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## Who is Afraid of the Stage?

### Thoughts on Nervousness and Stage Fright for Magicians (and other performers)

by **Roberto Giobbi**

This essay is intended for all those among us who feel that they are not giving their best in a performance situation because of uncontrollable nervousness. It is also meant for those who do give excellent performances, but would like to feel better *before* they do so.

Curiously, nervousness not only concerns beginning performers, but almost everybody who performs, up to the most seasoned professional.

I can honestly say that in my entire life I've met very few performers who were not nervous in some way before their shows, most notably Juan Tamariz, who keeps amazing me when—about 90 minutes before doing a show in a big theater for 800 people—he says to me: «*Roberto, let's get a bite before the show—I need some energy.*» Then we go to a restaurant and order a three-course meal! I've talked to many professionals about this issue and found that there doesn't seem to be one technique that works for everybody all of the time, but most performers have a personal strategy. I know of famous magicians who had stage fright their entire lives and either stayed with this feeling of malaise, or tried to overcome it with alcohol or drugs. However, in my opinion, none of this is necessary.

Let's explore a few things about nervousness, so-called «stage fright,» and then let me help you find your own personal strategy—that's the ultimate point of this essay.

I remember exactly when I got hold of one of my very first magic books—it was in Italy, and the book written by Padre Ciuró. I must have been about 16 then and into magic for two years or so. In it, he gave some advice to his readers, and among other things he wrote that if you are overly nervous you should think about dropping magic and doing something else. This advice was as bad as the rest of the book. I'm glad I didn't follow it, because in the past 36 years I've been practicing magic as a hobbyist, amateur, and eventually full-time professional (since 1988); magic has given me everything I need—a life, a career, and much more.

Comparatively little has been written on this subject, as you will have noticed if you have investigated the literature, and although I haven't written much about it myself, I've brought this complex subject up in most of my full-day seminars and private lessons. Here are a few thoughts in no particular order:

## **Natural Stress Mechanism**

First of all be aware that our body and mind have been programmed by nature to be able to tap into extra resources whenever we need them. This reminds me of the famous quote, often heard from motivational speakers who want to sell us their ideas by trying to convince us that we can have a more fulfilled life if we buy their products: «We only use 10 percent of our potential.» Well, of course we do, how else? If we used 100 percent of our potential all of the time, we would kill ourselves. We'd be like a stereo system going at all times at full power. Or like a car that constantly goes full speed—in reality, however, you'll drive an average of maybe 30 mph, so you're just using a small percentage of the car's potential, which obviously doesn't mean that you are not able to access the other percentages. Because if you needed to pass another car or react in a dangerous situation, you could tap into its resources at any time and drive faster. I'm using this as an analogy for our human system. There is a natural stress mechanism that was given to our ancestors (and now to us) to survive: whenever something unusual happens, that could endanger us, our body instantly activates dozens of chemical and mental processes that are there to make us run, think, and generally react faster. This complex stress mechanism is also triggered when we perform. Therefore being «nervous» before going on is something nature has given us to be at our best.

Fact: Scientific stress research showed that the two activities that cause most stress are a pilot in a test flight and an actor before he goes on stage. In a way I think that's fantastic to be at the top of the list. Years ago I read a survey where people were asked what they feared most. Very much to my surprise they didn't answer «going to a cemetery at night,» or «walking through a dark alley at night in a foreign city,» which were some of the options given, but «speaking in front of an audience.» So, you see, it is absolutely normal that we should be nervous before performing, as our situation as magical performers implies both realities of the actor and the person who speaks in front of others. Now the big issue is: how to let just enough of the stress mechanisms into our mind and body as to help us deliver an optimum performance, but get rid of those stress factors that keep us from performing at our best. So let's now look at how to avoid an «overreaction» of this stress mechanism we call «stage fright,» which is like an allergy that is also a kind of overreaction of our immune system.

The first insight to be gained from the above is that it is completely natural to be nervous before doing anything extraordinary—and performing is something extraordinary. Once understood, you can start making «nervousness» your ally, your hidden partner that helps you being your best. Begin by giving «nervousness» a new meaning, reframe it as «extra energy» which is necessary to:

- think on your feet if anything goes wrong
- activate your enthusiasm
- project yourself into the audience (I mean this in a figurative sense)
- create strong and permanent rapport during the whole show

The day you don't have this extra energy and you feel the same way performing as you feel in every other moment of life, in my opinion you're dead. In my case as a

professional who works maybe eight shows a month (I mostly do corporate and private shows, occasionally some cultural events as well as intermittent lectures and workshops for magicians), I know that a «show day» feels different than a «regular day» (where I'm studying, practicing, reading, writing, etc.). I look forward to feeling different and I know that I need to feel like that in order to have a successful performance. One state has been permanently linked to the other over many years now, and I can assure you that it feels perfectly okay, even great at times.

As a result of the above, learn to identify how nervousness affects your mind and, most of all, your body. I'm not a doctor, but I've noticed that there are two categories of nervous people, the «stomach type» and the «heart type.» The stomach type will feel «butterflies in the stomach» with more trips to the bathroom than usual. The «heart type» has a heart-beat that speeds up, sweaty palms, and shakes. You will probably recognize yourself as one of these two types.

So let's now look at a few ways of «mastering» nervousness:

## **Practice**

It is my experience that we as magicians simply don't practice and rehearse as much as people in other disciplines, like sports, music, and theater. One major reason for «stage fright» is that we are not sure what we are going to say and do and why we are saying and doing it. This can be radically changed by practicing and rehearsing better, more intelligently, and simply more often and for longer periods. You will see that each time you practice you will improve at least one little thing—make this a conscious habit and goal of each practice and rehearsal session. Find one little thing to improve or to learn every day and after a year has gone by you might be another person.

In order to gain even more self-confidence in what you say and why you say it, I recommend you try writing a script for just one or two of your presentations, learn it, rehearse it, and then go out and do it. You don't need special software to do this, simply write out what you say, that's it. You can make it a bit more professional by using two columns (I use Word's table mode with two columns): on the left write what you do (it is not necessary to go into details), on the right write exactly what you say. Don't be afraid of not sounding spontaneous anymore if you do this. You will soon forget the script and sound as spontaneous as before, however, with the great advantage that now you do it with more poise. By doing this you'll learn a strategy and implement it so it now becomes a tool you can permanently use.

## **Mental Rehearsal or Mind Before Body**

«Stage fright» is purely and exclusively a thing of the mind, although the symptoms will be physical—what you think is what your body will do. In my opinion this means one thing: we have to take responsibility for our situation by the way we understand and do things. When Ascanio, my spiritual father in magic, first talked to me about mental rehearsal, it opened a huge door for me. He suggested books by Charles A. Garfield and Laurence Morehouse to me (details on p. 485 in *Card College Volume 2*). I remember preparing during many months for my FISM acts in 1988 and 1991, especially 1988, by going through my act first and last thing in the day. It worked very well for me and I suggest you try this (you don't need to participate at FISM, of course). You can do this either by sitting or laying comfortably and listening to blues or classical music (or whatever relaxes you) or in any situation in which you don't need to pay close attention to your surroundings (so *don't* do this while driving or operating a machine): mentally go through the performance of one or several tricks and try to imagine the situation as vividly as possible, hearing

yourself talk, feeling the cards in your hands, maybe even smelling whatever you like to smell and above all imagining that you are doing all this in your very best way, relaxed and standing above everything, but also getting the best reaction that still feels natural from your audience (no need to overdo this). Do this a few times and note what it does for you—I'm sure you'll do this often. It really, really works and helps.

## **Think of Our Audience**

Tamariz told me many times about his teacher and idol José Frakson, the world-famous cabaret magician. I met him twice in the Eighties and he always looked to me like a peaceful and very happy person. Frakson would stand behind the curtain, breath slowly in and out, put on a broad smile on his face and think about his audience: «I look very much forward to seeing you, my friends.» When he got older, Tamariz told me, he would think: «You are all my children.» Let's take this a little further: Do you remember an occasion when you were sitting in the audience and a magician—or any other performer or speaker for that matter—went on and was obviously nervous? I'm sure you can quickly remember one. Now remember how you felt? You felt a little bad, didn't you? The nervousness sort of jumped over to you. And you felt sorry for the performer, maybe even a little guilty that he was so nervous because of you and the rest of the audience. Now you wished that he might feel better, wondering why he should be so nervous, because if he wasn't, he could give the best of himself, and you would enjoy it, and he would enjoy it—everything would be much better for everybody. When you go on next time, remember that each and every person in your audience is your friend or will become your friend during the performance and that they all want you to be as good as you really are, and that they want to enjoy the experience together with you. Yes, that's what a performance is, a communion ... the basis of all art and life. You have a passion, magic, you've spend hours, days, weeks, and years of your life studying and practicing magic, you've solved many problems, you've had ideas of your own, well, even though you might be «just a hobbyist» you have dedicated a part of your life, intelligence, and passion to studying what you are about to perform. You are actually sharing a small part of your life and of your inner self with some of your friends or some strangers that will in some sense gain an insight into your life and work. I'm sure you agree when I say: This is a wonderful moment for all involved and you have every reason in the world (and beyond) to do this as well as you can and to feel as good as you can because it's all a great, great pleasure.

## **Insight**

After many years of pondering the issue, I've come to the conclusion that the core problem of why we are afraid of failing has to do with the fact that we take ourselves too seriously. The higher the pedestal on which we put ourselves, the longer it takes to fall and the more it will hurt. But are any of us really that important? I recently went to the funeral of a «very important person.» I thought: «Well, now he's dead like all the other less important people.» When we come to our last moments we're really all the same. And measured with the billions of years the universe and life has existed and will maybe continue to exist, and measured with the tragedies of life—war, famine, torture, rape, cancer, death—millions of people go through every day, what importance would your and my failure in a card trick have? Compared to that it is ridiculous we even worry for an instant about anything, let alone a trivial failure when we are performing. This is so grotesque that it is certainly not worth worrying about, not even for a second. Of course this doesn't mean that one should care less about what he or she does, not at

all. Personally I always try to strive for excellence, try to be the best I can. We might not be able to completely change ourselves, but we can always improve. I am the most important person in life for myself and what I do is important, otherwise I'd rather not do it, but all of this has to be kept in the right perspective, with modesty and humbleness, but with self-confidence, based on acquired knowledge and skill (otherwise it's arrogance). It's not worth worrying about—nobody cares.

And now for some thoughts especially aimed at all beginners or those who don't perform very often among my readership:

Before anything else, let me suggest what not to do: don't take any type of drugs, alcohol, or medication if at all possible. I know of a very famous amateur magician, who was very close to me, who used to take beta blockers before performing. And of another very famous professional magician who worked top night clubs who would drink a few whiskies before going on. If you start any of this, it might work at first. However, after a year you will need two glasses of whisky, and after two years three glasses, and so on. This is a cheap solution and therefore is not a solution. There are other and nobler ways to win over yourself. Let's look at some of them:

### **Start Small**

Even the longest journey starts with the first step, doesn't it? Start by performing for one or two spectators before going on to a larger group—do this for the next few months. When you have a successful experience, put it in your memory bank, if you have a less good experience, analyze why it was so, think about how to do it better next time, practice a bit more, then forget the bad experience and replace it with the next good experience that is certain to come. I remember it took me years before I had the confidence to perform in a parlor or even stage situation. Meanwhile, now I (almost) prefer a show on stage than doing close-up! So be aware that it will take time, but that you are going to enjoy that time enormously, and you will grow humanly and artistically—and it works.

### **Personal Motivation**

Many of you have probably been interested in magic for a few years, purely as a hobbyist, performing for your own amusement, and would now like to do more performing. Great! Keep this inherent enthusiasm in mind before you go on and as you perform, at least at the beginning of the performance, because you'll see that once you start, most issues related to «nervousness» will take care of themselves. Become aware of why you're doing magic. Dare to ask the questions and find honest answers to them—and don't be afraid of the truth (most of us do it for similar reasons). Why is it that you do magic? What do you expect magic to do for you? If you do this—it might take days and weeks to find the answer, that's perfectly fine—you're ahead of most that have never bothered asking this question. And you'll find that it will give you more peace of mind when you perform, because now you know the reasons (or at least some of them), why you practice and perform magic and this will make you stand above the game.

### **Don't Compete With Others**

Don't compare yourself to others. Study the subject of magic as well as you can, understand why you are doing and saying this and that, then do it. Afterward look at your performance, keep the good things, improve the rest, and next time you perform you're going to be better. Try to be just a little bit better than last time, add or eliminate a little thing, and before you know it, you've traveled the road to personal excellence and success.

## A Few Techniques

- Breathing in and out slowly and listening to your breath is, since time immemorial, considered to be one of the simplest and best ways of mastering stage fright. Inhale slowly through your nose counting to ten. Hold your breath counting to three. Now don't forget to exhale through your mouth ... slowly counting again to ten. Repeat several times. You can adapt this to your own rhythm, of course.
- Find a set of simple vocal exercises to go through, such as Ammmmm, Emmmm, Immmm, Ommmmm, Ummmmm, sort of humming the vowels A, E, I, O, U for about 10 seconds each as you slowly breath out. You'll find that the vibrations caused by the humming will calm you almost instantly. It is assumed that the purring of a cat has the same function (for the cat).
- If you are the dynamic type who can't sit still before a show, simply walk around. That's what I do and it is perfectly okay and works. I walk miles (well, it seems like miles) before a show. If you have a little time before your show and the environment allows it, go for a short walk and run through the performance mentally (see mental training above).
- You can make the above ideas—and more if you like—into a short routine that could become your ritual before performing, either during the day or shortly before going on. Each success will encourage your mind to associate the ritual with it, so that by starting the ritual you automatically trigger your «success mode.»
- Try out specific things like Autogenetic Training, Yoga, Tai-Chi, etc. Personally I've tried all of this plus Transcendental Meditation, Self-Hypnosis, NLP, Transactional Analysis, and many more. I've never made a religion out of any of these ideas and techniques, but have used the information and insight gained to build a tool box and I'm the sole craftsman, responsible for how I'm going to use it—I suggest you look at it this way.
- I'll give you one last technique, and if you try it, it'll work wonders for you—I use this all the time. They call it the Circle of Excellence and it was the best thing I learned in a course of Syntonic Reading, a sort of esoteric speed-reading (that doesn't work for me). You'll need about five minutes in which you don't want to be disturbed. Silence or music you like is okay. Draw a large imaginary circle on the floor, big enough that you can stand in it. Now stand upright next to the circle. Close your eyes and think of a situation in your life where you've been at your best, where you've surpassed yourself and did everything right. We all have such moments. Start to vividly imagine the scene, hear, smell, feel, and involve all your senses. It might take 15 seconds or a minute or two, don't worry. At the moment you feel the situation is at its peak, step into the Circle of Excellence, keep the feeling and immediately perform a discrete gesture, such as forming your right hand into a fist and turning it 90 degrees clockwise, or anything else. You can also pronounce a specific word in your mind at the same time you do the gesture (this will become your «mantra»). This will associate the gesture and the word with the feeling of accomplishment and success. Stand in the circle as long as the feeling lasts. When you sense the feeling is diminishing, step out of the circle. You've done it. Next time you need access to this resource, take an imperceptible step aside (making sure you don't fall down the stairs or into a hole), repeat your gesture and mantra and you'll feel the power you've anchored in the initial exercise will come back to you. Don't laugh, do it.

**Out:** Have a «disaster script» for your tricks. What can go wrong and what do you do in such a situation? That's a huge help in mastering stage fright, believe me. And here's the ultimate out if you tremble during the performance of a trick. Simply say: «Don't worry about my trembling, that's part of the trick—I've practiced it in winter.» This will create a guaranteed laugh that will sooth you and instantly stop your trembling.

## Books

I recommend you read one or two books on the subject, for example:

- Gallwey, Timothy, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, ISBN 0-553-27372-8.
- Millman, Dan, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, ISBN 0-915811-00-6.

But also:

- Gelb, Michael, *Present Yourself*, ISBN 0-915190-51-6

You can find more book suggestions in *Card College Volume 2*, in the theory section, where I recommend books after each theory essay. Nowadays you can navigate the internet and will quickly find other interesting texts when you search on the terms «stage fright,» «nervousness,» etc.

And even if all of this should fail, which I doubt very much, you can keep magic as (in my opinion) the most complex and wonderful hobby there is, just studying and practicing magic for yourself, as thousands of other people in this world are doing, without the pressure of ever performing except on a few occasions for friends or for other fellow magicians who feel like you. As an amateur you don't need to perform, and just this very thought and feeling will free you of your nervous luggage right now.

I'm confident that this has been of some help to you and I predict that your next performance will be a better experience for you and your audience just as you finish reading these words.

This essay was inspired by an answer to a question by John Holt at *Ask Roberto*, a very unusual virtual publication that has stopped after 52 questions and 52 exhaustive answers. You can acquire the e-book ([www.robortogiobbi.com/site/product/ask-roborto-e-bookpdf/](http://www.robortogiobbi.com/site/product/ask-roborto-e-bookpdf/)) or the printed book ([www.robortogiobbi.com/site/product/ask-roborto-the-printed-book/](http://www.robortogiobbi.com/site/product/ask-roborto-the-printed-book/)) directly from me, or from your favorite dealer, or from the publisher lybrary.com ([www.lybrary.com/ask-roborto-giobbi-p-11669.html](http://www.lybrary.com/ask-roborto-giobbi-p-11669.html)).

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