Not scaring yourself silly: Effectively managing your stage fright

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It is the moment you have been looking forward to for weeks with equal amounts of dread and excitement. Your preparation has gone well, but you wonder if you have done everything you can to be ready and are concerned you will make a mistake. As you wait backstage, you hear the audience taking their seats and the eager buzz of anticipation. Your fellow dancers are going through their last minute preparations and the nervous tension is building around you. Standing in your costume, you worry that your body is responding in the usual ways: your heart is beating faster and faster, butterflies in your stomach, sweat forming on your brow, and your muscles tightening in anticipation. Your worries turn to fear as the signal comes for you to move into position.

Does this situation sound familiar? If so, you are not alone. Many dancers suffer from stage fright, with anxiety and nervousness hampering their ability to perform at their best. There are two major factors. First, there is a mental component, consisting of worries and concerns about your dancing. Second, there is a physical component which is your body reacting to the importance of the situation.

Dancers will usually feel both types of symptoms in the days and hours leading up to an important occasion. However, once the music begins and the spotlight descends, these symptoms will often disappear. You, the dancer, will settle into your well-rehearsed routine. On these occasions, you’ll view your nerves as a sign of readiness, necessary for you to perform at your best. Indeed, being able to control your nerves and use them to your advantage is an important part of becoming a dancer.

You will not always be able to control your nerves, however. Instead, the symptoms may spiral out of control, leading you to become distracted, lose timing, and make mistakes. In extreme situations, you may even freeze and be unable to perform.

Rather than let nerves get the better of you, it is possible to learn to manage them. Dancers often access mental strategies, such as imagery, to help learn new steps and rehearse their roles. You can also use these strategies to increase your confidence and control your thoughts and feelings.
So, what is imagery? Also known as visualisation, it involves using all of your senses to experience or re-experience situations in your mind and body without actually experiencing the real thing. The best way to understand imagery is to use it yourself. Take a moment to try this exercise:

Think back to a time when you danced really well. Try to recall it now, vividly, in your mind. You might find it helpful to close your eyes as you do this. Think about what you were doing in this situation. How did it look? How did it feel? How did it sound? What other details do you remember?

As you prepare for upcoming performances, you might find it helpful to store and use this image. By experiencing past success, you will feel more confident and find it easier to control your nerves. As well as this technique, other types of images will boost your confidence and help you stay focused when it matters most.

- Feeling ready and prepared from working hard in classes and rehearsals.
- Previewing the upcoming performance going exactly as planned.
- Handling unexpected or tough situations well by staying positive and focused.
- The warm and appreciative reception of the audience to your performance.
- Being congratulated and receiving positive feedback from important people in your life.

The key is to find images that work best for you. Try to make your images vivid, clear, and include helpful thoughts and feelings. Just like your physical skills and technique, the more you practise your imagery, the better you will get at using it. You might find it helpful to write an imagery script – a description that aids your imagination – to read or hear whenever or wherever you like. To give you an idea of how an imagery script might look, the scenario described at the beginning of the article has been reworded to encourage a more positive approach to handling the moments before stepping onto the stage:

\[It\text{ is the moment you have been looking forward to for weeks. You are excited. Your preparation has gone well and you have done everything you can to be ready. As you wait backstage, you hear the audience taking their seats and the eager buzz of anticipation fills the theatre. Your fellow dancers are going through their last minute preparations. You feel the nervous tension build around you, and recognise it as a normal and necessary part of performance. Standing in your costume, you feel your body responding in ways that help you feel motivated and geared up to perform: your heart is beating strongly, your body warm and supple, your muscles powerful and under control. You are confident and focused as you move into position.}\]

Regardless of whether it is helping you cope with stage fright, memorise a new dance sequence, understand a role, or recover from injury, conjuring simple, positive mental images can help you achieve your goals and improve your performance. **Now get imaging!**