

Acting Safe

Health & safety issues for actors

By Elbin Cleveland

Actors often undergo a great deal of stress. Some roles require a major emotional investment; others are physically exhausting. Two or three rehearsals a day can leave you drained and weak.

However, your body is not only your performance instrument, it also can be your source of income and the basis for an entire career. If your body isn't functioning well, or if it won't work at all, you can lose performance time, public exposure, and income. So it pays, in every way, to carefully protect your health.

As an actor, you need to become familiar with how your physical and emotional selves function and you need to follow a personal regime which works well for you. Here are some guidelines:

Prepare Yourself

Learn how to use your instrument properly, whether you're serious about acting or only enjoying it as an avocation. This is especially important for young performers. Seek the training and assistance of qualified specialists in voice and movement early in your career. Then you won't have bad habits to unlearn later.

A strong body will enhance your ability to play a broad range of roles. Physical exercise, performed regularly, is the single best way to prepare for difficult roles and to maintain flexibility, not to mention bodily and mental health. Consult a qualified trainer to design a moderate workout for you that you can do anywhere, at home or on the road, without expensive equipment.

Eat properly and stay away from junk foods and fad diets. If your busy schedule makes regular meals hard to arrange, snack on fresh fruits and vegetables instead of sugary, salty, fat-saturated chips and candy bars. When you're on tour, look for the nearest "meat and three veggies" restaurant instead of the burger barn.

Always warm up your instrument. If other company members fail to follow this essential practice, establish a program of your own and do it before every rehearsal or performance. Warm-ups not only limber up your body and vocal muscles, they also begin the emotional preparation for performance. A good warm-up relieves muscle tension and reduces nervousness. A good warm-up helps you say to itself, "I'm ready to do this."

Always test new costumes, properties, and scenery before you use them in rehearsal the first time. Warm up with them as you do with your body. This is especially true of any stage prop or scenic piece which may be dangerous. Theater history is studded with stories of actors made ill, injured, or killed by props and scenery. Be particularly cautious of special effects. Watch as they are set up. Learn how they operate. Understand all the safety precautions. Ask one of the technicians to stand in for you and to demonstrate what you must do to be safe as well as

to make the effect successful. If they won't do that, then you shouldn't either. No effect is worth illness, injury, or death.

Maintain Yourself

Be alert for injurious substances in makeup, hair preparations, deodorants, and perfumes. Although all American-made and marketed products must meet certain safety standards, these standards vary greatly from one product or ingredient to another. Furthermore, actors are more at risk because they use these things at a much higher level over a much longer period of time than the general public. Chronic exposure can produce chronic health problems, including allergic reactions.

Never share your makeup or borrow from someone else. The same is true for water bottles, makeup brushes, combs, eyeliners, towels, applicators and all personal items. We all harbor a wide variety of bacteria all over our body. Such sharing is a sure way to spread disease. Professional performers know this and make sure their makeup kit is fully stocked before they come to work.

Listen to your body. If you hurt, be sure you know why. The adage, "No pain, no gain," should be viewed with caution. It is often used to justify excessive physical demands on performers by inconsiderate or tyrannical directors and by misguided physical trainers. It's a good thing to stretch yourself with a new role, but not if it seriously strains your instrument. The sooner you learn the difference, the longer, the more productive, and more rewarding your performance career will be.

Stay away from tobacco and drugs. Nicotine is addictive and can cause mouth, nasal, throat, lung, and stomach cancer. It increases your chance of stroke and heart disease and causes premature aging of the skin. It's a one-way, express ticket to feeling old and looking old before your time. It also makes you more susceptible to bronchial problems and voice troubles--and what actor needs those?

Despite some anecdotes to the contrary, drugs do not improve your performance. They only make you think you're performing better by heightening internal sensations. In fact, they actually reduce your external sensitivity, which is essential for a quality performance. If your mind is focused inward, it simply cannot respond to the nuance of your stage partner's performance or to the audience. By taking drugs you are basically shutting yourself off from outward awareness which is the very basis of live performance.

Allow for rest time. The harder you push your mind and body, the more recuperative time you need every day. Studies have shown you can't deprive yourself of sleep and then "catch up" on the weekend. Getting enough rest can be difficult. Many performers also have a "day job" and/or family responsibilities. Actors often are still "high" after a performance so they go out for food and drinks afterwards. Late meal and late alcoholic drinks actually reduce your ability to rest easily, to sleep deeply, and they cause you to put on weight. Trying to talk over the noise in a crowded bar puts a strain on the vocal chords, too. Limit late night socializing.

Finally, learn how to manage stress. Emotional pressure upsets your performance and shortens your life. If you don't learn how to manage it, it will manage you. Learn meditation, relaxation, "self-hypnosis," biofeedback, or some other method. Learn how to shed negative charges and maximize the positive ones. Then you'll always be prepared, rested, and ready when the curtain goes up.

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