



real-world methods

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Stage Control

Is it just me, or are we not taking the time to teach the essential techniques of good and proper public speaking to our aspiring magicians? Performers of all ages are spending hours and hours working on the craft of magic and manipulation, but no time on their verbal presentation or the art of communication. How many of you

think a bigger and better box trick or illusion will make you a better performer? How many of you think, *All I need is a beautiful girl or boy — depending on your preference — to make my act look better? Maybe I should get a white tiger or a bunch of doves.*

Okay, let's cut the crap and address what the real issues are when it comes to stage performance. Learn to talk to your audience! It's your first line of communication.

How many times have you seen a performer, young or old, walk out onstage and go blank? I mean just completely shut down and not know what to do, with nothing but jumbled thoughts seemingly running through their mind. *Oh, yeah, the microphone stopped working, or it was never turned on to begin with, or it's making some god-awful sounds. Maybe the music didn't start on time, or maybe it's the wrong cue, or it's someone else's music, or — wait a minute, I don't even have music in my act or speech or monologue or in my introduction.*

Hey, where are my special light effects that I paid so much for? Why are all the lights on? They'll see how the tricks are

done! And how come the curtains haven't opened yet so I can get my dancers to seductively bring on some illusion that everyone — and I mean everyone — has seen a hundred times before?

You don't understand! I can't be good or win the prize or get the award or get the audience to love me if everything isn't perfect.

Stop!

Let's stop right here and go back to basics. A lot of the stage screw-ups I have just mentioned are out of your control. That's right, you have no control over what happens technically in any show at any time, anywhere!

So let's briefly examine what you do have control over and we'll go from there.

You, the performer, or whatever you call yourself, only have control over one thing. That's right, one thing — and that one thing is *yourself!* Your responsibility to your audience is to at least appear to be in control of *yourself.*

Might I suggest three rather simple things to consider before and after entering the stage area? Preparation, posture, volume and eye contact, and breathing. "Hey, isn't that four or five things?" Sorta! Pay attention, it gets better.

It has been my experience that "failure to launch" — failure to get your act off the ground with the audience — has to do with preparation. A lot of performers do not do their homework. For the sake of simplicity, I'll impart to you some examples of my own failures and successes in this arena.

Back in the '70s, I would throw up before every show because I was so nervous. I was nervous because I was constantly changing my opener. Instead of settling on a sequence of opening lines, I experimented with a new opener for every show. This was nerve-wracking. It was like going onstage for the first time every time. My manager was so tired of making excuses for me that he would say to the other acts, "Do you throw up before you go on?" If they said no, he would immediately say, "You're never going to make it in showbiz!" I didn't make either one of our lives easy.

So, first and foremost, settle on an opener and work it until it becomes second nature. Work it to death. Whether it's a magic trick done to music or a monologue, your opener should be the same every time — at least in the beginning, until you start logging in some real stage time. Why? The main result is to settle the nerves, to help you calm down and allow time for you to develop some focus after first walking out onto the stage. It will give you the confidence you need to feel. And the audience will be at ease if you're at ease.

Secondly, stand up straight and speak louder. Standing up straight makes you look better and allows you to breathe easier. This will also give you more confidence and make you look more professional to your audience. The hardest thing to get any novice to do onstage is to speak louder. Speaking louder, but not shouting, will also give you a heightened level of confidence. Remember, great speakers don't mumble. And they don't move around aimlessly or fiddle with the microphone stand.

Eye contact and breathing are one in the same to me. In college, my speech instructors would suggest that when you look at the audience, imagine their heads were cabbage

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or that the audience was naked. This was to depersonalize the audience and was in some way supposed to keep us from getting nervous. Telling a teenage boy to imagine that his audience was naked was the beginning of a whole new set of problems.

I have found that honest eye contact strengthens your effect on any audience. Well, *almost* any audience. I once performed for the Florida School for the Deaf & Blind in St. Augustine, but that's a whole other story. Look, don't stare at people in your audience for more than four or five seconds at a time or you'll seem like a creepy stalker. Five seconds is about a sentence and a half of talking, depending on how fast you speak. Lance Burton reminded me that a four- or five-second gaze is also very important to the back of the house and to the balcony. This simple practice of looking across and back will help to include the entire audience. Moving your gaze across and to the back will give you the pauses you need, so you look and sound more professional. It will also help you to maintain proper posture, so you appear as a seasoned professional. My friend Bev Bergeron's first tip in his lecture notes is this: "The difference between the professionals and the amateurs is the length of their pauses." And he's right. Pauses allow the audience to take in what you have just said and also allow them time to respond with laughter and applause.

Remember, an audience doesn't respect you for trying to control them; they respect you for controlling yourself. These three — alright, four — things will result in better performances. And, at the end of the day, I think we all want that same thing: better performances, which translate into better magic! **M**

Fielding West teaches StageCraft 101, an open enrollment course in public speaking, available to all individuals between the ages of 12 and 92; see www.fieldingwest.com.