

# Stage Fright

By Nikki Meredith

Although most of his public was not aware of it, cellist Pablo Casals suffered stage fright before every performance until he died at the age of 97. In his earlier years, his fear was not well disguised: at the beginning of one concert in Europe he shook so violently that the bow flew out of his hand into the audience. "The rest of the performance was first class," his longtime friend Margaret Avery Rowell told the *Sun* recently. "He had nothing left to fear — the worst had happened."

More than 80 percent of the general population is afflicted with this dreadful apprehension at one time or another. It can strike anyone — the parent who stands to speak at a PTA meeting is as vulnerable as the executive about to make his annual report to the board of directors. While some people experience only mild butterflies, others have such severe anxiety that they forego any sort of public speaking, even to the detriment of their careers. For this story the *Sun* talked to a variety of experts on the subject, from the performers who suffer with stage fright to the psychologists who treat them for it.

People who appear before the public only occasionally may assume that professionals are immune from stage fright, but seasoned performers are actually *more* affected. Pianist Arthur Rubinstein, who suffered terribly before performances, once called it "the price I pay for a wonderful life"; and in his autobiography, Sir Laurence Olivier referred to it as "a much-dreaded terror" and said he believed it to be punishment for his "overblown claim to pride"; actress Cornelia Otis Skinner, who was afflicted with agonizing bouts of stage fright, lived in fear that she might one day "suddenly go mad and goose the leading man. . . ."

**PERFORMERS SAY THAT** when it strikes, the dread goes far beyond a simple fear of being embarrassed; their very survival seems to be on the line. "The circumstances change but the feeling never changes," says San Francisco actress Nellie Cravens. "It's exactly the same sensation you had in the third-grade play. Once again you are like a small child, helpless, inadequate, feeling as though you are unable to deal with the world."

Stage fright is a primitive, instinctive response to a complex social phenomenon and the combination can be paralyzing. The fear of the audience activates the flight-or-fight mechanism which originates from the most primitive part of our brain. As that "reptilian brain" prepares our body either to escape from the danger or to strike, the cerebral cortex — the seat of speech, logic and reasoning — is trying desperately to repress this process so that the show can go on. In the most extreme cases of stage fright, the cerebral cortex loses the battle.

But *why* does the anticipation of a public performance elicit so much fear? Volumes have been compiled on the subject, but most experts agree that we will have more to learn. "The last word has not been written on this very vexing problem," says Dr. Emil Pascarelli, medical director of the Kathryn and Gilbert Miller Health Care Institute for Performing Artists in New York. "What we do know is that it is very complex."

Puerto Rico News Service



Pablo Casals once had it so badly that the bow flew out of his trembling hand and into the audience.

Like stage fright, the related problem of shyness involves a degree of social self-consciousness, but shyness affects only 40 percent of the population. "Shyness can be a *cause* of stage fright," says Wellesley College psychologist Jonathon Cheek, "but there are many people who suffer from stage fright who are not shy, and there are very shy people who do very well performing." He points out that Johnny Carson is quite shy socially but has no trouble performing because then he is in complete control. "Shy people have trouble with a back-and-forth exchange whereas audience anxiety is stimulated by a one-way social process."

For novices, this one-way communication is frightening because they have so little experience with it, but according to University of Texas psychologist Arnold Buss, author of *Self-Consciousness and Social Anxiety* (W.H. Freeman and Company, 1980), is the experience of being publicly evaluated and the fear of failure that is the most troubling for amateurs and professionals alike. "As a species we are very social," says Buss. "Failure in front of the group is much worse than private failure."

This is why the intensity of stage fright sometimes increases for experienced performers — although

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they do learn to manage it better. "For professional performers it can be much worse," says Buss. "In a sense, professional performers are always on edge — they have the competitive aspects to deal with."

Mill Valley rock musician John Cipollina, formerly with the Quicksilver Messenger Service and now playing with groups such as The Dinosaurs and Terry and the Pirates, says stage fright is unpredictable. "It can happen when you least expect it. One day you walk out on stage and all of a sudden it's there. Maybe it's because there's a music critic in the audience who hasn't been favorable, or you're having tuning problems with your instrument."

Cipollina says he was unexpectedly afflicted one



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day during a recording session when Michael Bloomfield stopped by to say hello. "He came in, sat down and said, 'Hi John, give 'em hell.' It wasn't anything he did — he was just one of the boys — but knowing he was there made me extremely nervous. My admiration for him got out of hand, and I clammed up."

Professional performers not only worry about judgment from others, they are pressured by their own standards, which get higher as they get more



For Sir Laurence Olivier, it has been "a much-dreaded terror."

successful. "Musicians who pass through an audition procedure for a major symphony are so good that their artistic output has to be outstanding," says Deborah Borda, manager of the San Francisco Symphony. "But their own standards are also very high. What may seem like an acceptable performance to the audience may not be acceptable to them."

ALTHOUGH MOST PERFORMERS admit that they've experienced anxiety, not all are affected



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equally. Veteran cello teacher Margaret Avery Rowell says that through the years she has seen great variation in her students with respect to stage fright, and it is not necessarily related to competence. "Some of them don't have it at all — they seem to have some kind of inner confidence — and some of the very good ones suffer a great deal. It almost seems to be in the genes."

Buss says that indeed there is evidence that stage fright is inherited. "What is involved here is fear, and the tendency to get scared is inherited. It's not as direct as eye color, but more like body build. Just as you can get fatter or skinnier with your 'inherited' body type, life experience can alter your fearful tendencies."

According to Pascarelli, whose New York clinic treats performers afflicted with chronic stage fright,

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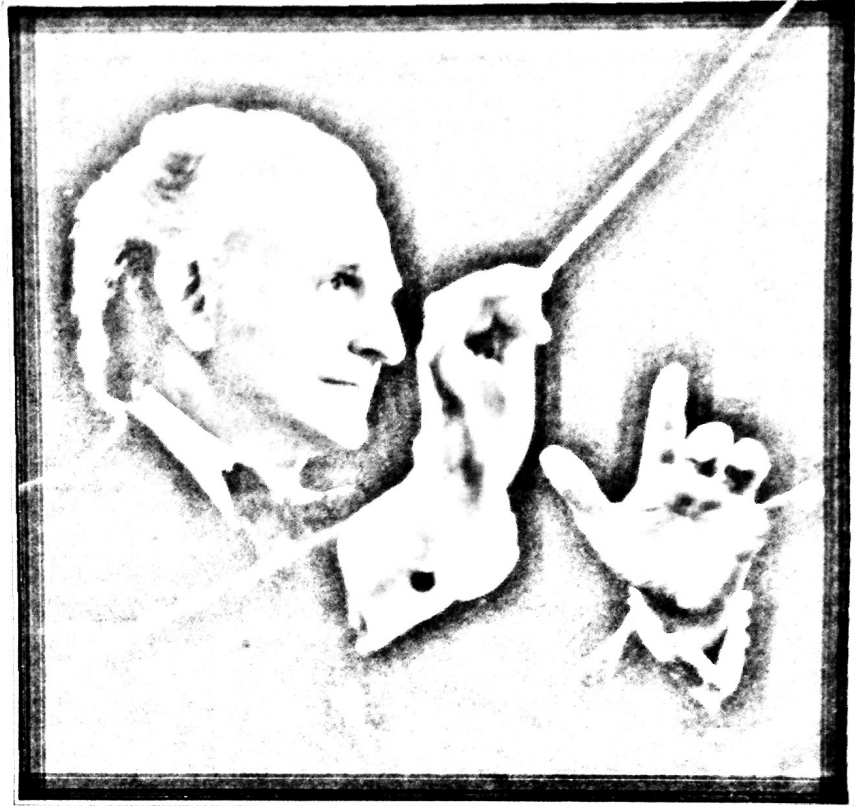
a single bad experience can become a trigger. "It can be a negative contact with a teacher, a bad experience at the conservatory, or an unfortunate performance." He says one patient treated at their clinic dated the beginning of her fear to the time a professor stopped a rehearsal, wagged a finger at her and vociferously denounced some aspect of her performance.

"The European style was to teach that making a mistake was a sin, and some of us never got over it," says Hugo Rinaldi, music director of the Marin Opera. "If you are already nervous, a disciplinarian will just make you more nervous."

Rinaldi says the days of "dictatorships" are, for the most part, over, and modern-thinking conductors are much more sensitive to their musicians. "Conductors now know better than to say, in front of everyone, 'Would you mind, for once, playing that passage correctly?' They now must be psychologists and father confessors as well as musical leaders."

Sometimes, though, the "trigger" for anxiety is not directly related to performing. Dr. George Fuller-Von Bozzay, director of the Biofeedback Institute of San Francisco, says other problems in a performer's life can result in audience anxiety — probably, he speculates, because it is an area of such vulnerability. One pianist he treated suffered such severe grief over her father's death that she was unable to perform at all. "Her fingers seized up as if she had palsy and she was so flooded with anxiety she had to cancel her appearances. For another patient, an opera singer, getting a divorce shook her confidence in herself so much it dramatically affected her performance."

People who suffer extreme stage fright, can develop a full blown phobia which prevents them from going near a stage. Dr. Jewell Price, a psychol-



Hugo Rinaldi, music director of the Marin Opera, says a conductor who publicly scolds his musicians only makes it worse.

ogist at the San Antonio Phobia Clinic, says she is currently treating an actress who, after having an acute anxiety attack during a performance, became increasingly fearful of "losing it" during subsequent

performances. "In her state of alarm, she threw up before plays, forgot lines, and knocked things over on stage. Finally, she was so overwhelmed by fear she just wouldn't go back."

While stage fright doesn't usually prove debilitating, some performers say they often feel that they're on the brink of losing control. Generally, however, their outward appearance doesn't reveal the anxiety. "Professionals learn how to control their movements so that the fear is completely inside," says Margaret Rowell.

Actress Nellie Cravens says actors help each other out when someone is obviously having difficulty on stage: "Sometimes physical contact — like a tap on the shoulder — will help 'ground' someone who looks like he's going to fly out the window."

Although amateurs can get nervous weeks and even months before a scheduled appearance, professionals usually experience the most intense anxiety just before they are to go on. The S.F. Symphony's Borda says musicians in the orchestra manage this anxiety in various ways. "Some sit quietly in the darkness, some chat, some go over their parts again and again and again. Claudio Arrau won't touch a piano before a concert, while Alicia de Larrocha practices other concertos — not the one she will play — right up until performance time."

**IN HIS BOOK, *Stage Fright*** (University of Chicago Press, 1986), Stephen Aaron, writes that some actors begin to get frightened as soon as the audience starts coming into the auditorium: "Most theaters now have an intercom system in each dressing room and in most of the backstage areas so that the actor can hear the members of the audience as they begin to take their places in the house. . . . Up to this point, it is not uncommon for frightened actors to try to comfort themselves with the thought that, for one reason or another, the audience actually will not show up that night."

This fear intensifies during the five-minute call, according to Aaron. "While the body is saying 'flight' the stage manager is saying 'places please' and the limbo can be agonizing."

Most actors deal with this wait by immersing them-

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selves in the role, says Cravens. "You work out the time of day it is, what you've been doing, what you will do. That concentration helps . . . because the minute you concentrate on something outside yourself, the fear dissipates.

"The worst time for me was in a play where I was an understudy," she continues. "The leading lady lost her voice and I had to go on after only one rehearsal. I remember standing there waiting to go on stage and I saw the back door. Until I actually walked in front of the audience, I didn't know which I would do: go on stage or bolt out the back door and forget about it."

Cravens says that stage fright has spawned a multitude of superstitions in the theater. These include: never peek out between the curtains to look at the audience; never whistle; never touch a peacock feather

structive ways to allay stage fright. Aaron writes about a famous New York actor who couldn't find "the pitch of the house" one night, so he consumed half a bottle of gin before curtain time. A colleague said that "it killed his stage fright and his acting at the same time."

In a 1979 story in the *Rocky Mountain Medical Journal*, Dr. Charles Brantigan reported that over 50 percent of all musicians consume tranquilizers or alcohol to combat performance anxiety. In recent years some performers have turned to yet another drug, the beta blocker Inderal, usually prescribed for hypertension, which is said to reduce anxiety without affecting performance.

Dr. Pascarelli says this drug has now gone "underground" among performers, a fact that concerns him because Inderal can have negative side effects. "We discourage the use of beta blockers indiscriminately," he says, "but intermittent use is not overly harmful."

Other remedies for stage fright include hypnosis, desensitization, relaxation and individual and group psychotherapy. Pascarelli says his clinic has found

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on stage; never say "good luck" because that translates to *bad* luck — hence "break a leg"; and never mention by name that Shakespeare play about a Scottish King. (She thinks this last one may have to do with all of the mishaps historically associated with the play, including actors getting killed on stage. If, accidentally, you do mention Macbeth by name, there are rituals you must go through to "undo" it, like running outside, twirling three times and spitting.)

Indulging in superstition is one of the more con-

group therapy particularly helpful because it diminishes the "I am all alone" aspect of audience anxiety.

Philip Fath, former first clarinetist with the San Francisco Symphony, is suspicious of some of the touted remedies. "Not everything can be fixed, cured or done away with," he says. "Anxiety is normal, it's natural and it's horrible. It's too bad, it's unpleasant, but one has to learn to deal with it. George Szell, the former conductor of the Cleveland orchestra, said the only antidote to anxiety is to deal with the text.



Actress Nellie Cravens says it makes her feel "helpless and inadequate."

Listen to the music and the nervousness will go away. If you think about yourself, you're finished." Fath adds that with experience, you usually learn to manage the anxiety better — if not, it may be time to look for a different occupation.

Most performers also say that as awful as it is, a measure of stage fright is essential to good performing. "The adrenalin that fuels stage fright also fuels first class performances," says Susan Rabin, a Marin actress and speech coach. "The voice reaches highs it cannot otherwise reach, extra muscle strength is available, we are more alert. That's why performances are never as good at rehearsals. The people who kick back and are completely relaxed are no good."

John Cipollina agrees. "Stage fright keeps you paying attention. It's nature's way of preventing us from being stupid all the time. What a world it would be if there was no stage fright."

