

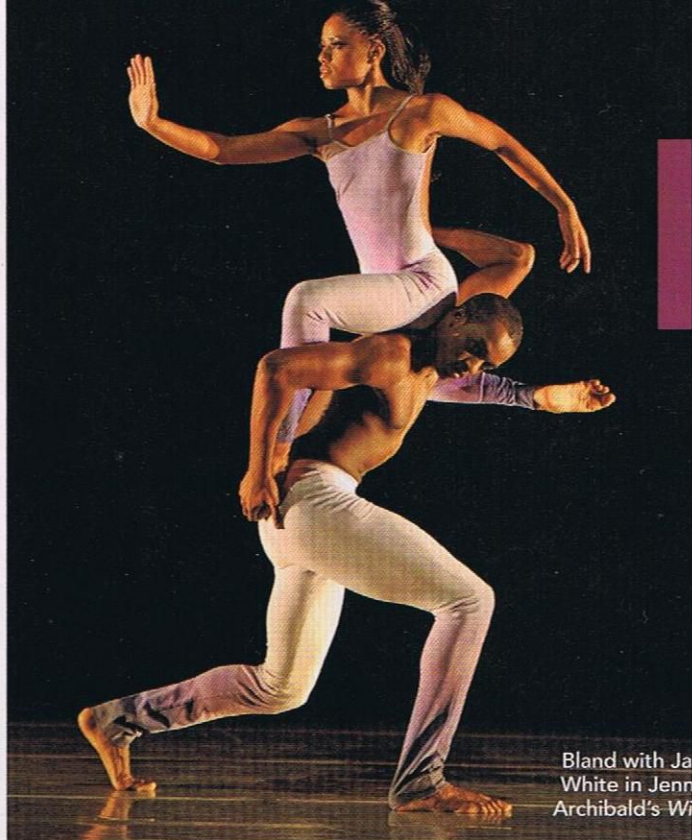
Got Stage Fright?

What it takes to overcome performance anxiety **BY RACHEL ZAR**

In the opening performance of her first season with Ailey II, Shay Bland was cast in Alvin Ailey's *Streams*. This show was an important one—her first time dancing Ailey's choreography as a professional. And as she waited in the wings, with the music already beginning to play, she panicked. "I was freaking out, imagining all the ways my performance could go wrong," Bland says. "Would I forget the choreography? Would my costume come off? I wasn't breathing regularly, and the other dancers backstage were worried I would faint."

Terrifying backstage experiences like Bland's aren't unusual. In fact, at least 50 percent of performing artists, regardless of age, gender or experience level, have had problems with performance anxiety. More commonly called "stage fright," performance anxiety can be a lifelong struggle or erupt midway through a dancer's career, often due to an injury, a past bad experience or, as in Bland's case, the overwhelming pressure of an important performance. Physical symptoms include a racing pulse, rapid breathing, dry mouth, a tight throat, changes in vision, sweaty or cold hands, and trembling in the hands, knees, lips or voice. Dancers may even get a sense of floating, being completely outside of their bodies. And the mental symptoms—fear and self-doubt—can sometimes be the most crippling.

Anxiety like this doesn't mean you're a bad performer. In fact, dancers in principal roles may actually exhibit more signs of pre-performance panic because of the added pressure they're under. But severe symptoms could negatively affect your performance, and hurt your career. (Not to mention that dread and panic can completely take the joy out of dancing.) Thankfully, there are several ways to overcome this syndrome.



Bland with Ja White in Jenn Archibald's *Streams*

UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

The first step is understanding why you're anxious. Dr. Steve Julius, clinical psychologist who specializes in enhancing the performance of clients like Cirque du Soleil and the Chicago Bulls, as well as other athletes, explains that performance anxiety comes from the brain's limbic system, which controls our fight or flight response. "A performer needs at least a moderate amount of anxiety to get energized," Julius says. "Too little isn't helpful, because then you'll under-respond. But too much will tell you to turn and run."

Dancers shouldn't be ashamed to seek professional help if their response is out of control. "If these symptoms are ongoing, especially if they're coming during class and rehearsal, or they're disrupting your sleep, seek counseling," advises certified athletic trainer Katherine Ewalt.

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

Taking care of your body can have a major impact on performance anxiety. "There's a lot of benefit to being physically prepared to take on stress," says certified athletic trainer Katherine Ewalt. These six tactics will help you stay performance-ready in any situation.



and dried apricots can help lower your blood pressure naturally.

- **Avoid caffeine and alcohol**, especially right before a performance. Both can exacerbate anxiety symptoms.
- **Potassium-rich foods** like bananas and dried apricots can help lower your blood pressure naturally.
- **The probiotics in yogurt** can reduce activity in the emotional region of the brain, decreasing stress and anxiety.
- **Somatic practices like yoga or Alexander technique** help many dancers relax, especially if they have a familiar routine they can turn to backstage.
- **Cardio exercise**, like swimming or jogging, has been proven to decrease overall levels of tension.
- **Diaphragmatic breathing, which stems from meditation**, can also help you find calm, both in the long term and in the moments right before a performance. Fill your entire belly with air by breathing in through the nose for two counts before exhaling through pursed lips for four counts. "This gets you centered and less concerned with what the audience may be perceiving," says clinical psychologist Dr. Steve Julius. "It also triggers the parasympathetic part of our nervous system, which is the wiring our bodies use to calm ourselves down."

“I was freaking out, imagining all the ways my performance could go wrong.” —SHAY BLAND

who's worked with dancers in Southern California. Most dance companies and schools have a psychologist on call who will listen to your concerns without judgment and help you find the path that works best for you. You can also find a local counselor at locator.apa.org.

Psychologists will often use cognitive behavioral therapy, which involves identifying what's causing anxiety, then gradually exposing yourself to it, evaluating its validity and taking steps to overcome it. Biofeedback, which can measure your physical reaction to stressors, may also be used to teach you awareness and relaxation techniques. In extreme cases, you may be prescribed medications that target the neurochemicals that are altered when you're in a state of anxiety. However, be aware that self-medicating is risky, since these medications can interfere with muscle tension and harm your performance.

FINDING CALM

Most dancers are able to control stage fright by finding a way to calm themselves. Having a pre-performance routine—whether it's a short meditation, a single movement or a more elaborate process—can do wonders. “Often, I'll recommend saying a predetermined word aloud, maybe the name of a pet or something related to the performance,” Julius says. “With repeated exposure, that triggers you to trust your muscle memory.” Like Pavlov and his dogs, you can actually condition yourself to hear something, and then perform without fear.

Having a lucky charm—whether it's a ribbon pinned into your costume or a photo waiting in the dressing room—can also work. “Bringing something that reminds us of a place of calm or that allows us to stay focused is critical for a performer,” Julius says. “It may seem silly, but these tools are extremely valuable. They can be the difference between getting centered and completely losing it.”

IN THE MOMENT

But what about the terror that takes hold when you're already on-stage, perhaps after a fall or a forgotten step? A dancer's best bet is rehearsing for worst-case scenarios before they happen. With athletes, Julius will often create stressful situations in practice, like screaming at a basketball player and physically distracting him as he takes a crucial shot. “Experiencing failure is the key to learning how to bring oneself back,” he says. Try having a fellow dancer call out when you should fake a fall, and then practice starting back up again. Or leave an obstacle in the middle of your rehearsal space that you'll have to avoid.

“During rehearsals, you shouldn't just be practicing choreography; you should also be practicing a positive attitude,” says Ewalt. “A lot of performance anxiety is related to a past negative experience, so reestablishing a positive thought process can override those memories.” In the end, your attitude can be a self-fulfilling prophecy: Whether you think you can or can't succeed, you're probably right.

For Bland, repeating a mantra, taught to her by Ailey dancer Hope Boykin, was the key to getting performance-ready in her moment of panic. “Hope always told me, ‘You have nothing to lose, but everything to share.’ I kept reminding myself that,” says Bland, who was able to calm her anxiety only eight counts before going onstage. This April, she performed *Streams* again, this time in a lead role. “In the end,” she says, “you're the only one who can get in your way.” ■

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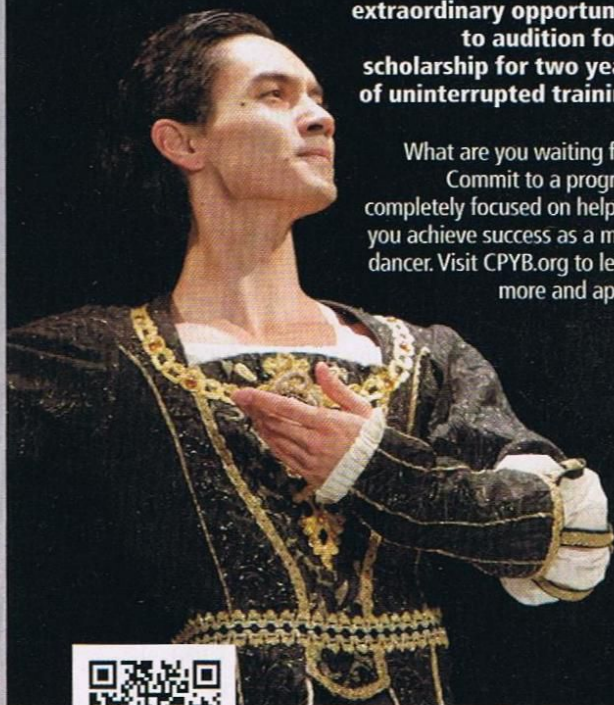
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