever attitudes and bodily states are necessary for their impending performance. Indeed, for performers, their performance truly begins in the wings. Actors and performers must undergo any preparations and transformations in the wings so that when they appear in front of an audience they are already performing. For this reason, in the last few moments preceding the commencement of a performance,

The actor, waiting in the wings, can resort to neither fight nor flight. He is physically and emotionally trapped, and there is an intimate relationship between such immobility and passivity on the one hand and panic anxiety on the other.¹¹⁹

At this point an actor is alone, effectively trapped with her hopes for the impending performance, and with her fearful anticipation. At such a point, two symptoms can manifest, what Kaplan refers to as 'blocking' and 'depersonalization.' Both are directly related to performers' pronounced need for control. 'Blocking' is the sensation of having lost all access to rehearsed actions and text, no longer being able to move or speak. 'Depersonalization,'

is most often experienced as a split between a functioning and an observing self, with pronounced spatial disorientation. The observing self perceives the functioning self as off at a distance, operating mechanically before an audience which is also perceived as quite distant.¹²⁰

'Blocking' stops a performer from performing altogether, whilst the dislocation of 'depersonalization' renders a performance lifeless. With both symptoms, a

¹¹⁸ Examples of such behaviour include placing one's hands in one's pockets, mopping one's brow, rubbing one's face and fidgeting.

¹¹⁹ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 81.

¹²⁰ Kaplan, "On Stage Fright," 64.

performer's own body becomes a troubling presence, it "can come to appear 'Other' and opposed to the self."¹²¹ Rather than being able to perform with their body, a performer suffering from severe stage fright experiences their body as a prominent object of concern, an impediment to effective performance.¹²²

Combined with this anxiety, performers also suffer from the knowledge that the audience must be won over during the performance. A performer seeks the attention and approval of her audience, and it is the audience who can pay rapt attention, catcall and boo, or worst of all, simply remain indifferent. In light of this, John Harrop has noted that, "performance is an aggressive/erotic experience."¹²³ This is because, "Standing on the stage is an aggressive act. It says: Look at me. Listen to me."¹²⁴ From backstage performers commonly perceive the audience as a threatening mass, "a force to be tamed."¹²⁵ According to Aaron,

The audience remains the bad presence in the house – the uninvited – threatening to persecute the actor by humiliation, ridicule, starvation, and indifference until the actor has made contact with them, until the stage and the house are merged.¹²⁶

Such a merging is characterised either in aggressive terms – Aaron cites such phrases used by actors as "Knock 'em dead," "Lay em out in the aisles"¹²⁷ – or seductive terms. The seductive terms were made explicit to me in an interview with Amanda Muggleton who described stepping out onto the stage as,

... almost like going out on a date, that's how I look at it [...]. For me, I want everything perfect. [...] It's weird ... it's a good analogy ... it's like I'm going out on a brand new date but instead of being with one person it's with two thousand or fifteen hundred and, I suppose, in a way, like a date you want that person to fall in love with you, or to really need you and want you, and that's ... when I go onstage my whole aura, it's not just me ... it's even the air around me I want them to love. My breath, my

¹²¹ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 70.

¹²² J. Lowell Lewis describes how such a foregrounding of one's embodiment as troubling resembles the embodied experience of learning a new skill. See Lewis, "Genre and Embodiment: From Brazilian *Capoeira* to the Ethnology of Human Movement," 229-30.

¹²³ Harrop, *Acting*, 107.

¹²⁴ Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A New Path to Personal Knowledge and Power*, 146.

¹²⁵ Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 68.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

very breath. And so you go out with that intention and sometimes it goes right and sometimes it goes wrong.¹²⁸

Both these approaches indicate a basic intent on the part of performers; they must wrest control of the circumstances of performance from the audience.

So far I have outlined how stage fright finds its roots both in everyday social and self-presentation anxieties as well as in the processes of acting and the way performers must act as both creator and evaluator of their own work. These anxieties are intensified during preparations for performance, especially when the performance is perceived as vitally important, or the performer possesses underlying concerns about their ability to perform their part. These anxieties then reach their peak in the wings, in the final moments before a performer steps into the view of the audience. The audience too, present a danger, they must be tamed, and each performer must exert a form of control over the audience and win their appreciation and support. Performers' understandings that entrances are often highly important to the success of a performance can further heighten their anxiety. Gay McAuley has noted both the way entrances segment a performance and the many conventions "that have been developed in many different performance genres to heighten or mark the moment of entrance."¹²⁹ For actors, the moment of entrance is especially important as it allows them to seize the initiative and demand an audience's attention. McAuley states,

Whatever the mode or purpose of the entrance, the moment is charged for the performer – actors sometimes speak of "working up" an entrance – and their physical appearance, bodily demeanor and energy level all receive particular attention at that moment.¹³⁰

The knowledge amongst performers that their entrance must be finely judged and executed – and the pressure this can generate – is yet another factor in the generation of stage fright.

Given that the pressure of an audience's presence and the accompanying desire to please them, as well as control them, can provoke anxiety in performers, it is not

¹²⁸ Muggleton, interview.

¹²⁹ McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 96.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

surprising that the audience can also serve as the cure for performers' fears. Following Kaplan and Aaron's understanding of stage fright, a performer in the wings may be conceived as suffering from a split between an observing self and a creative self. This, argues Aaron, stems from a need for outside reassurance in the absence of a directorial figure. Performers require acknowledgement that the audience is with the performer. In arguing this, Aaron also advances his view that actors involved in the conscious transformation of themselves into a 'character' also suffer from 'disintegration anxiety,' a fear of losing themselves in the transition. I find this is a questionable view, largely dependent on the extent to which actors actually become another individual, as opposed to simply portraying them.¹³¹ However, "the audience's acknowledgement, in whatever form it takes, of the presence of the actor"¹³² is what dissipates stage fright. McAuley's understanding of the complex communication between actor and audience aids in understanding how this can occur. For McAuley, "the live presence of both performers and spectators creates complex flows of energy between both groups."¹³³ Such flows are complex enough that "it is even questionable whether what is going on can be discussed in terms of stimulus and response."¹³⁴ Instead, both performers and spectators are active during a performance, and it is the focussed activity and attention of the audience that a performer requires to quell their own fears. If a performer experiences the audience as communicating with them, through the appropriateness of that audience's reactions, then a performer receives assurance that their effort is not in vain and that the performance is being positively received.

Contrary to what I have outlined so far, not only does the movement of a performer onto the stage involve an attempt to establish control in the face of uncertainty, but it also involves a certain submission. This is essentially a submission to what one actor termed the "the requirement of performance."¹³⁵ Performers must submit to the uncertainty involved in the act of performing, to the rehearsed details of the

¹³¹ Aaron does make the distinction between actors, whom he views as attempting to "become someone else," and other performing artists whose performances are based more on impersonation or other more physically based skills. Such a distinction is, in my view, an over-simplification of what actors actually do and possibly relies heavily on certain approaches undertaken within the various techniques of US-based Method acting. Aaron, *Stage Fright: Its Role in Acting*, 130.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³³ McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 247.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Phelan, interview.

performance they are to give and, as already outlined, they must submit to the judgement of the audience. In the wings a performer finally makes the decision to perform, and it is in the wings “where you realise you’re going to do it.”¹³⁶ In this way, there is “a line to cross,”¹³⁷ and crossing this line involves a performer ‘assuming responsibility’ to a multitude of people. Actor Leo McKern has described this through relating his experience of waiting for his first entrance whilst once playing the title role in a West End production of *Peer Gynt*:

Crouched at the bottom of the steps in one of the forestage entrances from the pit, and awaiting a light-change heralding the cue for a stormy entrance, I would be overcome by a kind of super-consciousness of what I was doing – there, and at that time – and I would burst into tears in which sadness and grief had no part at all; the magnitude of the occasion, the enactment of a great part in a great play and the hugeness of the responsibility to author, audience, the director, the actors, and to myself, was quite suddenly overwhelming.¹³⁸

The assumption of responsibility is in many senses a submissive act; a performer submits to the responsibility resting on her shoulders through deciding to perform. Julie Hamilton placed a great stress on this notion of submission, noting that her experience of the wings is that they are, “that moment when you actually have to hold it together and say ‘keep going’ ... it is the moment when it's the last chance you've got; it's the last bit of freedom.”¹³⁹ In an important sense, performers must submit to what they have prepared, they must submit to the curtailing of their freedom, and to the channeling of all their energy and strength into the performance at hand.

In light of this discussion, it is evident that the position of a performer in the wings is one beset by tension and contradiction. In the wings performers are neither onstage nor offstage, neither ‘in character’ nor fully their everyday self. In the wings performers seek to assert control over their circumstances, and over the audience, and yet they must also submit to the requirements of the performance at hand, to the performance as rehearsed. In this, performers experience the wings as the sharpest point of collision between their own psychological needs and requirements and those

¹³⁶ Zemiro, interview.

¹³⁷ Ah Kin, interview.

¹³⁸ Leo McKern, *Just Resting* (London: Methuen, 1983), 89.

¹³⁹ Hamilton, interview.

of the market within which their skills are valued. This position is difficult to negotiate, but performers do so through the use of what I term ‘compensatory tactics.’ That I refer to them as ‘tactics’ is because performers deploy each in response to the different conditions they endure in the wings. The routines that performers develop attempt to mitigate the dangers faced in the wings, while the games and playfulness they frequently engage in subvert the submission involved. Reflecting performers’ very situation in the wings, these tactics are in tension with each other.

Compensatory Tactics: Superstition and Play

Performers desire control over the dangers of the wings and the uncertainty of live performance, and this desire finds expression in the routine practices that they develop. In Chapter Four I detailed how individual performers working on *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* developed routines that together provided them with an intersubjective embodied sense of a satisfactorily progressing performance. Added to this, theatre practitioners also appear to abide by various superstitions, which effectively regulate behaviour, seeming to offer safety and the comfort of a personalised certainty. But, in contrast to these, performers also engage in practices that explicitly *increase* the danger and uncertainty of their situation, specifically testing the degree of control they possess. These include the games and general playfulness that develop during productions, providing enjoyment for practitioners and releasing the tension and boredom of long seasons. Importantly, such games and play also reassert performers’ creativity and agency in the face of performances that necessitate largely pre-determined actions on cue.

1. Superstition

Historically, theatrical performance and the places in which it occurs have been riddled with superstition and experiences of the supernatural.¹⁴⁰ Although not as

¹⁴⁰ English and continental European theatres feature prominently in theatrical ghost stories, although sites of performance in other cultures are also often connected with supernatural encounters given the close links that frequently exist between places of performance – and performance itself – with religious and ritual practice. Apart from featuring ghostly figures onstage, the Japanese theatrical forms of Noh and Kabuki attract experiences of ghostly presences in the offstage areas. Matazo Nakamura writes that in the Kabuki-za in Tokyo the long passageway under the *hanamichi* is a site where

prevalent now as they once were, theatrical superstitions act as important guides for performers' personal conduct within theatres. Indeed, theatrical traditions and superstitions mutually inform one another. Much performance culture is expressed orally in the form of anecdotes and gossip, with very little written down. For this reason, amongst the innumerable accounts of superstitions pertaining to theatrical performance, it is nigh impossible to establish consistency. It is apparent, however, that theatrical superstitions primarily apply to offstage behaviour and frequently link performers' offstage conduct with the onstage success or failure of a performance. Adherence to superstition is therefore implicated in the general uncertainty of live performance and the mechanisms of stage fright; by at least not acting in contradiction to prevailing superstitions, performers maintain a degree of faith in their own performative success.

In an attempt to catalogue the diversity of theatrical superstitions, Richard Huggett has produced a book that draws on his own experiences as an actor and on the anecdotes that serve as a conveyor of performance culture.¹⁴¹ According to Huggett, theatrical superstitions cover a wide variety of activities, including the possession of talismans, mascots and charms,¹⁴² the avoidance of that which is deemed to be unlucky (objects, situations, persons), and the practice of certain ritualised actions before a performance. Some superstitions appear to have their origin in historical practices. An historical prohibition on whistling in the theatre, a practice still considered unlucky by many practitioners, derives from the seventeenth and eighteenth century when the individuals who worked theatre flies were commonly ex-sailors. Sailors of the time used whistling as a means of communication when working in the rigging of ships, a practice they brought with them to the theatre. A misplaced whistle by an actor on the stage could therefore lead to confusion and injury; a whistling actor could in effect invite something to be brought down on them

performers often experience inexplicable presences. Nakamura, *Kabuki: Backstage, Onstage*, 110. Interestingly, the offstage areas of theatres are often conceived of in terms of their cosmological significance; under the stage is often a zone of devils, demons and evil, whilst above the stage is a space of angels and heavenly goodness. The basement of the Kabuki-za is known as *naraku* ('hell'). Nakamura, *Kabuki: Backstage, Onstage*, 78.

¹⁴¹ Richard Huggett, *The Curse of Macbeth and Other Theatrical Superstitions* (Chippenham: Picton Publishing, 1981).

¹⁴² These may take the form of objects, items of clothing, animals and other individuals.

from above.¹⁴³ Other superstitions develop through the repetition of circumstance; the avoidance of mentioning the word ‘Macbeth’ in a theatre derives from the extensive history of seemingly inexplicable misadventure and ill fortune associated with that play. Still others derive from entirely idiosyncratic personal experience.

The uncertainties of performance are so great that, for many performers, they invite a reliance on whatever is perceived to work. Actor Garrett Keogh’s tongue-in-cheek description of actors’ rituals in his article “The Blue Tracksuit Syndrome” draws on the experience that while an actor performs “the same lines, the same thoughts, the same moves [...], one night it sparkles and the next night it’s flat.”¹⁴⁴ For Keogh, this invites a distancing of the creative and evaluative sides of an actor’s self: “you take out the microscope and you become a private detective trailing yourself.”¹⁴⁵ But of course no definitive answer is ever forthcoming. Instead, “In the land of shadows and talismans you don’t mess with what you don’t have to. You don’t invite trouble. You don’t add to the list of imponderables.”¹⁴⁶

The particular sociality of practitioner spaces results in superstitions, traditions, and ritual-like practices inevitably being passed on to others. Keogh writes:

I’m not superstitious. I’ve no good luck charms. I don’t go out of my way not to walk under a ladder. But I don’t quote *Macbeth* in the theatre. Partly it’s conditioning, partly it’s the sensibilities of others, and partly it’s something else.¹⁴⁷

The ‘something else’ aside, the conditioning and the awareness of other’s sensibilities lead to superstitions and conventions being adopted even if they aren’t completely accepted by the individual performer. One of the dressers working with Opera Australia expressed this sense to me in her comment, “I’m not necessarily superstitious, but I’ll adhere to those conventions.” Performers are intensely aware of other performer’s activities and habits. Indeed, younger performers will take their social cues from watching more experienced performers; communal dressing rooms

¹⁴³ Harrison, *The Language of Theatre*, 308.

¹⁴⁴ Keogh, "The Blue Tracksuit Syndrome," 4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

are ideal for informing younger performers of the “professional boundaries”¹⁴⁸ that must be adhered to. In such a social environment, superstitions, traditions and conventions spread.

So far I have demonstrated that superstition emerges as a response to the myriad uncertainties of live performance; performers will adopt anything that is perceived as offering security. In addition, I have demonstrated that superstitious practices spread in the backstage, with many performers adopting practices so as not to be seen to pose a threat to the established order. In this way there is a curious attitude exhibited towards superstitious behaviour. Of the many performers I observed and met during the course of this research, few explicitly exhibited or admitted to superstitious practices. Two instances illustrate a more general situation. During the season of *Frozen* at the Downstairs Belvoir Street Theatre, the Upstairs Theatre was occupied by a production of *Macbeth*. While no member of the cast mentioned the name ‘Macbeth,’ questions were asked of Blair, a member of the *Frozen* cast and theatre history buff, about where the superstition originated and what exactly the rules were about saying the name. In this there was a curious tension between asking historical questions about a seemingly quaint little theatrical superstition, while nonetheless still adhering to it. Similarly, before the opening night of *The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe*, performer Joanne Foley pretended to spit on the stage, a tradition meant to bring good luck. The spits however weren’t actual spits and instead had a self-conscious quality, which, as I recorded in my notes at the time, was ‘for the notice and enjoyment of others.’ Indeed, with the approach of another performer, Dennis Olsen, Joanne spat in his direction, to which he reacted with mock indignation, “Did you see what she did?” Both these examples demonstrate the irony with which performers observe superstitions. No performer would necessarily contradict a superstition, but it is questionable if they are altogether taken seriously.

However, the backstage and pre-performance routines that performers develop during productions can intensify into nightly rituals with performers adhering to them in ways that border on the superstitious. During *Run Rabbit Run*, actor Georgina Naidu reported that before every show she did three yogic ‘salutes to the sun,’ a practice she

¹⁴⁸ Davies, interview.

had maintained since she initially trained as an actor. This ritual she said provided her with “a sense of continuity” through her work as an actor.¹⁴⁹ Continuity is an important, and often overlooked, source of assurance. During *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Joseph Connell explicitly explained how, “I need the ciggie at interval, or maybe two now that I’ve got into a pattern, and if I don’t have it I go ‘Oh shit, the second act is going to be totally different for me.’”¹⁵⁰ Admitting, “I suppose it’s so stupid,” Connell explained that his need was because “I’ve made it a part of my routine now.”¹⁵¹ Changes or omissions in performers’ routines can create a sense of unease. This unease is not simply a mental phenomenon, but is based in a physically experienced sense of difference. Like the habitual physical tics and movements that sports people exhibit, performers’ routines aid them in the creation of an embodied sense of readiness.

2. Play

Contrary to the tactic of routine and the residual adherence to superstition, performers’ games and playfulness involve an almost overt flaunting of the conditions of performance and, indeed, create certain types of danger. During the Sydney season of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* I was aware that many in the cast involved themselves in ongoing games and jokes. Two of these occurred onstage during the performance and toyed with the notion of visibility; these games took place in full view of the audience but remained effectively invisible, instead forming a performance-within-a-performance. One was a regular game of charades in which an onstage performer mimed clues to a book or film title which practitioners in the wings had to guess before the end of the interval that followed; the other involved different humorous items being hidden in a prop, items which were only visible to a single performer, whose varying reactions were carefully watched by others. Another common joke was to dress up in scrounged clothing and put on a performance in the wings that would be seen only by those onstage. Furthermore, ad hoc physical play comprising wrestling, tickling and hugging were common in the wings. The specifically sexual nature of this play was often very evident; during one performance

¹⁴⁹ Georgina Naidu, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 4 February 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Connell, interview.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

two performers exited the stage only to stop in the wings and engage in mock intercourse for the benefit of those cast members still onstage. On another occasion, one performer was about to enter with two female attendants. Just before entering she reached out and quickly tweaked one of her attendants' nipples. In a flash the attendant returned the tweak. In what seemed like a split second, both had recovered and, on cue, had commenced performing. The sexual nature of such play was commented upon by various performers through shared jokes about sexual harassment in the workplace. Much of the playfulness and the games relied on stretching, subverting or transgressing the boundaries of the performance context at hand and playing with the degree of control that the various performers exercised.

The dominant reason provided by performers to justify the games and playfulness present within theatrical performances was that such play feeds back into their performances, energizing the performers and ensuring that the performance, no matter how many times it has been performed before, remains fresh. To achieve this, some of the games performers play deliberately draw upon their fears and anxieties. One such game is to whisper an insult or joke to a fellow performer in the wings just at the moment they have to commence their performance. Camilla Ah Kin described a similar gag:

There is a very old gag that people tend to do. Geoff Morrell is one of the worst offenders of – you're running to make an entrance – grabbing the person before their entrance and not letting them on. So there's a really, really big cuddle, and then you get on. But there's something kind of great about it because it really energises the entrance. But the fear that you're not going to get on there while the other person's just holding you back ...¹⁵²

On long running productions, such activities can unsettle performers in a particularly constructive fashion, ridding them of the accumulated habits they are perhaps relying on to get them through the performance and forcing them to quickly reconsider their approach. At the same time, such games and playfulness are also undertaken for the pure enjoyment that they can provide, allowing practitioners to experience a renewed engagement with each other and countering – or at least avoiding – the deadening effects of repetition.

¹⁵² Ah Kin, interview.

Importantly, in performers' lived experiences, routine and play blend. Indeed, as the season of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* progressed, certain games, especially the nightly game of charades, became a part of many performers' routines. In the jumble of activity and behaviour I observed, routines developed as an expression of performers' more conservative needs, whilst play and games emerged as an expression of their more improvisational or innovative tendencies. Many performers informed me of their need to combat boredom and keep their performances fresh during the season, with one puppeteer mentioning his need to "make it fun every night."¹⁵³ *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* possessed an integrative power in which difference was quickly assimilated into routine and games and play were, in effect, structured in. The bodily practices of performers in the wings exhibited the strength of routine particularly through the way cues became internalised; when a cue arrived, performers experienced what they repeatedly termed a 'snap.'¹⁵⁴ For Leighton Young, "When I hear my cue I go 'snap' and I'm in it."¹⁵⁵ Likewise, Terry Ryan spoke of how, "Everything changes in a heart beat [...] you just go snap!"¹⁵⁶ Part of the 'snap' came from the almost continuous musical accompaniment that performers enjoyed in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Cues were aligned with particular beats and notes, and in this regard the production quite literally possessed a constant rhythm. Indeed, the contrast between musical performance and spoken-word theatre is that performers in the latter tend to 'gather' themselves into performance mode rather than 'snap.' In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, each performer's plot became ingrained as an embodied disposition. Furthermore, performers' plots accumulated innovation, integrating it with other elements. Jeffrey Denman has explained how, in his experience working on the Broadway musical *The Producers*, play, jokes and games quickly became nightly rituals:

They start innocently, something you do on a whim that brings a laugh or a smile. The next time you see that person again, and you repeat it, trying to repeat the laugh. By the

¹⁵³ Parker, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Company manager Laura Hamilton, herself an experienced musical theatre performer, described how she often became "conditioned" to the routine and rhythms of productions she was involved in. In one case she was aware that, even whilst in the audience watching a production she had ceased working on, her breathing still reflected the timing of her old cues. Hamilton, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Young, interview.

¹⁵⁶ Ryan, interview.

third night, it has become a ritual that you will do until you leave the show. God forbid you forget one night. Or you're sick and you didn't tell your understudy to do it.¹⁵⁷

The assimilative power of large-scale theatrical performance demonstrates one manifestation of a general state of affairs; in theatrical performance of all scales a tension is experienced by performers between the enjoyment and exhilaration of innovation and the desire for the safety, continuity and relative security of routine.

Concluding Remarks

Theatrical performance, though questioning, subjunctive and subversive, is a highly structured activity, and the concrete entities we call 'theatres' are in part the physical manifestations of an immanent social structure. The social structure erected around acts of explicit performance has developed precisely because of the perception that theatrical performance is *dangerously* questioning, subjunctive, and subversive. In this, what Jonas Barish terms 'the anti-theatrical prejudice' can be observed.¹⁵⁸ This is a prejudice directed against "the expressive, the imitative, the deceptive, the spectacular, and the subject that arouses, or even acknowledges, an audience."¹⁵⁹ Actors, those who can seemingly transform themselves into the shape of others and seemingly manipulate the emotions of an audience, are deeply untrustworthy, indeed, polluting figures. Because of this, argues Mendel Kohansky, "Society has built a wall around the dangerous figure of the actor, and has kept it, although in different forms."¹⁶⁰

But performers also need structure to provide both meaning and context to their endeavours. The rehearsal practices undertaken in preparation for performance fundamentally involve the construction of a framework within which the actor or performer can perform; in essence, "Your performance is determined by what you have rehearsed."¹⁶¹ Even performers involved in improvisational performance

¹⁵⁷ Denman, *A Year with the Producers*, 152.

¹⁵⁸ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

¹⁵⁹ Alan Ackerman, "Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality," *Modern Drama* 44, no. 3 (2001): 275.

¹⁶⁰ Kohansky, *The Disreputable Profession: The Actor in Society*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Peter Barkworth, *About Acting (with a Bit of Name-Dropping and a Few Golden Rules)* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 135.

practices do so within the guidelines of self-imposed ‘parameters’ or ‘frameworks.’¹⁶² As was touched on in the previous chapter, different scales and genres of performance may be governed by looser or stricter structures; a small co-operative theatre production like *Frozen* allows more freedom for the individual performer than a large-scale touring production like *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. But in each there are many requirements placed upon performers: particular relationships, actions, cues, and choreographies. It is all these that John Harrop has in mind when he lists the attributes an actor must possess. Harrop lists athletic skills, a wide ‘emotional palette,’ curiosity, imagination, energy, and sexual chemistry, but finishes with the statement that, “More mundanely, but no less important for a working actor, is the ability to work within structure, be it of the text or the production company, and not to be restricted by it.”¹⁶³

Between the structure that pervades performance and the structure that pervades the essentially everyday social world of the backstage, the wings are encountered as a space that is “essentially unstructured,”¹⁶⁴ being the interstice between those two states. Reflecting Turner’s description of the liminal phase of ritual, performers’ experiences of the wings are characterized by “the mood of maybe, might-be, as-if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, [and] desire.”¹⁶⁵ The wings are a space in which the immensity of possibility looms, forming a gap that must be crossed. For performers, this is stimulating, exciting and liberating, but it can also be experienced as immensely dangerous and generate extreme anxiety. It is a position beset with tension. The liminality of the wings is therefore, “both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm.”¹⁶⁶ For performers, the creativity finds expression in their playfulness and games, whilst the destructive aspects are present in the potentially debilitating effects of stage fright.

¹⁶² Not to mention the construction of a ‘community of sentiment’ within which their performances might be appreciated.

¹⁶³ Harrop, *Acting*, 81.

¹⁶⁴ Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 98.

¹⁶⁵ Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” 11.

¹⁶⁶ Victor Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology,” in *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts*, ed. Janet C. Harris and Roberta J. Park (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1983), 150.