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**Transitions and transcendence of the self:
stage fright and the paradox of shy performativity**

Susie Scott

Abstract

This article explores the paradox of shy performativity, whereby people who identify as shy in everyday life can nevertheless give confident displays on stage. Professional performing artists' accounts reveal that this is both enabled and complicated by transformations in consciousness concerning the Meadian social self. While taking on a fictional persona can provide liberating opportunities for the transcendent subject 'I', the critically self-doubting 'Me' reappears at certain moments, such as stage fright, transitions in and out of character, and disruptions of a scene's dramatic frame. Managing the shifting boundaries between contrivance and reality creates ontological dangers, the brave pursuit of which presents a thrilling challenge for the shy performer. Symbolic Interactionist and dramaturgical theories are therefore applied alongside concepts of edgework and flow to analyse shy performance art as voluntary risk-taking action.

Keywords: identity, performance, self, shyness, stage fright

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Introduction

With its emphasis on frontstage visibility and audience scrutiny, performance art is ostensibly the anathema of shyness. Striding onto stage, demanding the limelight and being the centre of attention must surely be a shy person's worst nightmare. Yet a curious paradox inspiring this piece is that confidence on stage and shyness in everyday life might be compatible. Some self-defined 'shy' people report a love of performing arts (Scott, 2007), while many famous actors, musicians and comedians who seem like flamboyant, exhibitionist characters, confess to feeling painfully shy in 'real life'. The list of self-proclaimed 'shy celebrities' includes Michael Stipe, Ella Fitzgerald, Kirsty MacColl, David Jason, Robbie Williams, Tom Cruise, Daniel Day Lewis, Victoria Wood, Robert Smith and Tracey Thorn. This resonates with Zimbardo's (1977) notion of the 'shy extrovert' or Pilkonis's (1976) 'privately shy' individual, who appear socially gregarious in public situations but become uncomfortable in intimate encounters.

Shy performativity is a term I introduce to describe this juxtaposition of public confidence and private reticence, which results in a complex love-hate relationship with social (in)visibility. Shyness differs from introversion, a contentment to be quietly alone, for it involves frustrated sociability (Scott, 2007) – an ambivalent longing to be 'where the action is' (Goffman 1967). The struggle to be seen and need for audience validation vie with anticipated negative evaluation. Simmel (1908) pointed to the delicate balance to be struck between proximity and distance, trust and secrecy, knowing others while protecting oneself from being known.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social life as theatre assumes a double hermeneutic here, being both literally and metaphorically applicable. Performance art crystallises, accentuates and magnifies the dilemmas routinely faced by the shy self, its stark contrivance bringing their mundane features into sharper focus. Hyperbole, caricature and parody most vividly convey the intricacies of micro-social action: (performance) art imitates (everyday) life. Thus this article examines processes of dramaturgical risk-taking in the theatrical realm as an exaggerated reflection of the quotidian. Using Symbolic Interactionist theories of the social self, I explore the ontological transformations actors make as they move on- and off-stage, in and out of character.

Firstly, I unpack the paradox of shy performativity, asking how those who experience everyday shyness manage to give contradictory displays on stage, and what motivates them to do so. Live performance can be understood as voluntary risk-taking action that involves edgework (Lyng, 1990) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Following Hardie-Bick (2015), I suggest these existential processes involve a similar transcendent consciousness. The social self splits into its constituent parts of 'I' and 'Me' (Mead 1934), the latter disappearing and the former taking over. Role immersion occurs when the Shy 'Me' internal critic recedes and the actor becomes lost in their character.

Secondly, I show how moments of self-consciousness disrupt this transcendent potential, jolting the actor into a sudden reflexive awareness of their 'real' self as a symbolic object. Through this jarring juxtaposition of person and persona, the self-doubting 'Me' reappears at critical moments throughout the performative process: beforehand, in the anticipatory state of stage fright and transitions into character; during, in alienating feelings of self-detachment; and afterwards, when leaving the theatre and re-entering the quotidian realm. In these liminal moments, the actor detaches from and evaluates their character. Both the

ecstatic thrill of the 'performing high' and the nauseating terror of stage fright are states of reflexive consciousness that can only occur in moments outside the dramatic process, not during its unconscious flow. For 'shy' actors, this raises interesting questions about where they consider their 'true' self to reside, and how performance - paradoxically - holds meanings of authentic self-expression.

Theatricality, risk and self-transcendence

The changes in self-consciousness engendered by performance art make it a dramaturgically risky or 'fateful' (Goffman, 1967) undertaking. Symbolic Interactionism and dramaturgy retain the notion of a core, authentic 'real self' who designs its social action: the player or person concealed behind the persona (Waskul and Lust, 2004). Theatricality, however, demands a process of splitting, fragmentation and merciless self-reflection, which leaves this inner subject vulnerably exposed. As Laing (1960) argued, the phenomenology of the 'divided self' creates fundamental dilemmas of existential (in)security. While physically safe, performance art is ontologically dangerous, playing with the boundaries between contrivance and reality (Goffman, 1959). This raises the question of what happens to the social self during dramaturgical risk-taking, and what is its appeal?

Studies of voluntary risk-taking activities, such as recreational drug use (Reith, 2005), sadomasochism (Newmahr, 2011) and skydiving (Hardie-Bick, 2005), emphasise their positive subjective meanings. Adherents describe shifting into an altered state of consciousness and transcending their 'ordinary' selves, the activities serving as 'escape attempts' from everyday life (Cohen and Taylor, 1995). Euphoric emotional experiences accompany this, through excitement, thrill and intense pleasure (Katz, 1988). While this may come from an activity's social deviance and normative transgression (Lippens, 2009), more poignant and fateful challenges arise from tinkering with the dramaturgical boundaries of the self. As Goffman (1961) argued, motives of fun, risk and thrill pervade social action, from the mundane to the remarkable.

The concept of edgework (Lyng, 1990) refers to activities designed to test the limits of human endurance and survival. Extreme sports, such as skydiving and mountaineering, plunge participants into intensely challenging and stressful conditions demanding high levels of skill. Surviving this results in feelings of triumph, joy and a heightened sense of self: participants describe feeling 'pure', 'alive', and hyper-real, experiencing self-mastery and self-determination. Risk is sought out as an end in itself, the fine line between thrill and danger holding an enticing appeal.

Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) theory of 'flow' presents a less dramatic interpretation. He describes a state of deep immersion and involvement in an activity, resulting from intense focus and concentration and a narrowed perceptual field. The actor performs without self-consciousness, losing track of time and other mundane concerns, no longer observers but only participants in their own action. The self operates automatically, without any reflexive understanding of its own mechanical processes. Unlike Lyng, Csikszentmihalyi argues for the calm and rational assessment of danger and the minimisation of risk: activities are chosen proportionately to one's level of skill, and involve careful planning. Practitioners strike a balance between boredom and fear – dabbling with danger, but with the aim of taming it. Thus athletes and musicians practise diligently, surgeons train for years, and skydivers learn how to execute safety manoeuvres (Hardie-Bick, 2005).

Despite their ostensible differences, Hardie-Bick (2015) suggests these two theories have much in common. Drawing on Mead's (1934) theory of the dialogic social self, he shows how both edgework and flow allow the impulsive, subjective agent ('I') to rise to prominence, while the reflective, objectified image of oneself ('Me') disappears below the threshold of consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Following Sartre (1936), Hardie-Bick describes this moment as 'transcendence of the ego' or 'annihilation of the self': a state of 'non-thetic consciousness' in which the unreflexive 'I' has no awareness of itself as an object ('Me'). While practitioners report a heightened sense of self and strongly autonomous control, Hardie-Bick points out that these are always retrospective interpretations, cited *after* the event, when the 'Me' returns to consciousness. I would add that similar moments of self-consciousness can occur *before* and *during* the activity, as well as in the liminal phases of transition in between.

Theatricality allows a decoupling of 'I' and 'Me', creating the potential to experience flow and practise edgework. Schechner (2002: 2) defines performance as "*any action that is framed, presented, highlighted or displayed*" through the conscious enactment of something separate from the self: typically a role or stage persona. This alter ego breaks into the closed loop of I-Me, transgressing its ontological boundaries. Hayman (1969) suggests that actors can stand either 'inside' or 'outside' of their characters, the former implying a blurring of person and persona, and the latter a more self-conscious detachment. He makes a similar distinction between 'finding the role in oneself' (identifying with a character through personal experience) and 'finding oneself in a role' (feeling uncomfortably aware of its difference or unfamiliarity). Hodgson and Richards (1966), likewise, contrast 'losing oneself' with 'using oneself' in a performance. Actors may purposely train in these techniques: Stanislavski's immersive Method or Brecht's 'alienation effect', respectively. However, transitions in and out of character can also happen unintentionally, throughout the course of a performance, generating changes in self-consciousness and phenomenological experience.

Methods

The data discussed below come from a small-scale, qualitative study, involving semi-structured interviews with ten performing artists: seven British, two Canadian and one Swedish. These included two theatre actors (male), one television actor (male), one singer and ballet dancer (female), one drag king (transgender), two musicians (both male singer-songwriters and band frontmen), two stand-up comedians (one female, one male) and one spoken word poet and teacher (female). Most were white, middle class and aged between 20-45, though one was 82 and another was mixed race. All performed professionally, six in full-time careers and four fitting the work around other 'day jobs'. This was unanimously viewed as a passionate vocation, and financial rewards were not mentioned as a motivation.

The participants were volunteers, recruited via local advertisements, professional agents and personal contacts. I briefed them that the study was about the relationship between stage fright and everyday shyness, inviting responses from anyone who experienced both and had a story to tell. The sample was therefore not systematic and demographically balanced, nor necessarily representative; its limited size was due to the project being unfunded and conducted in my free time.

I conducted and transcribed the interviews, and analysed the data thematically, using the software program Atlas.ti. My coding scheme was theoretically informed by Symbolic Interactionism, focusing on concepts of selfhood, identity and dramaturgical performativity.

Differences of gender, ethnicity, age and class were considered but did not emerge from the data, possibly due to the sample's size and demographic bias.

Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face: in a coffee shop, university office, or the participant's home. These took the form of semi-structured 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984: 102), guided by a schedule of broad topics that could be covered in any order and with flexibility over question wording (Bryman, 2012). I asked participants about their experiences of everyday shyness, decisions to enter the performing arts, experiences of stage fright, reflections on their onstage roles, personae or characters, and the degree of similarity between these and their 'real', offstage selves.

Sharing my own experiences of shyness, I tried to build rapport and create a non-hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Oakley, 1981; Scott, 2004), making the situation a collaborative venture (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Inevitably, the stories told were co-constructed narratives (Brannen, 2013), emerging through the interview as a situated social encounter (Denzin, 1978). They brought present perspectives to bear on past experiences (Schiff, 2012) and depicted 'negotiated selves' (Collins, 1998) rather than essential subjects. However, the unhurried pace and length of the discussions (most lasted 1.5 – 2 hours, and one spanned two days) allowed participants more time for self-reflection and thus greater powers of self-authorship.

Two interviews were conducted by email, because of one participant's geographically distant location and another's expressed preference (cf. Burns, 2010). 'Shy' people often choose to communicate in writing rather than speech, saying they feel better able to articulate their views through this medium (Scott, 2004). In addition, the asynchronous nature of such discussions - participants were sent a list of questions in advance, to which they replied at their convenience - can appeal to those who wish to take more time to compose, edit and reconsider their responses (Markham, 1998), thereby giving the data greater validity. Given the project's topic, it was important to address any concerns about the interview itself as a 'live' performance, insofar as this might create feelings of methodological stage fright (nervousness, self-consciousness or inhibition), and to provide opportunities for response 'rehearsal'.

Escaping shyness: 'a "Me" that's not there'

My Symbolic Interactionist theory of shyness (Scott, 2007) identified this is a situational state that emerges under conditions of dramaturgical stress. The social actor feels relatively incompetent at managing an identity performance compared to the 'Competent Other' they see around them. They anticipate making an embarrassing mistake that will leave them vulnerable to critical audience judgement, while team-mates will not step in to save their face (cf. Goffman, 1959, 1967).

Following Mead (1934), I suggested that the shy social self has two component parts. The Shy 'I' is the subjective, phenomenological experience of inhibition and anxiety that seems to come out of nowhere and take over the mind. As the creative, impulsive part of the self, it has agency but not self-consciousness, and reacts to situations seemingly instinctively. By contrast, the Shy 'Me' is the reflexively perceived image of oneself as being shy, viewed from the perspective of others. It is similar to Cooley's (1902) concept of the Looking Glass Self, whereby the mind can take itself as a symbolic object and imagine others' judgements of this appearance. There is a strong sense here of vulnerability to exposure. Shyness entails

the co-presence of the Shy 'I' and Shy 'Me' in a cycling, reflexive dialogue: feeling shy makes one aware of appearing and being judged as such, which reinforces that self-image; hence shy identities can develop over the life course. In everyday life, the noisy chatter of the 'Me', with its self-questioning doubts and inadequacies, gets in the way of the (non-shy) 'I' and frustrates its sociability.

By contrast, the theatre represents an escape route and safe haven, wherein the Shy 'Me' recedes and the creative, non-shy 'I' can flow, free from inhibition. Taking on a different character offers a liberating release from the perils of everyday shyness. Paradoxically, this is because of the greater levels of planning, control and predictability stage actors have over their self-presentation, which removes the anxiety associated with improvisation. Just as lay actors can occasionally drift out of shyness in situations that provide a clearly defined role, such as the workplace (Scott, 2007), theatrical shows can also be rehearsed, scripts learned, and cast members relied upon, to reduce the likelihood of embarrassing mistakes. This resonates with Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) idea of careful and calculated risk minimisation as characteristic of flow:

'I was always known as the quiet one. But it's different when you're on stage - you can be somebody else.... I played a lot of comic characters, and foreigners! ... I was very confident on stage, because it was taking on a character. That was why I liked acting, you see. You left your real self behind, and just forgot about it. You just became the character.'

(Martin, television actor)

Theatre provides a retreat from the social gaze, protecting the 'real', private self from critical scrutiny. While of course, performers demand and desire audience attention, this is restricted to their frontstage personae and is carefully regulated. Self-consciousness arises from unwanted, not wanted social attention (Leary, 1996), and so should not occur in a 'flowing' performance. Hiding behind a character, role and script reduces the sense of exposure and vulnerability a 'shy' person would normally feel. If the audience response is critical, this is directed towards the character or script, rather than towards the actor-as-person who inhabits that role. The present, objectified image of self-under-scrutiny is only alter ego, not ego. Taking on a different character thus allows the Shy 'Me' take a blissfully welcome vacation:

'There is a "me" that's not there.... there are moments where I feel that I'm very much not me. It's not a kind of presence; it's more as if I've been displaced.'

(Martha, spoken word poet and teacher)

'When you're acting, it's not you, it's your character, so it's so much easier... it's a chance to be someone else. It's like going in fancy dress to a party... you get to be someone else for the evening. And you can almost become something that you would never be. If you were quite a shy and retiring person, you could become the most arrogant, macho arsehole bastard, because you know it's not you and it's just playacting. And on that level it's empowering.'

(Cory, drag king)

However, this liberating effect is only precariously sustained. I now consider some moments of unwitting self-consciousness that plague the shy performance artist before, during and after a show. When the 'I's flow is interrupted and the self-doubting, critically evaluative Shy

'Me' reappears, the actor is jolted back into reflexive awareness of the theatrical scene as a social situation, wherein their 'real' self is under scrutiny.

Before the performance

Stage fright

Stage fright is the feeling of intense nervousness before a live performance, which creates a state of existential self-doubt. In their survey of 178 drama students, Steptoe et al (1995) found that the most commonly reported fears were of panicking and losing emotional self-control, collapsing or being physically sick. As an occupational hazard of the theatrical world (Aaron, 1986), stage fright seems universally felt, and persists over actors' careers. Lyman and Scott (1970: 74) observe that, *'rehearsal doesn't eliminate stage fright. Seasoned actors as well as neophytes suffer from pre-performance anxieties.'*

With a cruel twist of irony, stage fright mirrors the same features as shyness: the escape route leads back into the trap. Whereas in everyday life, these unfold dramaturgically and metaphorically, in theatre, they translate acutely and literally. There is a fear of losing one's place in the script, making mistakes and spoiling the scene, with resultant embarrassment. The audience watch critically, ready to scrutinise and judge. Self-conscious inhibition leads to 'freezing' on stage: memorised lines are forgotten, skills disappear, and the actor suddenly doubts their own competence. Reflecting upon failure in these moments, it is the 'Me' who is uppermost in the mind's consciousness.

Artists' willingness to endure, even thrive upon stage fright, suggests elements of edgework (Lyng, 1990). The phenomenological experience of fear (cf. Davidson, 2000) in this context arises from the apprehension of the metaphorical 'edge' or boundary between the offstage and onstage realms. Confronting the existential threshold between survival and destruction creates 'fear and trembling' and a 'sickness unto death' (Kierkegaard, 1843, 1849). Performers speak colloquially of 'dying' on stage when things go wrong, while surviving the experience makes them feel more alive. Danger lies in the challenge of giving a credible performance, which at these moments seems near-impossible. The gulf seems uncrossable, yet there is a compelling urge to take the risk:

'Adrenaline is like an angry wind. And you're a boat. If everything is safely bolted down, really ingrained, you'll sail, wonderfully. If there's a screw loose, you'll sink.'
(Tariq, theatre actor)

Simultaneously in these moments, there is an awareness of the possibility of transcending the anxiety and entering the state of flow. Standing in the wings of the theatre is like standing on the wing strut of an aeroplane, balancing precariously and trying to summon the courage to jump off (Hardie-Bick, 2005). The actor's perceptual field narrows and they become intensely focused on the task:

'The silence in itself is really scary, cos you realise they're listening to you. And that's terrifying. So you just have to block them out and pretend they're not there.'
(Cory, drag king)

Lyman and Scott (1970) suggest one of the main triggers of stage fright is the feared *discrediting of identity claims*. In Stone's (1962) Symbolic Interactionist theory of identity,

social actors are constantly making claims, through speech and actions, to be certain types of person. Similarly, in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, actors in everyday life seek consciously to 'give' the right impressions but find that unwittingly, they 'give off' others. Identity claims are assessed and verified by the observing audience, who may accept or reject them. The identity category in which the actor is 'placed' may not match that which s/he 'announces' (Stone, 1962), and an incongruity between announcements and placements results in a discredited, or 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 1963). On stage, the artist's claim to be their character is '*temporarily honoured*' by the audience, but only '*until further notice*' (Lyman and Scott 1970: 89): it is contingent on the performance being found convincing. Fear of embarrassment is therefore central to both stage fright and shyness, the artist '*anticipating that a slip or flaw will suddenly thrust one into a position that invites challenges to a claimed identity*' (Lyman and Scott, 1970: 69).

Performance lines risk being discredited in various ways. Clumsiness with one's territory, props, or body (Lyman and Scott, 1970) communicates an impression of lost composure, dignity or 'poise' (Miller, 1996) in managing the dramaturgical scene. Respectively, the actor might fear making an 'ecological faux pas', such as failing to position themselves correctly on the stage, blocking another actor's entrance or exit. There may be a miscalculated use of material props as items of identity equipment, such as the violinist whose hands tremble so much that she cannot hold the bow steady (Havas, 1973). Finally, the performer may move their body clumsily or misjudge its capacities: failing to project one's voice loudly enough (Steptoe et al., 1995) or tripping over a musical instrument. Just as 'shy' people report concerns about speaking or moving clumsily in everyday life (Scott, 2007), the artists in this study described how the same fears were accentuated in the theatrical context. Stage fright was associated with the more technically skilled, complex and demanding kinds of performance:

'It's more prominent when you're going to do something quite technical. I did a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" where I had to appear on stage in time to music, and if you lose count, it's really quite difficult to get that back... if I had to sing something a cappella, that would be quite unnerving.'

(Tariq, theatre actor)

Stage fright involves a sense of vulnerability to exposure: the projected character might fail, revealing the incompetent actor underneath. Aaron (1986) explains that an unsuccessful performance threatens to unmask the actor: their cover is blown, their 'dark secrets' (Goffman, 1959) revealed, and everyone can see they are not who they pretended to be. This, too, echoes the dramaturgical anxieties of shyness (Scott, 2007), subverting the meaning of the theatre as a safe haven from social scrutiny. However, the extent of this fear depends on the degree of overlap between the actor's offstage identity and onstage persona. Those who pursued different forms of performance art noticed variations in their propensity to evoke stage fright. Josie compared dancing in a choreographed ballet with singing her own songs:

'It's fear of doing it wrong, but it's also fear of exposure... your voice is such an intrinsic part of YOU, so if people won't like it, that would feel like a massive rejection of YOU. Ballet's really controlled; it's not really you in it, and musicals are really tacky and over the top, so it's not really expressing what's inside of you. Yeah, singing's much more baring your soul than dancing is.'

(Josie, singer and dancer)

Transitions into character

Entering a role entails the shedding of the 'Me' and embracement of the 'I', which is channelled through the role performance. Although these are deliberate transitions, they are not consciously controlled, but rather unfold intangibly and imperceptibly within the self.

This effect is accentuated by the strange, mysterious connotations of the theatrical world as symbolising another realm. In his account of the 'fascination of secrecy', Simmel (1908) explained how the idea of knowledge, materials or social realities being restricted in access made them more appealing. The elusiveness of things barely tangible and just out of reach - money, expertise, celebrity - gives them a magical allure. The onstage persona can have this quality, not only to audiences but to performers themselves, who feel estranged from the parts they are playing. Actors may regard their onstage character as something different and other, an alter ego whom they cannot fully apprehend, much less comprehend. Jonze (2014) considers the identity dilemmas faced by band lead-singers, whose fans attribute them magical charisma, yet who self-define as shy and feel uncomfortably thrust into the role.

Getting into character, then, requires a leap of faith over the metaphorical edge into the unknown. The performer must assume this other identity, incorporating alter into ego, without being entirely sure whether or how this will work. Musician Nick Cave (2014) describes a 'transformative' process of shifting into his onstage persona, which seems to happen passively to him, beyond his control. Acute performance anxiety occurs before live shows when he doubts this will happen successfully:

'It's horrendous backstage, before we go on. You don't know how you're going to be able to do this show. But then something just comes and takes you away from all that... It's transformative.' (Cave, 2014)

Similarly, Gerard Way, of the band My Chemical Romance, speaks of a magical moment of transition that he calls 'the switch':

'You need to have this thing that is kinda like a switch... In normal life I am not the most confident person. I get self-conscious. I over-think stuff. But you have to have something inside your brain that turns over, so you can give yourself over to something else.' (Jonze, 2014)

My participants also spoke of this transition as something mysterious that 'just happened' to them. However anxious they felt before a performance, and however estranged from their role, there would come a moment when they inevitably entered and became their character. Doubts dissolved, self-consciousness receded, and live action took over; flow then became possible. Sometimes the transition was gradual and insidious, and sometimes it was a sudden 'switch', but it always remained an elusive, intangible process. Stephen expressed this sense of powerless over a mysterious, external force, his remarks echoing Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) account of flow:

'I think you're just there and it comes. There is something primeval about the way that it just takes over you, and it's just inexplicable, that sometimes you just go on and it all comes together with you coming out with great stuff that you aren't

expecting yourself. So there you are inhabiting a character, but I think it just happens sort of organically, rather than me psyching myself up.'

(Stephen, stand-up comedian)

Noah's account of the transition suggested a deeply embodied, phenomenological experience, which was difficult to verbally articulate:

'I get myself ready, obviously, in warm up or whatever, this is for any play I do, and then when I get backstage, I kind of - it is a strange, it's hard to describe... I almost kind of shake my head and just think [widens eyes, lifts head] - it's that, it's that kind of look. I know I do that because apparently my eyes open, but depending on the character, you think, depending on the scene, "Where have they just been? Why are they coming into this room?"... So you just kind of become what they are... It only takes a couple of minutes, and sometimes you have less than that, but long enough to stand there and root myself a little bit, just to shut yourself off for a second... It's almost instinctive... I just stand there and think, "Right, this is him". And then I can say my first line in my head... or sometimes I say out loud or whisper words, just kind of get their voice... to kind of get myself into that mode of playing him. And then once you're on, it kind of takes care of itself, because you've got people responding to this character and you're responding to their characters, and just carrying on until the end of the scene when you come off, and then you drop it.'

(Noah, theatre actor)

Some participants enacted superstitious rituals backstage before a performance, which created a faux-confidence through the illusion of gaining control. Dressing room routines are a familiar theatrical indulgence: ceremonial costume donning, meditation or the pre-show cigarette. Steptoe et al.'s (1995) drama students reported self-medicating with drugs or alcohol to distract themselves from anxiety. Aaron (1986) observed actors 'walking the stage' before the curtain goes up, just as Goffman (1959) described 'insulting the audience' in everyday situations (e.g. shop staff mocking their customers), to deflate their critical power. Goffman (1959) observed the 'regressive character' of such backstage life, as teammates take comfort from conspiring in naïve, irrational beliefs. The collective enactment of rituals functions to bring a cast together, strengthening their solidarity (cf. Durkheim, 1912). Thus Tomas described the final moments before going on stage:

'In the band we always do a unique ritual for every show... The rituals are often quite intimate and aim at making us as a group feel like we are close. For example it can be us standing in a circle and everyone has to whisper something nice about the person next to them in their ear, or doing Eskimo kisses.'

(Tomas, singer-songwriter/musician)

For those who played totally different characters, such as theatre actors, the transformation of self into other was stark and dramatic. This contrasted with singer-songwriters and comedians, who perceived more overlap between their onstage and offstage personae. Similar variance could occur within the same individual's experience, as they played different parts that felt more or less similar to their 'real' selves. Rupert, the lead singer of a famous band, described identity-transitioning to play one song that narrated a fictional character, in contrast to his other, more autobiographical songs:

'There's a couple of times more recently where I actually tried to get into a so-called character, which has been very much dependent on the song that

we've done... Now it's not me, it's emphatically not me, but I find that I've started taking, um, props from the audience, and having them apply make-up during the song. I don't know, it happened once and then we had fun with that and I started doing that quite regularly. And it's good fun because it just drew people in. and then, of course, once I had the make up on, I thought, "Ok, I'm [song title] now, you know, I'm obviously the character, I'm obviously acting out the character now, of the song." And it was quite different - it was good fun. I think you have to get to a stage, and I don't know if it's confidence, but I just think you have to interpret what you're doing: "Now is this me or this a character?" '

(Rupert, singer-songwriter and band frontman)

During the performance

The second trigger of stage fright, according to Lyman and Scott, is *disruption of the social frame*. A successful stage performance relies on the audience being willing to suspend their disbelief and immerse themselves in the fantasy before them (Schechner, 2002). The 'fourth wall' is a figurative barrier between actors and audience, which contains the performance as a bounded piece of artwork. In a successful show, the audience form the fourth wall: the drama is so convincing that they feel immersed as if part of the scene. Similarly, in everyday life, social actors use 'mystification' to conceal the backstage construction of their self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). 'Breaking the fourth wall', to acknowledge the audience's presence and the show's contrivance, can be done deliberately, but more often occurs accidentally, through lapsed concentration and distracted focus. A sudden jolt into awareness of the theatrical scene as a social encounter means that the carefully constructed fictional frame comes crashing down. Noah recalled an unsettling experience during a play, when he 'broke character' (came out of role):

'It was such a tiny studio, and I looked at a woman dead in the eye, at one time, and I thought, "Fuck! What have I just...?" And - because you're trying to look into the middle distance, but if the audience is the middle distance, sometimes it's impossible... you have to stare at their chests or stare at their legs or their feet.... When I looked at this woman, I think I instantly looked up, or did something, and that broke me.'

(Noah, theatre actor)

Disruptions of the dramatic frame impede flow by causing a split between actor and character. The 'Me', who had slipped under the threshold of consciousness, suddenly reappears with a brutal force, casting a withering gaze upon its own image. Now it is the 'I' who disappears, because the very act of regarding, indicating and reflecting on oneself as a subject makes it turn into an object. As Mead (1934: 174) put it, *'I cannot turn around fast enough to catch myself'*.

The self-conscious awareness of this happening evokes a strange feeling of detachment. In Hayman's (1969) terms, the actor 'finds themselves in a role', confronting it as alien, rather than 'finding the role in themselves'. 'Standing outside of' their character, the actor reflects upon on it as a symbolic object (a 'Me') that has not been successfully communicated (cf. Blumer, 1969). Stephen recalled realising that his comedy routine was 'not working' and 'not going down very well' with the audience:

'I had weird experiences. I mean when we did the Oxford Revue we got heckled, and we got booed off late at night one night, by all the stand-up comedians - that really made me lose my confidence a bit more, and also just worry a lot more about stuff... I don't know how much I was nervous, as much as just humiliated when it went wrong.... [In one gig], there was a kind of feeling of not really going down very well, plus knowing I hadn't really got that far in the show. And I got that kind of dry mouth... you can just hear your voice rising... and feel that prickly heat. And embarrassment, and feeling it's not working.'

(Stephen, stand-up comedian)

After the performance

Role exit

Coming off stage at the end of a performance requires another transition, out of character and back into one's 'real' self. Role exit can be a long-term, protracted identity career trajectory (Ebaugh, 1988), but in the theatrical context, reversal transformations are somewhat truncated. This is another elusive and subtle process, on which the actor can only reflect retrospectively, once the 'Me' returns to consciousness and evaluates its own show. Perceived success evokes thrill and exhilaration: the 'performer's high' is reminiscent of Lyng's (1990) edgework in suggesting a heightened, 'purified' sense of self, or even omnipotence:

'There is an adrenaline that comes along with it; I do get my 'teaching high'. And weirdly, by the end of it, on the train home I'm partially exhausted and then partially really elated.'

(Martha, spoken word poet and teacher)

'It's a really wonderful feeling, and it's wonderful to be able to share it with someone. And lots of enjoyment is usually had afterwards: you get very drunk. Cos there is also that arrogance that comes off with it: that "We can do it. We've won. We are the best. Look at how amazing we were!" Even if the performance wasn't really that great, the feeling inside you is that you are all-powerful and you are amazing.'

(Cory, drag king)

Sometimes, however, the sensation is more of an anti-climax. The actor perceives that their performance did not go well: they made mistakes, suffered stage fright, or broke the fourth wall. Again, the 'Me' only appears retrospectively, through reflections on performative failure:

'It would be afterwards that I felt terrible. At the time I would sort of try and stick it out and do my time, or whatever I had to put up with, but afterwards you would feel a bit crushed.'

(Stephen, stand-up comedian)

This can also happen when the performance becomes routine and habitual, such as a theatre actor during a show's run, or a comedian or musician on a long tour. Giving the same performance night after night means that although stage fright may become less acute, the 'comedown' experience is also dampened. Acting becomes just a job: a routine responsibility, handled with a perfunctory pragmatism:

*'Once you walk out of that room, you're like, "Right, fine, I'm done. Let's go home."
And the lights go up.'*

(Noah, theatre actor)

Participants described how the realisation of being back in their offstage selves would hit them with a jolt as they were confronted with mundane objects from the non-theatrical realm that symbolised their return to the everyday world. Often this happened long after the show had ended, on the journey home. Thus Noah continued,

'... your body is so tired, but your brain is rushing to try and create new things. It's hard to completely drop that kind of energy, until I get home, sometimes, but – I've got the Tube ride... you can't really relax on the train, but having those free [news]papers... they are a good free "lose yourself for half an hour" thing, which is really helpful.'

Will the real self please stand up?

Some participants commented on the broader relationship between their onstage personae and offstage selves, and what this meant in terms of managing their 'shy' identities. Two strikingly different accounts emerged, locating ideas of authenticity in one or other of these agents. In both versions, shyness resided in the backstage, non-performing self, but this could be interpreted positively or negatively, as evidence of the 'true' self or its phoney alter. Performance art then represented a strategy of, respectively, protection or liberation from shyness.

In the first case, the shy backstage self was perceived as more authentic. Hiding under the mask, script and costume of a contrived character gave space for playing with alternate selves without jeopardising personal integrity. The shy self remained safely in its protective shell. However, this discrepancy between private self-image and public persona meant that the latter could seem quite alien. Performing evoked feelings of role conflict and self-estrangement when its reach encroached into the everyday realm. Tomas spoke of his onstage persona with a mixture of affection, fascination and frustrated dislike:

'When I started performing live I decided there was only one way forward - to become a full-on entertainer and put on an act. By creating a role or persona I can do it more confidently. It's still me but it's a distorted version of me. Many people who know me get a bit confused when they see me live: they don't recognize me or the way I speak and act. ... I'm not sure which one is which anymore; they've started blending together. Sometimes I'm disgusted by my stage persona and how he follows me into my real life. He can be such a clown.'

(Tomas, singer-songwriter/musician)

In the second case, the onstage persona was felt to be a more authentic reflection of the 'true' self. Performing gave confident expression to ideas that would normally be inhibited by shyness, allowing more honest communication than was possible in the polite, rule-governed interaction order (Goffman, 1983) of everyday life. These actors found roles in themselves, rather than finding themselves in roles (Hayman, 1969). Lara spoke of her stand-up comedy as a liberating release, which finally gave her the chance to be 'the real me'. Personifying this agent as 'The Jokes', she said:

'I always knew that just because I was shy and quiet, that didn't mean I shouldn't have a voice. So what better place to go to, than a stage where everyone has to listen to you?... part of my shyness comes from the idea that some of the things I say or think might be inappropriate for day-to-day conversations, and I will say the wrong thing and accidentally upset someone. In my daily life I feel I have to be polite to the status quo. On stage I can spell out everything that annoys me about the status quo, and as long as it's funny, I can say anything... The Jokes are the real me, not what a character would say... I am myself on stage. More myself than [in] other areas of my life.... I often wish I could be that verbose and forthright in my real life.'

(Lara, stand-up comedian)

Curtain call

Dramaturgical risk-taking, on stage and in everyday life, is highly fateful for identity and social selfhood. The paradox of shy performativity can be explained by the transformations of consciousness that take place when an erstwhile 'shy' person takes to the stage. Frustrated and constrained by dramaturgical stress in everyday life, the actor finds sanctuary and freedom in a safely prescribed role. Presenting not the 'real' self but an alter ego to the audience means that performance art offers a liberating release from feelings of exposure and vulnerability. Theories of edgework and flow make sense of this process as a splitting of the Meadian social self, whereby the objectified, self-critical Shy 'Me' disappears from consciousness and the subjective, agentic, non-shy 'I' takes over. Live performance is an ontologically risky activity, in toying with the boundaries between contrivance and reality, but is simultaneously thrilling in its implications for the shy self.

However, the Shy 'Me' reappears at certain moments throughout the performative process, disrupting the flow of the 'I' and jolting the actor back into self-awareness. Beforehand, stage fright involves fearfully anticipating one's own incompetence and imagining a discredited identity. Making the transition into character demands a nervous leap of faith that the 'I' will give a convincing appearance that the audience will accept. During the performance, actors may make mistakes, fall out of character or break the fourth wall, creating a sudden realisation of the theatre as a social interaction context. After the show, transitioning back into the quotidian realm lets actors stand outside of their characters, evaluating their success or failure.

Although it is cruelly ironic that the intended escape route out of shyness leads back into the trap, this does not seem to deter performing artists from pursuing such risky action. The various occasions when self-consciousness may re-emerge are regarded as challenges to be tackled but potentially overcome, in order to accomplish feelings of autonomy, integrity and authenticity. These otherwise rare and thus deeply rewarding self-attributions are reflectively interpreted as the results of theatrical flow, giving the experience a tantalising allure. Beyond the immediate context of the show, therefore, edgework is involved in navigating the risks and managing the boundaries of the 'shy performer' identity, making performance art a dangerously delightful undertaking.

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