Rewiring Stage Fright

A Neuroscience and Art Conversation

With Fay Simpson and Marcia Lesser

I am sitting at a faculty meeting at a school that has only just recently hired me. We are discussing the involvement of faculty in school productions. I want to say something that I feel strongly about, but from a viewpoint that I know will meet resistance. My heart pounds so that my ears hear it. I feel the beating in my chest. My palms sweat. Those physical reactions deter me from standing up and speaking. I leave the meeting depressed.

Although we may not always view such experiences that way, they are a form of stage fright. I am fascinated by my complete lack of control over my body's reaction, even though my memory demonstrates that I was aware of the dynamics of the situation. I remember similar experiences from my years of performing—panting backstage before making my entrance.

I decide to seek out my colleague and somatic specialist, Marcia Lesser, to break down the elements of stage fright and to discuss various ways and approaches to helping actors use that state of being to advantage.

Marcia and I sit down and excitedly exchange information. We were like kids comparing notes about our favorite ice cream, but instead of mint chocolate chip, the work of actors and their sympathetic nervous systems is our focus. Both of us are attracted to working in the space where science and artistic processes collaborate. We recognize similar intentions in our work with actors, but see it through different lens and use different terms. My approach is from the Lucid Body process, which focuses on versatility of character embodiment through the analysis of the chakra energy centers. Marcia's work stems from a neurobiological body/mind approach anchored by Somatic Experiencing.

Our common intention is to develop analyses of body and mind experiences as well as to create processes that can free actors from stage fright that plagues and disables them from drawing on their impulses.

I was thrown off guard—and isn't that the nature of attentiveness—when Marcia spoke of the *usefulness* of stage fright. *"When it comes to performing under pressure, being stressed is better than not."**

Marcia*:* Yes, that really surprised me as well. After years of trying to make stage fright disappear, thinking of it as a negative, it turns out that a certain amount of disequilibrium works to the benefit of the actor.

Fay: What helped you realize that?

Marcia: I came across the work of Dr. Kelly McGonigal. She wrote *The Upside of Stress*, which is based on new and exciting studies about the positive effects of stress called the Challenge Response.

Fay: That feels very positive. Let's go back to your view of stage fright in particular.

Marcia: I very often see actors approaching their material mired in their own stress/threat response, blocked from discovering the truth in their characters' circumstances. This response is a biological and psychological reaction, triggered by stimuli in the environment or triggered from within.

Fay: In this case meaning performing or working in front of others. Right? I experienced it trying to talk at a faculty meeting, when the stakes weren't even that high.

Marcia: Yes, in fact the first time we met, when I was speaking at your department, it was high stakes for me. I could have easily been talking about easing the threat response while caught in my own! I was grateful that as a result of my discovery of the Challenge Response, I could actually use the tools I teach and show up, be present, and have fun.

Fay: I had no idea. You killed it. I was so impressed with your engagement.

Marcia. Thanks, that makes me feel good! This kind of stimulus that we both know well, the possible threat of vulnerability/exposure, is immediately accessed by the amygdala, also known as the brain's fire alarm. The amygdala determines whether a stimulus is a threat to our equilibrium. If it is, the information is relayed to the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), which begins the process of preparing us for fight or flight. But if our mobilization is not sufficient or possible, it takes us to dissociation/immobilization/shutdown/freeze. For the brain, it is all about survival.

FAY: And when fight or flight is ignited the adrenal glands are signaled to release adrenaline. I find this fascinating, because basically the body is perceiving a survival-based threat, instead of "I am in a play and about to go on stage."

In the Lucid Body process, fight or flight is described as an exploded or excessive root chakra. Actors are taught to send their energy to the earth when the character is in actual physical danger. The actor's imagination tips off the somatic memory in the actor's body, which then

fires up the adrenalin that prepares the body for the flight or fight that you mentioned.

But in my experience, the actor's body can already be filled with adrenaline due to stage fright or life stress. Before their imagination can give their body a cue, there is a level of stress (unrelated to the play) that is mucking up the works. It is hard for the imagination to work through tensions that existed before the character's given circumstances. It is unsustainable to add tension on top of tension, like painting on top of a painting.

MARCIA: I love that; a painting on top of a painting. The model I use helps me see where a person might be stuck in this process. The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) regulates the function of our organs, such as the lungs, heart, and digestive system, as well as maintaining blood pressure and sexual arousal.

It has two branches that work reciprocally to regulate the ANS: the sympathetic branch, which functions as the gas pedal, preparing us for emotional and physical activity. When necessary, it mobilizes us for threat responses that include fight or flight.

Then there is the parasympathetic branch, which is the brake, helping us to feel settled. If necessary, it takes us to shutdown, immobilization, or freeze. In a regulated or balanced ANS, there is a flow between the two branches: not too excited (sympathetic) and not too dampened (parasympathetic).

FAY: I love that word, regulated. It sounds like being regular or balanced, which for the body is a daily challenge. In my language, when we utilize the chakra centers as the biological centers which receive, assimilate and express energy in response to our environment, we always speak of balance as the actor's personal responsibility. But the training the actors undergo will involve the ability to go to the extremes of emotional and physical human experience. So, in our example of flight or fight adrenal response, that is best initiated from a body that is in fact balanced.

MARCIA: Yes. I agree. When the ANS is in a chronic state of sympathetic activation, it is stuck in fight or flight, and when it is too dampened, it is stuck in immobilization or a freeze. These states prevent us from accessing the deeper, more truthful parts of ourselves, and leave us blocked

emotionally and physically. The actor definitely has to recognize the difference between literal survival, and “I am in a play” reality.

It’s most important to bring mindful awareness to the fact that it’s not a life or death situation, and that the stress they’re experiencing is the body’s natural and helpful physiological response, preparing them for the challenge they’re about to undertake in the play.

FAY: The first of which is to walk on stage. Maybe the physiological stress response of stage fright could be called Alert Attentiveness instead? Or a Call to Action? It seems important to harness the energy inside the stressful circumstances of the character, without actually leading the actor into a stressed body that can’t be released. This is why it behooves an actor to start from a regulated body/mind, which I would call balanced root chakra and balanced third chakra, in order to allow the characters stress response to be activated and then deactivated after the play.

How can stage fright, which is basically the actor’s fear of failure, be used to help their performance? You spoke of the challenge of performance being a place that can be utilized in a positive way.

MARCIA: Definitely stage fright can be a Call to Action. I love finding all the ways our language is different but our concepts and understanding are the same. While you call regulation a balanced root and third center, I consider a person regulated when they are in Social Engagement. This is the regulated physiological state that we inhabit before stress mobilizes us to fight, flight or freeze. When there is a flow between the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches, we are in Social Engagement. We feel safe enough in our environment and willing to reach out for help if needed.

Social Engagement is our most creative, expansive and confident state, when we are connected to our inner selves as well as to the environment. We are playful and our imagination is abundant. Important and helpful hormones are released, including oxytocin, which literally helps us to want to connect to others.

FAY: Social Engagement. Nice way of expressing an easy and confident response to the environment. Grounded but not inflexible, confident but not power-crazed. I call this the Swinging Door, when the biological center can swing either way in response to given circumstances, as opposed to an

excessive or recessive state of being, which causes the disruption of our sensory instincts.

MARCIA: Interesting. Equally important, actually crucial to our sense of well-being and social engagement, is the vagus nerve. This cranial nerve is associated with the parasympathetic branch, and is directly connected to our sense of self and safety. Stephen Porges discusses this in his book *The Polyvagal System*.

The nerve has two branches, dorsal and ventral, which evoke very different physiological and psychological states. The ventral is at work when our environment is deemed to be safe by the ANS. It enlivens our eyes, face, middle ear, larynx, heart and lungs. This is Social Engagement. Because of this flow, we have direct access to excitement and passion as well.

The dorsal vagal is another matter. As soon as a possible threat is detected—and this can come from an inner place (anxiety) or from the environment—our ANS begins to get us ready to mobilize for fight or flight.

If this process continues, actors go into a narrow focus. This leads to contraction of the face and eyes, and even the ears, affecting the lungs and

heart and gut as well. It is the place of overwhelm, when fear, self-judgement and looping thoughts make embodiment impossible.

In my approach, it is imperative to teach actors to use tools that allow them to stay in the early stage of mobilization.

FAY: The dorsal vagus sounds like the place that should not be engaged by the actor's imagination, because it would be really hard to emerge from that.

MARCIA: Yes, or even to recover from. What I find fascinating is that it is precisely those first shifts towards mobilization that can be harnessed for energy, focus and confidence. The adrenaline wakes up our senses, pupils dilate to let in more light, our hearing sharpens, and our mind stops wandering. We are ready. From my perspective, it's crucial to be very familiar and comfortable with Social Engagement, and then, as the actor steps into the circumstance, it is crucial for them to welcome the physiological shifts that begin as the body is getting us ready for an important challenge. This is the Challenge Response, the state in between Social Engagement and a full fight or flight response.

FAY: The Challenge Response seems to be the best way to relish the challenge ahead, and activate the keenness of perception and heightened awareness, rather than dropping into the dorsal vagus nerve, and cutting off that activation.

How do we prevent actors from slipping into that dorsal? The fear of failure is definitely one reason for a shutdown. Another may be the actors lack of confidence that they have the ability to meet the challenge. Sometimes, students come from tense environments, where their abilities to get ahead, to track and hunt, have been stymied. They have no confidence and therefore, their stress shuts down the useful spark that comes from the challenge response.

My conclusion is that (animals as we are) we are ignited into a heightened physical body/mind when a challenge is upon us. We breathe deep. We ground deep. Our eyes blaze with the courage to push forward, if we start with a body that is regulated.

To go back to your first insight: being stressed is better than not. Instead of surrendering to various scenarios or internal forces that may cause flight or fight, we can teach actors how to regulate, socially engage,

ground or project their energy, to activate and engage the body to meet the challenge.

MARCIA: Yes. Below is a step by step approach to help train towards this engagement.

Practical Application to rewire the anxiety caused by Stage Fright:

A few hours before the event or as a daily practice:

1. Bring to mind your protector: a person, fictional hero or animal that makes you feel safe, that has your back.
2. Notice your breath and track the physical sensations of safety. Make sure your feet are flat and your spine is being supported by the floor or a chair.
3. Now imagine you are on your way to the event (audition, or performance) accompanied by your Protector, noticing the feeling of safety that coexists with excitement and nervousness.
4. When you arrive, place your Protector in the exact right spot for you. Maybe in the audience, maybe onstage with you. Proceed to go thru

your speech, your play, your dance, whatever it is, beat by beat. Realize in the midst of your intense involvement, you remain regulated and therefore porous and available.

5. Exit the stage with a feeling of deep satisfaction.
6. Now it is the actual show time. Walk to the theatre with your Protector and have confidence that you will meet the challenge with grace. Take a breath and welcome your physiology getting you ready for this challenge, before entering the stage.

Marcia Lesser SEP, is a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner, a movement therapist, and somatic psychotherapist. She has had a private practice for over 30 years, and is on the Classical Voice and Music Theatre faculty at New York University. She combines her dance and movement background with psychodynamic techniques and the latest neurobiological approaches to engagement, mindfulness, and change.

Fay Simpson is an Associate Arts Professor at NYU's Graduate Acting Program. She founded the Lucid Body Institute which teaches a physical process for actors based on the chakra centers of the body as tools for character development. She is also the Artistic Director of Impact Theatre NYC, whose mission is to apply theatre as a tool for social change and engagement.

Works Cited

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