

Lizzie Franks speaks with performers about stage fright and self-doubt, and asks the professionals to share their strategies for shifting to a healthy mindset



Actor and acting coach Peter Feeney
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KEEP FOCUSED AND GO FOR GOLD

It was during her days as an elite athlete that Angie Ford developed an interest in managing nerves and self-doubt in order to give the best performance possible. A former national gold-medal swimmer, Ford is now one of Australia's leading performance coaches, with a client list

that includes business professionals, athletes, musicians, comedians and actors.

"I feel blessed to have had mindset trainers at the Australian Institute of Sport, who have helped me to understand what nerves are and how it's natural for your body to prepare for action in this way," she says. "We don't learn this in school. The experience of nerves is so visceral, but it doesn't mean you have to think, 'Oh, there's something wrong with me. This is going to be a bad race. I'm not going to be able to go on the gun.'"

Rather than eradicating the natural feeling of nervousness, Ford believes actors can learn what to do when these feelings hit and practice taking charge of their thinking. "In that moment, be really honest about what your body is experiencing without making it wrong, or embellishing it. Reconnect to why you're there, to others, and to what you really love about acting.

"Another thing which is really helpful is to humanise who you're about to work with – the casting director, director, a more-experienced actor. Remember they are a human being with dreams, fears, and a family who is here to do their job too, just like you. They want this to

be an amazing production too. Holding a bigger perspective on life is really important.

"Auditions and getting jobs can mean the absolute world to an actor. This can however, create a stressful perspective of success-or-fail. Remember, you're not going to war. It's another chance to do what you love – to play, to act."

Ford works with actors to shift the mindset from 'getting' to 'giving'. "So often when we're auditioning, what is unconsciously happening is we're desperately hoping to get a job. When that's happened, we've slipped into the future, and we're not present with what we're doing. Our other unconscious behaviours may then show up, like people-pleasing or perfectionism, because we want to get it right so badly.

"These things aren't wrong, they're just strategies we've developed, but they can be very stressful, and we don't perform well when we're stressed. Switching your mindset from getting a job to genuinely giving what you want in that room is a subtle nuance that can completely change your own acting experience, your relationships and your outcomes."

Actor Emily Gruhl who worked with Angie one to one says this strategy was essential for her audition for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, in which she was cast as Minnie. "The key was to go into the room with the intention of helping the casting directors do their job. It meant I wasn't trying to get anything from the casting directors but was trying to genuinely help them solve their problem of needing to find the right actor for this role."

Director Peter Andrikidis (*Pulse*, *Bite Club*,



Actor Alastair Osment



Actor Emily Gruhl

Underbelly Files: Chopper) believes that having an understanding of how the casting process works can assist actors in facing rejection and associated feelings of self-doubt. "The best thing an actor can do is become a reader and see how it actually works behind the scenes. It often comes down to something like chemistry or looking like a family member who has already been cast."

"When it comes to self-doubt, it's always worth asking: Is there something I can do to give myself more certainty?" says Ford. "Yes, there are a lot of things out of our control, but there's also a lot within our control.

"First, be in tune with your body. Is the doubt coming from something like not having enough sleep or having low blood sugar? Get those small things right first. When your body is sending you doubt, trust that maybe you need clarity on something, and move to an action that will get you clarity.

"Often, nerves before an audition can be due to a lack of preparation. You will take so much doubt out of your auditions if you prepare well. I don't think preparing has to take a lot of time – a common myth. Start with 10 minutes a day and if, at the 10-minute mark, you want to keep going, do so. But if you're not into it, you've done 10 minutes that day. It's amazing what stays in your "body memory" when you sit with something regularly rather a lot."

Actor Simon Ward has experienced stage fright and performance anxiety several times. "For me, it generally shows up in the 10 minutes before I go on, [although] sometimes it has paid me a visit while I'm on stage. Symptoms included a dry mouth, being frozen to the spot while my body was surging with adrenaline, mind blank and racing at the same time, a fear of going on set or stage, and shaking. It affects people differently, even though it's the same neurological threat-response system engaging."

Ward now uses body and mindfulness exercises to keep things in check. "I'm no longer as thrown off-balance when it shows up as I used to be," he says. He believes giving someone a few minutes to practice their mindfulness exercises to calm their body and mind can make a huge difference, and should be common practice on set, "so that it becomes as normal as stretching your body before, during and after a performance or a take".

Actor and acting coach Peter Feeney, who runs an acting studio in Auckland and teaches in drama schools, regularly works with his actors on areas such as nerves, self-doubt and confidence.

"Acting is not therapy," he says. "It's a tough and exacting vocation, and you need to sort your head out to do it. That may mean taking up yoga, meditation or therapy, gardening or whatever works for you. Before you can apply craft, before you can work, you need to be emotionally available. To act, you cannot allow your fear or insecurity or behavioural

conditioning to block the emotional reality that is really going on for you internally. You need to learn to live with the discomfort that comes with the fear and nerves of performance, and not put your energy into pretending you feel something else. As soon as you do, the audience will 'see' the lie, and so 'see' the work, 'see' the actor."

Feeney is a proponent of a strategy called 'failure imagining', which he says is used to great effect in sport and business. "It turns out that positive thinking will get you so far, but it does not prepare you for what to do when things go wrong. So, in advance of any big day, write down your greatest fears: everything that

"Finally, you're not only dealing effectively with anticipated problems, but working with a problem-solving mindset that allows you to successfully solve unanticipated ones, as well."

Staying focused on why you act is crucial for a healthy mindset, according to Ford.

Actor Alastair Osment, who has starred in productions such as *Rake* and *Deadline Gallipoli* and is one of Ford's clients, says shifting his focus on the 'why' has helped to empower him as an actor, particularly during a setback or disappointment. "Surely the hardest part of being a professional actor is missing out on jobs you've auditioned for, without any explanation. Or perhaps it's the



Performance coach Angie Ford presenting at the University of Oslo

might go wrong for you ahead of that event – every difficulty, every humiliation, every failure that might ensue. For each fear, think of a strategy to deal with it. This technique is also called a 'pre-mortem'; it sounds negative, but it's not. It's an empowering tool in three ways...

"One, you're writing down over and over – every time you're about to step into an audition room or set – what turn out to be the same old, surprisingly banal and generalised fears: 'I'm scared I'll lose my lines, won't connect with the reader, get really nervous' etc. After writing down these neurotic, and sometimes ancient, worries a few times, you start to disdain them – and they lose their power over you.

"Two, by anticipating failures but coming up with strategies to deal with them, you are taking active control over your craft. Ideas about ways to recover from failure give you confidence. If your strategy to deal with something doesn't help one day, you can try something else next time. You're growing as an artist – no longer a victim, but a grown-up collaborator.

self-doubt that creeps in before day one of rehearsals or before the big scene.

"There's power in understanding what acting means to you and what it nourishes beyond the financial compensation. Seeking out creative partnerships and wanting to do business with organisations with your shared values is going to be a much more fulfilling creative experience than simply getting paid to be in a show where the focus is entirely superficial."

"Focus on progress, not perfection," says Ford. "If you genuinely, in your heart of hearts, love the craft of acting, play the long game with yourself. Focus on your craft. Focus on building relationships. Focus on understanding why you act and the things that you love about acting, and nurture yourself and those things."

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