

PETRIFIED

The horrors of stagefright.

BY JOHN LAHR

In February, 1995, the thirty-seven-year-old British actor and comedian Stephen Fry was starring with another popular British comic, Rik Mayall, in the West End production of Simon Gray's "Cell Mates." Fry had the role of George Blake, a spy and traitor who is sprung from Wormwood Scrubs, where he is serving a forty-two-year sentence, by a prison friend, Sean Bourke, and who then, through a series of stratagems, keeps Bourke living with him in Moscow for two years. Fry, a multifaceted performer (he was Oscar Wilde in the 1997 film "Wilde," and a featured player on Rowan Atkinson's TV comedy "Blackadder"), had "the manners of a convivial prelate," as Gray subsequently wrote in "Fat Chance," his account of the production. On the Sunday after the show's opening, when the weekend reviews hit the stands, however, Fry woke up feeling a "sort of clammy horror." He told me, "I had something to do, something annoying—I had agreed I would do narration for 'Peter and the Wolf' in a church somewhere. I woke up. I looked at the ceiling. I thought, I can't let this person down on 'Peter and the Wolf.' But I can't go back to the theatre. I cannot." He added, "It was just a feeling of impossibility. It's inexplicable. I'd never, ever, had stagefright and I'd done things like appear in front of close to eighty thousand people at Wembley for Nelson Mandela's birthday."

Fry fulfilled his "Peter and the Wolf" obligation at midday, returned to his apartment, wrote a series of letters to his cohorts, and then went into the garage to kill himself. "My finger was on the ignition key," he said. "But then pictures of your mother appear in front of your eyes. You cannot do that to your parents. At least I couldn't. I had tried when I was seventeen." Instead, Fry fled. "I drove to Bruges and struck east through to Germany. I had it in my head that the tip of Jutland would somehow suit me. I would buy a small wooden, quite well-heated

hut. I just somehow imagined that British people didn't go there. I would learn Danish. I kind of liked the idea of going around in a big white pullover and a pipe and teaching English in some school in Denmark, meanwhile writing peculiar novels." He added, "I thought I had burned every bridge." Fry's disappearance was a subject of scandal and concern in England, where it dominated the headlines. A substitute was found for "Cell Mates," but the production never recovered, and it closed prematurely three weeks later, with a loss of some three hundred thousand pounds. "I really believed I would never come back to England," Fry said in his documentary "The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive." "I couldn't meet the gaze of anyone I knew."

In a sense, the term "stagefright" is a misnomer—fright being a shock for which one is unprepared. For professional performers, the unmooring terror hits as they prepare to do the very thing they're trained to do. According to one British medical study, actors' stress levels on opening night are equivalent "to that of a car-accident victim." When Sir Laurence Olivier was in his sixties, he considered retiring from the stage because of stagefright. It "is always waiting outside the door," he wrote in "Confessions of an Actor." "You either battle or walk away." The Canadian piano virtuoso Glenn Gould, who suffered from disabling stagefright, did walk away, abandoning the public platform for the privacy of the recording studio. "To me the ideal artist-to-audience relationship is one to zero," he said.

Stagefright is a traumatic, insidious attack on the performer's expressive instrument: the body. According to the psychoanalyst Donald Kaplan, who studied this morbid form of anxiety, the trajectory of stagefright begins with manic agitation and moodiness, proceeds to delusional thinking and obsessional fantasies, and then to "blocking"—the "complete loss of

perception and rehearsed function." The actor stiffens, trembles, and grows numb and uncoordinated. His mental and aural processes seize up. His throat tightens, his mouth goes dry, and he has difficulty speaking. The experience, with the metabolic changes it sets off—sweating, confusion, the loss of language—is a simulacrum of dying. "I died out there" or "I corpsed," actors say. In defense against the immobilizing terror, sufferers often split off. They disassociate. They report out-of-body experiences, a sense of watching themselves go by. ("It's a negative ecstasy," Fry says. "Remember that 'ecstasy' means 'to stand outside.' You stand outside yourself.") The actor's feeling of physical as well as mental coherence disintegrates. Instead of being protected, as usual, by the character he is playing, he suddenly stands helpless before the audience as himself; he loses the illusion of invisibility. His authority collapses and he feels naked, as if he were exposing to the judgmental spectators "an image of the man behind the mask," as the anthropologist Erving Goffman puts it. Actors sometimes refer to this momentary collapse as "drying": nothing flows from them to the audience or from the audience to them. "There is this catastrophic loss of confidence," the American psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, who has treated many stage and screen actors, says. "You lose your radar—like a surfer. You can ride a ten-foot wave with real confidence, not thinking about it, just doing it. Then, all of a sudden, you become too self-aware. You think too much. You get wiped out." The paradox of acting is that, like surfing, it requires both relaxation and concentration. If there is concentration without relaxation, or relaxation without concentration, the performance doesn't work.

ARNOLD ROTH

"Composure is repose," the playwright Clifford Odets observed in his diary. What the public wants, and what the performer sells, is the illusion

of control, of never being at a loss. The actor is a model of perfect personality, "one who is not wounded, or worried, or maimed, or in danger," as Wilde described it. The performer's poise works as a defense against shame and social threats, both signalling security and creating it, projecting confidence and neutralizing aggression. Poise, according to the analyst Leo Rangell, is a way of re-



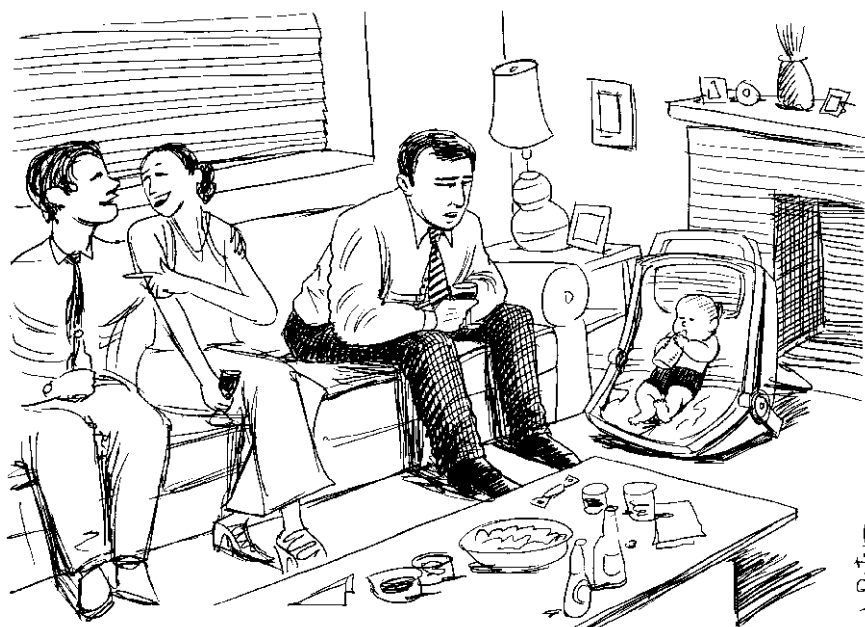
The journey through fear gives performing a kind of nobility.

capturing the blissful state of the infant, who develops strategies to insure his mother's collaboration and to prevent the agitation that would lead to his being "put down" or "dropped." Poise is an expression of the desire to be wanted and loved—a form of social security, which is never at play in solitude, when, Rangell writes, "there is no danger from without, no fear of ridicule: one is not at the moment being observed and judged." Actors, of course, watch themselves like hawks. Some, like Noël Coward, turn

poise into a philosophy of life: their careers are a perpetual performance of charm. "I have taken a lot of trouble with my public face," Coward said. "Lose yourself and you lose your audience." The psychoanalyst Harvey Corman, speaking of his friend Barbra Streisand, who suffers from chronic stagefright, says, "Her greatest talent isn't acting or singing; it's her ability to hide her fear." ("Break a leg" and "Merde"—the backstage mantras for good luck—are acknowledgments of the actor's terror of losing control of his body and of making a mess.)

Performers don't talk much about stagefright," Ian McKellen wrote in a defense of Fry that was published in the *London Times* in 1996. "The spectre of a tongue turned to stone and vomit where the lines should be is all too frightening to be evoked." One of the few to describe the trauma in detail is the British actor Ian Holm, who abandoned theatre for nearly fifteen years because of it. In 1976, before the final preview of the Royal Shakespeare Company production of "The Iceman Cometh," in which he played the central role of Hickey, Holm, as many sufferers do, had a presentiment of disaster. "I knew—I *knew*—that something was going to happen," he writes in "Acting My Life":

Somehow I got through the first part of the play, though I do remember sweating in the wings while I was waiting to go on, suddenly feeling cold and clammy, and people asking me if I was all right. Although I did not realize it, I had started to seize up. . . . Then the moment arrived when I knew I would not be able to continue. I was giving a monologue from a chair at the front of the stage. The rest of the cast was behind me and, despite their previous efforts, now unable directly to intervene or assist me. I kept drying, even at one point addressing the audience with something like, "Here I am, supposed to be talking to you . . . there are you, expecting me to talk. . . ." Getting off the stage was quite complicated and involved a choreographed manoeuvre through and past the other actors, who were frozen in a kind of tableau. . . . I had only been off stage for a few moments before I knew some kind of



"So, Carol tells me you're a baby."

buffer had been reached, that the game was up. I walked briskly past the stage manager, who waved a flimsy arm at me and uttered something polite like, "But you're due back on almost immediately, Mr. Holm."

"I'm off," I replied. "And I'm not coming back." . . .

By the time I got back to the dressing-room area, I had even lost the ability to walk. The black curtain which slowly cowed my brain had become a complete hood. . . . I experienced complete meltdown. I was unable to speak or to focus on anything. My eyes were wild and staring.

Holm ended up being comforted by a fellow-actor backstage. "We were both on the floor, my head in his lap," he writes. "He was caressing me like a child."

The poster for Alfred Hitchcock's 1950 film "Stage Fright" reads, "Hands that applaud can also kill." In fact, it's not the hands of the audience but their observing eyes that are lethal. The pianist and critic Charles Rosen writes, in his mischievous essay "The Aesthetic of Stage Fright," "The silence of the audience is not that of a public that listens but one that *watches*, like the dead hush that accompanies the unsteady movement of the tightrope walker poised over his perilous space." Without an audience, or the fantasy of one, there is no stagefright. The actor's success depends on his ability to conquer the audience, which is why the encounter is so often

fraught with excitement and danger. "The relationship is undoubtedly sexual," the British character actress Anna Massey says. "You get to know an audience very, very quickly. Within the first five minutes. They become your friends or they become difficult to woo. Sometimes they're never won." Fry, before his first professional engagement—in Alan Bennett's "Forty Years On"—was found by Paul Eddington, one of the show's seasoned stars, peeping through a hole in the curtain at the sea of strangers. "Never look at the enemy," Eddington told him. Performance is, for the actor, a form of battle—as the idioms of theatrical success make clear: "I killed 'em," "I slaughtered 'em," "I knocked 'em dead."

In the 1989 show "Back with a Vengeance!," Barry Humphries, as the "housewife/superstar" Dame Edna Everage, perfectly parsed the role of the audience and the effect that its cruel gaze can have on frightened actors; he also made the audience itself feel the fear. At one point in the show, Dame Edna patrolled the edge of the stage in her high heels and diamanté harlequin glasses, looking for someone from the first six rows "to do nude cartwheels onstage." "And now the mood has completely changed, hasn't it?" she said.

"I don't know what you'd call it. Blind terror, I think, don't you. . . . But don't be nervous. Please . . . Supposing I chose, for argument's sake . . . you! In the third row. Yes. Yes. What is your name?"

"Emma."

"Hello, Emma. Have you done much cartwheel work? We've found audiences prefer an amateur nude cartwheelist, they do. They have a way of falling over which is vulnerable . . . and, well . . . strangely appealing. Don't scratch your eczema, Emma. Because you will not know you're doing these cartwheels, Emma. Do you know why? You'll be in deep shock, Emma. You will. Because whenever we women are very, very frightened, our bodies do a funny thing. . . . Did you know, Emma, that we women have a little wee gland about half the size of a little fingernail tucked in an intimate nook? . . . This gland of ours, Emma, has a duct jointed on to it. . . . And whenever we women have to do something a little, oh, unacceptable or even a little bit yucky, Emma, you know what this funny little gland of ours does? Do you? It squirts. It squirts. And it oozes. And drips. And we black out, Emma. . . . And that'll be you. You will literally not know that you've been tonight's nude-cartwheel girl until you're leaving the theatre and you notice people pointing and laughing at you. And saying things like 'She wasn't a natural blonde, was she?'"

All the central traumas of childhood—being alone, abandoned, unsupported, emotionally abused—are revived for an actor when he appears before the paying customers, who have the power to either starve him of affection or reward him with approval. What the child gets from his mother—rapt focus, adoration, a sense of self—is what the actor needs from the audience. When things are going well, the stage and the house merge and a sort of imaginative union is achieved. The intimacy is palpable on both sides of the footlights; the audience seems to breathe with the actors. "There is brilliant intellectual clarity, a sense of boundless, inexhaustible energy as the chambers of the brain open up," Holm says of a successful performance. "Your whole existence is lit up by a dazzling sense of potential." Fry, explaining why he put himself through the stress of acting, says, "You're trying to recapture the 'first fine, careless rapture.' The first time you felt king of time and space, the first spinning joy of it all."

When the actor cannot make contact and the audience withholds its affection, however, the experience brings back a primal anxiety. "Every time I went onstage, there was that heavy feeling," Fry says. "I felt the audience was not on my side almost from the get-go. . . . It

was a sweaty sense of not being in control . . . constantly behind rather than ahead." He adds, "Everybody else had some transformative magic power that was completely denied me. I had no business being there." Fry blames his attack of stagefright partly on a scene that he had to perform in his underwear. "I was putting on a lot of weight," he says. "I was clearly a middle-aged man with a big gut." The audience, he adds, "sees the shrivelled penis in your head." For Olivier, whose much loved mother died when he was twelve, the audience was, to some degree, his parsimonious father. "My father couldn't see the slightest purpose in my existence," Olivier wrote. "Everything about me irritated him. I was an entirely unnecessary extra burden on the exchequer." In what seemed to be a gesture of preemptive defiance, before a show Olivier used to stand behind the curtain muttering at the audience over and over, "You bastards." Shirley MacLaine, contemplating the unfathomable energy and fierce focus of Frank Sinatra, with whom she worked for a time, came to the conclusion that "it has more to do with remaining a perpetual performing child who wants to please the mother audience." She continued, "He desperately needed her to love him, appreciate him, acknowledge him, and never betray his trust. So he would cajole, manipulate, caress, admonish, scold, and love her unconditionally until there was no difference between him and her."

The parent in the audience who needs to be won over is also, in some cases, a theatre critic. In "Fat Chance," Simon Gray makes it clear that a bad review played a large role in Fry's stagefright. Gray remembers reading Fry's "ambiguous suicide letter" to one of the producer's associates, Peter Wilkins. "Wherever he was going, whether to his untimely end, or into a hospital, or a monastery, or just into hiding," Gray writes, "the letter made it unequivocally clear that (a) he wasn't going to appear in 'Cell Mates' again, indeed was never going to act again, and (b) the reason for this was he believed that he was letting Rik, me and the whole production down." Gray added, "He followed this with a kind of spiteful lampoon on himself—the lumpen, superior 'act' which I inflict on a bored audience every time I open my

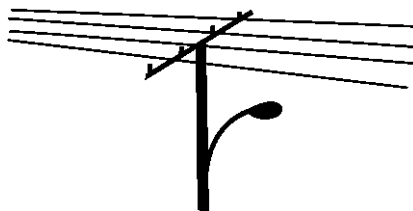
mouth." Gray recalls hearing Wilkins let out "something that sounded like a gasp":

WILKINS: But that's the *Financial Times* review.

ME: What?

WILKINS: Almost word for word. The *Financial Times* review.

Fry, who claimed not to read reviews, had gone out and bought the Sunday papers; if the actor couldn't actually see the judgmental eye of the audience from the stage, the words of the critic were in cold type and impossible to miss. "Fry is the all-time façade: so damnably English on the one hand, and so perplexingly inexpressive on the other," Alastair Macaulay had written in the *Financial Times*. The impact of the review was, Fry says, "phenomenal." He describes the sense of acute self-consciousness and loss of confidence that followed as "stage dread," a sort of "paradigm shift." He says, "It's not 'Look at me—I'm flying.' It's 'Look at me—I might fall.' It would be like playing a game of chess where you're constantly regretting the moves you've already played rather than looking at the ones you're going to play." Fry could not mobilize his defenses; unable to shore himself up, he took himself away. E-mails from his father and from Hugh Laurie, his friend and comedy partner, eventually found Fry in Hamburg and coaxed him to return briefly. By then, he'd seen his name in headlines and pictures of the police clamoring around his family's home in Norfolk. After a stint in America, staying first at John Cleese's Santa Barbara beach house and then at an apartment he'd bought in New York, Fry went back to his London flat in the fall of 1995. Around that time, he was asked to star in the Oscar Wilde bio-pic. "The idea that so much faith was put in me was a big thing," he says. "The film was one of the happiest experiences of my life." Since "the Debauché," as he calls it, Fry has written six books, appeared in several films, including the Academy Award-winning



"Gosford Park," and made a handful of documentaries. He has not, however, returned to the stage.

Stagefright, with its ties to both terror and shame, inspires a powerful desire to hide. "I was always looking for exits, literally looking for ways to escape," the singer and songwriter Carly Simon, who suffers from chronic stagefright, told me. "It felt claustrophobic being in the spotlight and being expected to finish a song. So I left myself the leeway of being able to leave the stage at the end of every song. What I tell myself now is 'If I just get through the song, I'll be able to leave.'" Olivier wrote of his famous performance in "Othello," "I had to beg my Iago, Frank Finlay, not to leave the stage when I had to be left alone for a soliloquy, but to stay in the wings downstage where I could see him, since I feared I might not be able to stay there in front of the audience by myself."

The entertainer's journey through fear is the burden and the blessing of performance; it's what invests the enterprise with bravery, even a kind of nobility. "There was no other treatment than the well-worn practice of wearing *it*—the terror—out," Olivier wrote. The battle takes many strange and creative forms. Some performers drink to give themselves courage; some pop beta-blockers; some meditate or practice various other tension-reducing exercises; some play inspirational videos in their dressing rooms; some, like Charles Rosen, simply see stagefright as an inevitable and appropriate result of a virtuoso's perfectionism. "Stagefright is not merely symbolically but functionally necessary, like the dread of a candidate before an examination or a job interview, both designed essentially as a test of courage," Rosen writes. "Stagefright, like epilepsy, is a divine ailment, a sacred madness. . . . It is a grace that is sufficient in the old Jesuit sense—that is, insufficient by itself but a necessary condition for success."

One of Olivier's ways of coping with stagefright was to ask his fellow-actors not to look him in the eye. "They generously agreed, and managed to look attentively to either side of my face," he wrote, of his performance as Shylock in the National Theatre production of "The Merchant of Venice," in 1970. "For some rea-

son this made me feel that there was not quite so much loaded against me.” Fry had the opposite experience. “If you’re going well, the one thing you hate is being onstage with an actor who won’t look you in the eye,” he says. “If they’re not going to meet your eye, there’s something wrong with them, or they think there’s something wrong with you.”

Sviatoslav Richter, whom Prokofiev thought “the best pianist . . . in the whole world,” coped with his stagefright by turning the lights on the audience and—except for a reading light on his sheet music—off himself. The illusion of invisibility freed Richter and allowed the listener, he said, “to concentrate on the music rather than on the performer.” Some performers, like Carly Simon, on the other hand, choose to have the lights on the audience “because of the empathic reaction.” She says, “When I feel I don’t have the audience, when they’re not warm, I’ll pick out one person, usually in the first four rows, and sing a song directly to that person. He or she will get embarrassed and turn to people on his right or left. Therefore the embarrassment, or the focus I’m putting on him, takes it away from me.”

On tour in 1995, Simon discovered that another way to handle her stagefright was to lie down onstage. “Rock and roll is so good because it accepts so much,” she said. “I had a couch onstage so that I could be languorous. . . . I could ease my way up to the mike. I do it in stages. I’m lying down on the couch, then I put my knees around and I sit up, and then I stand up at the end of the first song.” These days, Simon says, eighty per cent of the time she has beaten her stagefright before she’s vertical. As part of her arsenal of attack, she keeps a hairbrush under the couch cushions so that she can brush her hair during the set, a gesture that helps to calm her palpitations. Simon has found that physical pain often trumps psychological terror. “If you have something that’s hurting you physically, the pain is the hierarchy,” she said. To that end, she has been known to take the stage in tight boots, to jab her hand with clutched safety pins, and even, just before going on, to ask band members to spank her. At a celebration for President Bill Clinton’s fiftieth birthday, at Radio City Music Hall, in 1996, Simon, terri-

THIS MORNING

First I had three
apocalyptic visions, each more terrible than the last.
The graves open, and the sea rises to kill us all.
Then the doorbell rang, and I went downstairs and signed for two packages—
one just an envelope, but the other long and bulky, difficult to manage—
both for my neighbor Gus. “You’re never not at home,”
the FedEx guy said appreciatively.
It’s true. I don’t shave, or even wash. I keep the air-conditioners roaring.

Though it’s summer,
one of the beautiful red-and-conifer-green Bayside Fuel Oil trucks
that bed down in the depot by the canal
was refreshing the subsurface tanks with black draughts
wrung from the rock, blood of the rock
sucked up from the crevices.
The driver looked unconcerned. Leaning slightly on each other,
Frank and Louise stepped over his hose and walked by slowly,
on the way to their cardiologist.

—Vijay Seshadri

fied of following Smokey Robinson, invited the entire horn section to let her have it. “They all took turns spanking me,” she says. “During the last spank the curtain went up. The audience saw the aftermath, the sting on my face. I bet Olivier didn’t do that.”

The acting coach Susan Batson, whose clients include Juliette Binoche, Jennifer Lopez, and Nicole Kidman, advises her students to try to displace the fear onto the role they’re playing, to make it part of the performance, part of what she calls the “previous circumstances” of the character. When one of her actors has stagefright, she says, her response is “Can we use this?” Batson considers stagefright a “civilian issue,” not an artistic one. “If you are a people pleaser”—worried about whether the audience is going to like you—“you’re bound to have stagefright,” she told me. “If you have an issue of not feeling like you’re good enough, you’re bound to have stagefright. The people who survive it are the ones who can take control of the situation and override it.”

Kidman falls into Batson’s “people pleaser” category. “My job with her is to scare her, really terrify her, tell her that she’ll do awful work if she continues that kind of shit,” Batson says. “Then she gets the courage, and she’s O.K.” In the early

nineties, Kidman wanted to audition for the part of the icy Las Vegas hustler Ginger McKenna, opposite Robert De Niro, in Martin Scorsese’s “Casino,” a role for which all the Hollywood swamis said she was wrong. “She worked like a dog to prove that she could do it,” Batson recalled. On the day Kidman went for her audition, according to Batson, “she felt awkward” and “lost it.” Scorsese took her in to meet De Niro, Batson recalled. “She could feel everything just falling apart.” Her legs got wobbly and she felt hives coming on, but she pushed ahead and went straight into a scene that required her to strike her co-star. “All she could think of was ‘Stay in the character’s circumstances.’ She reared back, and she slapped the shit out of De Niro.” Batson added, “They didn’t give her the part”—it went to Sharon Stone—“but they were impressed. That’s literally the artist overcoming the terror. She had no choice. She said, ‘I was gone. The only thing to do was to do the slapping. To get through.’” Courage generates more courage. “Once you go through it and lift it, you feel very, very courageous. It’s a high that you pray everybody has,” Batson said. “I’m always terrified of the person who doesn’t have it, because it means that the commitment is not fully there.” ♦