



Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright

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Stage fright is one of the human psyche's deepest fears. Laurence Olivier learned to adapt to it, as have actors Salma Hayek and Hugh Grant. Musicians such as George Harrison and Adele have battled it and learned to cope. Others never do: In 1973, Pittsburgh Pirates All-Star pitcher Steve Blass suddenly could no longer find the strike zone; his career ended soon after. Surveys in the United States repeatedly rank public speaking as one of the top fears, affecting up to 74 percent of people.

Sara Solovitch studied piano as a young child and fell in love with music. At ten, she played Bach and Mozart in her hometown's annual music festival, but was overwhelmed by fear. As a teen, she attended Eastman School of Music, where stage fright led her to give up aspirations of becoming a professional pianist. In her late fifties, Sara gave herself a one-year deadline to tame performance anxiety and play before an audience. She resumed music lessons, while exploring meditation, exposure therapy, cognitive therapy, biofeedback, beta blockers, and other remedies. She performed in airports, hospitals, and retirement homes before renting a public hall and performing for fifty guests on her sixtieth birthday.

Using her own journey as inspiration, Solovitch has written a thoughtful and insightful examination of the myriad causes of stage fright and the equally diverse ways to overcome it, and a tribute to pursuing personal growth at any age.

Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright Details

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Author : Sara Solovitch

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From Reader Review **Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright** for online ebook

Linda says

Very interesting for one who likes this kind of nonfiction.

Jeff says

Anyone that has ever acted, spoken in front of a large group or even participated in sports with a lot of spectators has probably experienced stage fright. Just before I started reading this book, I saw an article online quoting some of today's biggest performers as to their own struggles with it. Many people at the top of their fields battle daily with stage fright.

In this book, Sara Solovitch intertwines her own attempts to overcome her debilitating stage fright with a history, of sorts, of others that have suffered; and a whole lot of ways people try to overcome it. Her own experiences included many attempts to find, correct and challenge it.

One of the best discussions in the book is concept of perfection versus artistry. How what is sometimes 'robotic perfection' cannot come close to what might be a flawed but passionate performance-- stage fright seems to fuel the latter in uncontrollable ways.

Though I felt the POV was a little more text book than I'd prefer, this book holds a wealth of information that might be beneficial to someone desperately searching for solutions. Yoga, betablockers, therapy, exercises... it's all discussed and explored. This is not a 'how to' book but it certainly offers up a lot of clues along the way.

I won this book as part of the Goodreads First Read giveaway program.

Sylvia says

2.5/2.8-3.0 stars out of 5 stars

Kathleen says

Fascinating and absorbing. As a musician myself, I related to a lot of the author's experiences, and was interested in much of the research she did in her quest to conquer her lifelong debilitating stage fright/performance anxiety. I have not suffered performance anxiety to the degree she did, just what I am now seeing as average, run of the mill and perfectly normal 'nervousness'. But some of my fellow students in university definitely did suffer at the level Sara describes, and I now understand much better what they were going through, and why the usual advice to simply perform more often to 'get over it' didn't help. Or work. As a music teacher myself, I gained a lot of additional insight and ideas for my own students, particularly the

adults, who almost universally suffer severe nervousness even at their lessons.

Heather L says

This was such a great book. Very informative. Even though I don't personally suffer from stage fright, performance anxiety, or fear of public speaking, it definitely speaks volumes into the unique way our brain works and what scientists/researchers/scholars have discovered in order to deal with this phobia. I thought it was very interesting. I took a lot away from this book. Sara can definitely write. This was an absolute gem. The classic artists mentioned throughout brought forth a whole new genre of music I forgot I enjoyed and most appreciated. So glad I had the chance to pick this up at my local library: just there in front of the new arrivals, beckoning so sweetly to me.

Tfalcone says

OK, I am not nearly as bad of as most of these folks.

Jenny says

I really enjoyed the chapters on perfectionism.

Art says

The personal story of a woman, now sixty-two, who tried many tips and techniques over the years for overcoming stage fright. Then, for her sixtieth birthday, Sara Solovitch gave a triumphant piano concert for family and friends.

This is an interesting journey for those among us who experience stage fright, social phobias and the common fear of public speaking. This book also will appeal to anyone who plays or enjoys piano music, which permeates the story.

Stage fright is a mutiny of the mind against the body. Performance anxiety is the rapid, shallow breathing that occurs when muscles contract and shaking begins. Shyness and stage fright happen in social situations with unfamiliar people. These anxiety disorders, the author writes, represent the most common mental illness, afflicting eighteen percent of adults.

Mark Twain coined the term "stage fright." The modern version of stage fright began in 1879, with the introduction of electric lights in theaters, which shifted the balance between audience and performers from an earlier time when softer lighting created a more collegial relationship.

Fear of public speaking goes back at least thirty-five hundred years, according to the oldest story about it. Moses was tongue-tied when he brought the tablets down from the burning bush. Aaron, his eloquent brother, spoke on his behalf.

Pairs well with *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, another four-star book for me.

Weekend Edition turned me onto this book: <http://www.npr.org/books/titles/41745...>

Dad was the funny, silly and gregarious one, balanced by my more cultured mother, but a stage mother, nonetheless. So, I was always "on," whether playing music, comedy sketches, improv, public speaking and as an on-air radio-TV guy for ten years. I no longer enjoy performing in public. But if the need ever arose, I can turn to this book for ideas, advice and support.

Mary says

As an adult in my second year of piano lessons, I was in for a rude awakening last year -- I didn't realize that my lessons also entailed participation in...gulp...piano recitals. My first recital last winter, in a crowded room of about 60 listeners, didn't go so well. I was playing a simple Bach Minuet which I'd memorized and played about 10 times earlier that day without a mistake. Sitting at the Steinway grand piano, I got through the first half of the piece okay...and then, awash in adrenaline, I got amnesia. A sea of unfamiliar black and white keys lay before me -- what was I doing here? After a few tries to regain my momentum, I got up, bowed, and took my seat. The only plus as a middle-aged beginner was that I knew the stakes were quite low. I suffered from embarrassment, sure, but in the big picture, I'm still happy to progress with piano lessons. And I even survived a spring recital, with less gruesome results.

Which brings me to this book. Sara Solovitch, a very accomplished pianist, plays at a level of mastery I will likely never achieve, but psychologically she has been through the wringer. And she covers the subject of stage fright with a thoroughness that takes us through multiple aspects of the condition, and explores many possible solutions. She has worked with many gurus, musicians and psychologists. The back end pages of my hardcover copy are now covered with notes pulled from the text.

Solovitch challenged herself with a public concert on the occasion of her 60th birthday, giving herself a year to prepare. I don't think I'll do anything like that -- or maybe I will! I have about nine years to prepare :) But I am definitely going to explore the many techniques given in the book -- meditation, centering, intent. And, despite the negative response of my piano teacher, who thinks I absolutely shouldn't, I may just cadge a beta-blocker from my neighbor before my next piano recital, to see if my hands shake less. My sense is that there is no one magic solution, and that this will be a slow process. But this book has been an inspiration.

Richard Jaspers says

I'm not sure why I was drawn to this book, except that the chords it struck by way of a recent *New Yorker* article (August 3, 2015, "I Can't Go On!" by Joan Acocella) told me I must read it. I began studying piano when I was ten, and then at age thirteen I set about the study of classical organ, which continued throughout my successful completion of a bachelor's degree in music. I'd suffered certain moments of stage fright, not only while playing organ (I, like the author, gave up playing), but also when I taught Advanced Placement English classes (Pre-AP to be exact) each morning for ten years, always wondering if I would say something wrong, or worse, something stupid. The most difficult situation for me was speaking before a group of adults, reading from my own writing! By sharing with us her life-long battle with stage fright, Solovitch has

created a fine primer on how to approach the affliction that affects millions of people, whether, musicians, actors, athletes, or other public figures:

“A 2014 survey by the online research and consulting firm YouGov reported that 56 percent of Americans were ‘very’ or ‘a little’ afraid of public speaking. But it wasn’t their top-ranking fear; snakes and heights ranked higher. Among the British, YouGov found the same prevalence of public-speaking anxiety, but that figure exceeded a fear of heights and snakes” (177). Who!

Or, allow this to soak in:

“By 1987, a survey by the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians, which represents instrumentalists in dozens of major orchestras, revealed that 27 percent of its members used beta-blockers. Of those, 70 percent got the drug from colleagues”(108). For those who don’t know, beta-blockers are a medicine that slows down the heart, gives the person a physical sense of calm.

Solovitch’s journey is a long one. She begins studying piano as a young child and continues throughout college. As an adult, she gives up performance and actually becomes a journalist, creating a successful career. However, she reaches a point where she feels she not only wishes to play again but wishes to conquer her extreme stage fright (sweaty palms, limbs that quake/my most dreadful symptom seems to be the emission of rather acrid farts). Over a number of years Solovitch must consult scores of experts: other musicians, therapists, both physical and psychological, sports coaches and many more. In the end she sets a goal for herself: to play at age sixty a challenging piano recital in front of a large audience of family, friends, and other musicians. Her journey is a remarkable one, one that’s instructive for all of us, whether we’re musicians, performers, speakers, or even audience members. Important to remember are those who appear before us, that they may be suffering from performance anxiety, the preferred term, and we can by our very understanding help them by being attentive and understanding and most of all, forgiving, something performers often cannot do themselves.

Margaret Wichorek says

This really is a fascinating book. The author stopped playing the piano after finishing two years at the Eastman School of Music. She had always dreamed of being a concert pianist, but her stage fright was so severe that she finally gave up on it and abandoned the piano entirely. She married, had three children, who were also interested in music careers and they persuaded her to go back to the piano. After much practice, she decided to try again to play in front of an audience. but first did research into the causes of the fear and methods to overcome it. She found that many famous artist had and have this problem and she consulted many experts in the field. She finally found the method that worked for her and was able to give a small recital for friends and family with much success. I say Bravo to her, as I know how she felt. I took piano lessons for several years, but could never get over being scared to death at a recital.

