

Possessing Presence

Posted on [October 1, 2009](#) by [Kathryn Holmes](#)

Dance Spirit

Margot Fonteyn had bad feet, but her lush, generous port de bras and the passion and joy etched across her face made her mesmerizing to watch. Bob Fosse was round-shouldered and pigeon-toed, but the way he engaged and involved every muscle in his body while dancing, from his eyebrows to his pinky fingers, drew the audience to him. Perhaps neither had technique that would meet today's rigorous standards, but both went on to become legends in their respective genres—thanks in no small part to their innate ability to connect with audiences, to draw the eye. They were magnetic. Like Peter Gallagher's character said in *Center Stage*, "When Margot Fonteyn danced, you couldn't take your eyes off her."

Some people are just born with charisma. It's in their walk, their posture and their gaze. But for the rest of us, developing stellar stage presence can take practice and attention. And let's face it: In today's dance climate, technique just isn't enough. The most memorable—and marketable—performers merge technical prowess with the ability to grab the audience from the very first chaîné, shuffle, six step or strut.

What is Stage Presence?

Having great stage presence is not as simple as plastering on a mega-smile or pained expression. That grin or grimace won't mean anything if the audience doesn't believe it's genuine. "Movement is more believable when it's not just from your body, but from an emotional place," explains "So You Think You Can Dance" contemporary choreographer Sonya Tayeh.

Whether you're telling a story or moving abstractly, expressing joy or sorrow or even a lack of emotion, it's important to pull the audience into your onstage world. Dancers who are being true to themselves also seem true to those watching.

"SYTYCD" Season 4's Courtney Galiano found inspiration on the competition circuit: "I hated when the judges would sit and chomp on their Doritos while people were dancing," Galiano says. "When I'm onstage, I don't want to hear a pin drop." How does she continue to pull that off? "When I go out there, it's *my* stage," she says. "I am completely in that moment, emotionally invested." Believing in what you're doing and letting yourself express what you're feeling onstage is step one toward capturing your audience.

Emotional energy is only part of the package, though; stage presence also shines through your physicality. When you're dancing, "elongate your lines, and make sure your energy can be felt even when your back is to the audience," Galiano advises. "Finish all the moves. Fill the space."

And don't forget that power can be packed into even the smallest of steps. Fosse, for instance, was a master of tiny, precise movements that beckoned to the audience. "[Fosse taught us that] small, subtle moves must be executed with as much life and intensity as a grand jeté," says Dana Moore, who teaches theater dance at NYC's Steps on Broadway. "In 'Big Spender' from *Sweet Charity*, we were given the image of a full blender turned on high with the top on tight—an absolutely still container with the internal ingredients whirring madly." Fosse could draw attention while completely still—just by touching his hat.

To Act or Not To Act?

What's the difference between having stage presence and acting? Depends on who you ask. If you're in a character role—think musical theater, or story ballets like *Romeo and Juliet*—presence and acting are inextricably linked. "When you're dancing a character, 'he' or 'she' will inform every move," Moore says. Portraying someone else onstage means moving—and acting—as that person or creature would.

Still, especially outside of musical theater, acting skill often takes a backseat to simple performance appeal. In the hierarchy of the ballet world, for instance, dancers might not be given "acting" roles until they've shown standout stage presence in the corps. Additionally, "some dancers are better actors than others, often because they have more experience with full-length ballets," says William DeGregory, director of Pennsylvania Ballet II. "There are also principal dancers who excel in Balanchine pieces that don't require acting, but they still demonstrate wonderful presence."

The best advice may be to not think of what you're doing onstage as "acting." "The word 'acting' can lead to make-believe," Tayeh cautions. "Effort goes into creating an emotion, when in reality the emotion is already there in each piece." If you try to display the emotion you think you *should* be feeling instead of finding a real connection to the music, story or steps, your stage presence may suffer.

How Can I Develop Presence?

- **Start in the studio.** Don't assume stage presence is separate from technique. "When technique becomes second nature, you don't think about it anymore. You gain confidence," Tayeh says. "But if you're constantly worrying about what you're doing, how can you express a sincere emotion?"
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Being well-rehearsed will leave you free to explore your performance onstage. "The more you dance a piece, the easier it becomes," says DeGregory. "You can experiment, and bring out new things each time."
- **Build your musicality.** Musicality is a big part of stage presence. Onstage, you need to be confident not only in the main counts or musical cues, but also in the nuances in between. How do you do that? "Breathe with the music," DeGregory explains. Then you'll be in sync with your score, even if the choreography doesn't have you dancing exactly on the beat! Additionally, Moore recommends asking yourself questions like "How do you feel about the music?" and "Where does it take you?" to connect better emotionally to the music and find yourself within the choreography.
- **Try something new.** Sometimes stronger presence can be found in the smallest of adjustments. "Attack a step or the role differently," DeGregory says. "Maybe don't be so aggressive, or look for freedom of the arms or head."
- **Find pleasure in it.** If you love what you're doing and are comfortable onstage, the audience will trust you. "Don't just do the moves because your teacher told you to," Galiano says. "Move your body because *you* want to move."
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Remember, learning to maximize your stage presence will take time. "It's okay to not know it all right away," Moore says. "Keep practicing and allow it to creep up on you—presence will come to you in a more specific and truthful way if you don't try to slap it on or force it."

If nothing else, know that working on your stage presence won't just help you communicate with an audience. You're also finding ways to make dancing more exciting and fulfilling for yourself—and what could be better than that?

In Their Words

Five pros share what stage presence means to them.

Afra Hines, Broadway's *In The Heights*

"To me, stage presence starts with being comfortable with what you're doing, because you allow the audience to see a human, instead of just seeing someone in a costume. Go for the ride fully—that's when the audience can't take their eyes off you. They feel connected, like your story is their story, too."

Sterling Hyltin, principal, New York City Ballet

"Stage presence is essentially my personality coming out onstage. When I dance a role that fits my personality, I feel that I have the most presence. However, dancing a role that fits your persona is not always going to happen. That's when I let the role take over—my stage presence becomes a mirror to the way dancing that ballet moves me, from the inside out."

Mandy Moore, choreographer

"Stage presence is that imaginary light that shines down on a performer, making everyone else on the stage disappear. It's that look in the eye that says, 'Watch me and don't take your eyes off me.' It's when a dancer's body screams experience—you can see in every movement the hours spent in the studio working to perfect the craft."

Carson Murphy, freelance tap dancer

"Tap dancers are also musicians, so we have to communicate with the music. Stage presence is the ability to seamlessly mesh these two parts of tap, dance and music, while at the same time interacting with your fellow dancers and the audience. When you are able to give energy and joy to the people around you—when you're deeply alive and present—that comes across to the audience as great stage presence."

Sara VonGillern, "SYTYCD" Season 3 and member of The Syrenz, an all-female hip-hop crew

"As a dancer, I'm constantly being molded into new characters. When I perform, I become a different person. On the Avril Lavigne tour, I transformed into a 'punky skater girl.' The moment I stepped on the stage I became this spunky, bratty punk rocker, throwing my fists in the air and head-banging."