A functioning harness supports Spider-Man as he completes another death-defying leap.
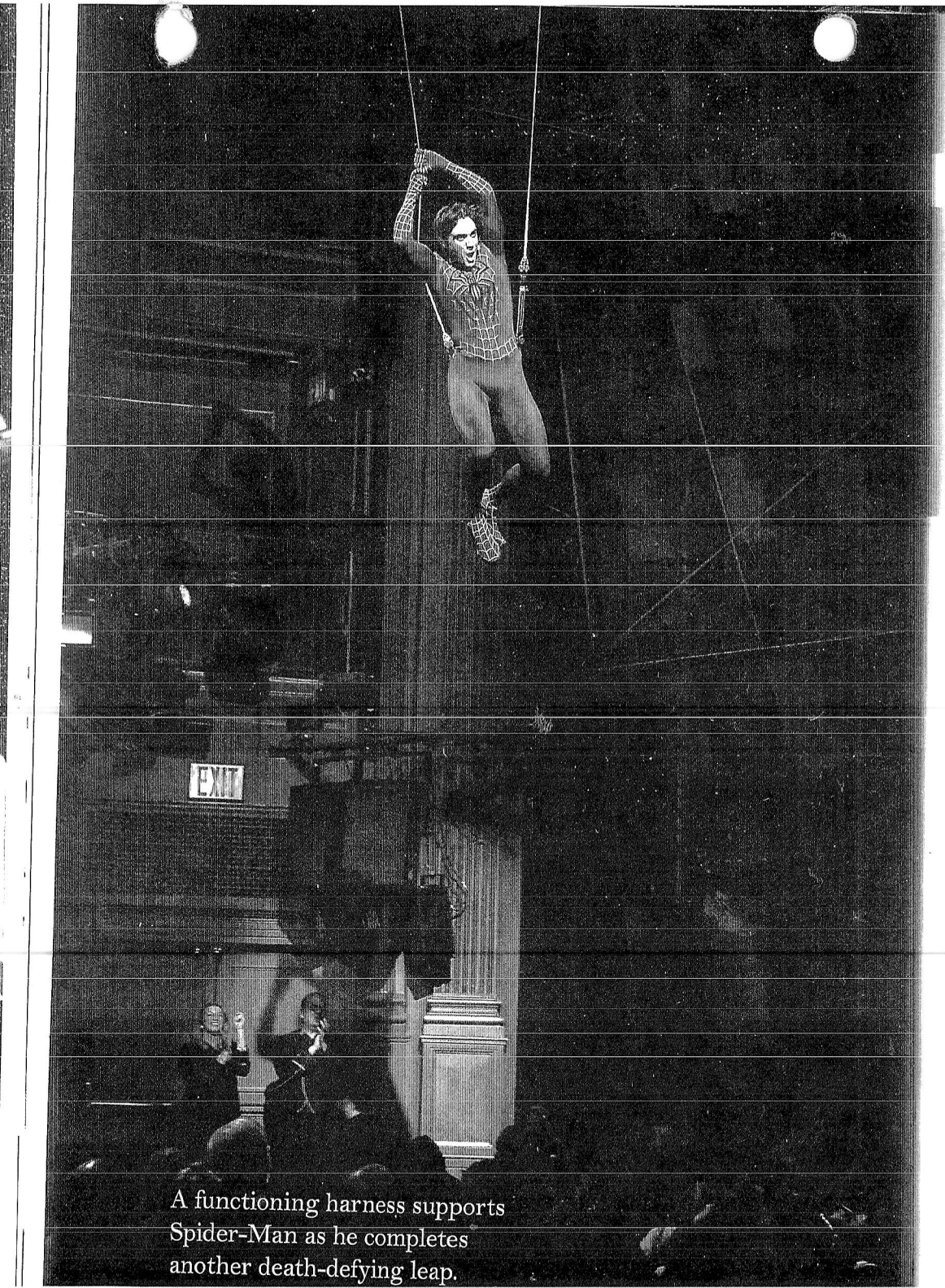
MISSTEPS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

n this chapter, we'll take a look at some of the common missteps beginning actors are likely to take as they grapple with the challenges of playing a role and being onstage. We'll also consider some tried-and-true techniques for avoiding these missteps and staying on course.

Sometimes in theater, a misstep, or mistake, is not the fault of the actor. It could be the result of faulty set design, for example, or the failure of a piece of technical equipment. In December 2010, a Broadway theater mounted a production of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*. At a crucial moment in the play, Spiderman was supposed to leap off a bridge and perform a daring maneuver to rescue his girlfriend. His stunt double executed the first part—leaping off the bridge. Unfortunately, the safety harness he was wearing flew open, and the poor man plummeted 30 feet (9 meters), crashing into the orchestra pit. He survived and eventually recovered, but the crash landing fractured his skull and broke his ribs. The

accident wasn't the stunt double's fault; the fault was with the safety harness, which a crew member may have failed to adjust correctly.

Speaking Too Softly

Fortunately, missteps committed by beginning actors are rarely so dramatic or life threatening. However, they can still take away from the quality of the show. One of the most common missteps is for actors to think that a normal speaking voice is loud enough for a live performance. If you can hear yourself, and your fellow actors can also hear you, then the audience will hear you too. No way! While this may be true in a theater with excellent acoustics, your stage voice needs to be "cranked up" to an appropriate volume, so even people sitting in the last row can plainly hear you.

So how can you make sure your onstage voice is loud enough? One way is to have a friend sit in the last row and record you delivering your lines, using what you think is an adequate volume. Then listen to the recording. Chances are the playback will be proof enough that you need to work on projection, which is sending your voice as far as it needs to travel during a performance without straining your vocal cords.

Another technique for learning how to project your voice is to experience what it feels like to speak at the correct volume. Then practice speaking at that volume until it begins to come more easily and not sound forced. And remember: the audience not only needs to hear you; they need to understand what you're saying. Reciting tongue twisters and practicing various vocal exercises will improve your ability to clearly articulate your lines.

Turning Away from the Audience

In general, it's never a good idea for actors to turn away from the audience, especially when delivering their lines. It's almost impossible for the audience to hear what the actors are saying when they've got their backs turned. A helpful rule of thumb is for actors to practice the three-quarters rule. Even if your character is not speaking or moving in a particular scene, and your head is facing upstage (away from the audience), make sure three-quarters of your body is viewable by the audience. The main thing is to stay connected with your audience. You want to keep them engaged with you as the character instead of seeing you as a motionless body taking up space on the stage.

Wearing the Cloak of Invisibility

Some inexperienced actors may assume that if they're onstage but not saying anything, then the audience can't see them, or at least is not paying any attention to them. And if that's the case, then they can break character and talk with a fellow actor, or stand there looking bored. The same holds true for actors who are backstage, in the wings or some other part of the theater. If they can't see the audience, then the audience can't see (or hear) them, so they're free to gab, joke around, or whatever.

To avoid the mistake of believing they're "invisible," actors need to bear a few things in mind: If they can see the audience, then the audience will probably be able to see them. If they break character while onstage or fool around backstage, they will distract the audience from paying attention to the main action of the play, and that will hurt the production, something you don't want to do if you consider yourself a team player.
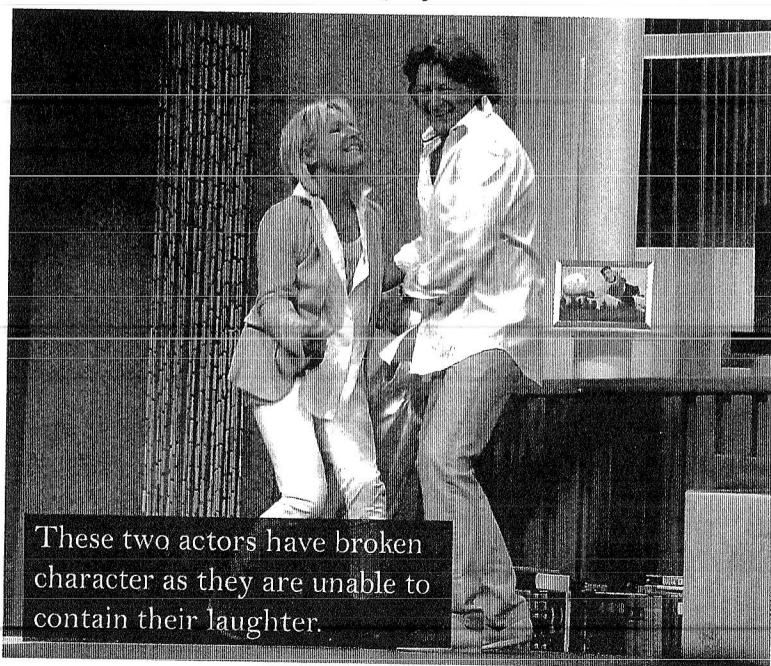
These two actors have broken character as they are unable to contain their laughter.

Breaking Character

Have you ever watched a **blooper** reel? This is a sequence of mistakes made by the actors during the filming of a movie or TV show. The bloopers typically show the actors breaking character in the middle of a scene. To break character means to destroy the illusion that you *are* the part you're

THE AUTHOR'S BIG BLOOPER

It all began with a tough bag of potato chips. As soon as I clamped my teeth on that tightly sealed bag and tried to rip it open, I felt a stabbing pain in my front tooth. That's when I knew I'd have to see the dentist.

A root canal when I was fourteen had killed this tooth. Eventually, the crown had become so brittle that too much pressure would cause it to break. Fast-forward a few weeks after my encounter with the potato chips. I'm performing in a play for middle-school audiences. My dentist had given me a temporary crown, which he had glued to the root. Just in case the crown came loose, I kept a tube of commercial dental adhesive with me at all times.

The character I'm playing is the legendary lumberjack Paul Bunyan. Unexpectedly, the glue loses its grip, and my front tooth sails out of my mouth and lands on the far side of the stage. But I don't break character. Instead, I curl my upper lip over my front teeth to hide the gap and make Paul sound like an old, toothless prospector searching for something onstage. Luckily, I soon find the missing tooth. While my scene partner continues the scene, I duck behind the curtain, squeeze a blob of adhesive on to the root, and then jam the tooth into the adhesive. Presto! I'm young Paul Bunyan once more, ready to bounce back into the show.

playing instead of the person you are in everyday life. As long as an actor is onstage, he or she must remain in character. One way in which inexperienced actors break character during a performance is to respond, as themselves, to something the other actors are saying or doing, If the dialogue or the actions are especially humorous, actors may be tempted to break out laughing instead of remaining in character.

Exits and entrances are perfect opportunities for actors to make a major misstep: entering a scene out of character or dropping their character the minute they exit. The life of the part you're playing doesn't end when a scene is over and you leave the stage. As part of your acting preparation, you need to know your character's **through line**—what is going on in his life between the scenes. When you exit, you're re-entering that life, and when you return to the stage, you're coming from whatever was going on in your character's life before your entrance.

Another reason for breaking character is when something goes wrong. Even experienced actors have been known to "go up" during a scene. When actors "go up," they have forgotten their lines and may not have the slightest clue about what comes next in the scene. For a pro, this sudden "blanking" is usually temporary, and the play goes on. But for a beginner, it can feel terrifying. To relieve this anxiety, the actor might grab the first word that comes to mind, which could very well be the word "sorry," which he addresses to the audience as himself. In effect, he's saying, "I'm sorry I forgot my lines. I hope you'll forgive me. I'm new at this. Just give me a moment to get back on track."

The costume for *Mrs. Doubtfire* presents the lead character as a stereotype.

Getting back on track is the right move. Saying sorry, however, is not. To keep their cool and avoid breaking out of character even when they "go up," actors can practice saying their lines in the wrong sequence and then finding their way back while remaining in character. During the performance, if you lose your way, keep talking. The audience won't know if you're saying the correct lines or not. They only know what they're seeing and hearing. So give them something to hear and see until the right words jump back into your head.

Relying on Stereotypes

A young person playing the part of an older person, such as a grandmother, might color her hair gray, put on a "granny dress," and hobble around onstage with a bad case of the shakes. This actor is playing a stereotype—a conventional, mostly unrealistic image of her character. Instead of working hard to develop a believable character with a unique personality, she's opted for the easy way out.

So how do you avoid relying on stereotypes when you're developing a role? One way is to look carefully at the people around you. Study their movements, their facial expressions, their ways of speaking and dressing. If you're playing an older person, focus your observations on people of a certain age. Your aim as an actor is to see through stereotypes and discover what makes your character unique.

To achieve this, create a detailed backstory of your character's life before the action in the play. Write down what your character wants in each scene and what obstacles are in her way. For a character who is much older than you, you could also ask yourself what her fondest memories are. What did she dream of accomplishing in her life when she was your age? What did she love most or hate most in her life? Questions like these will help you transform your character into a specific, believable individual.

Ignoring the Director's Notes

During rehearsals and performances, the director is observing the action onstage and is taking notes. Part of his or her job is to enable the actors to improve their performance through every stage of the production process, right up to opening night and beyond. Actors who disregard these notes or don't take them seriously are doing a disservice to themselves and to the play.
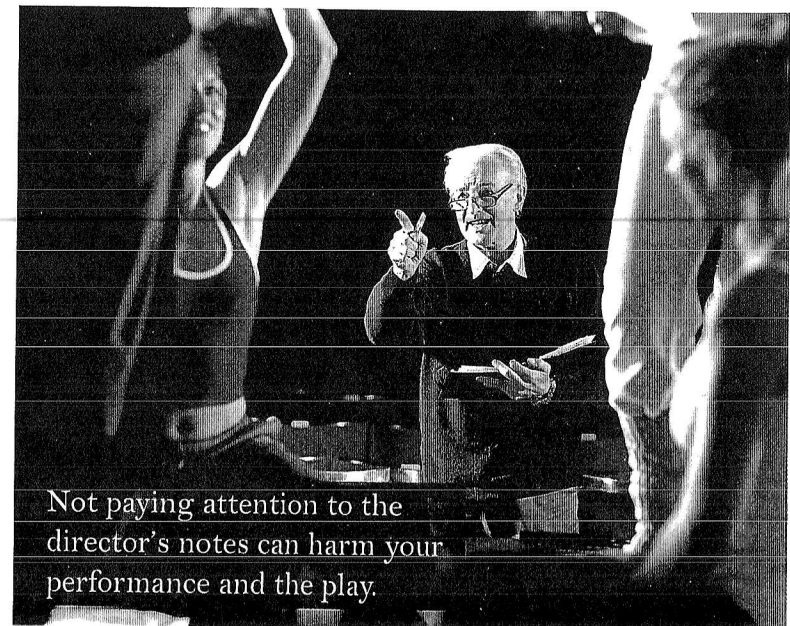

Not paying attention to the director's notes can harm your performance and the play.

If you disagree with a note, the best course of action is to talk it over with your director. Politely explain why you believe your character wouldn't do what the note is telling him to do. It's possible the director will see your point of view and not have a problem with your disregarding the note.

A Nasty Case of Stage Fright

It's not unusual for first-time actors as well as seasoned pros to experience stage fright—that overwhelming, heart-thumping, cold and clammy, butterflies-in-the-stomach feeling that you just can't go out there and face an audience. Your confidence is shattered. The fear of making a complete fool of yourself has taken over your entire emotional life, and there's nothing you can do to escape this fear and get on with the show.
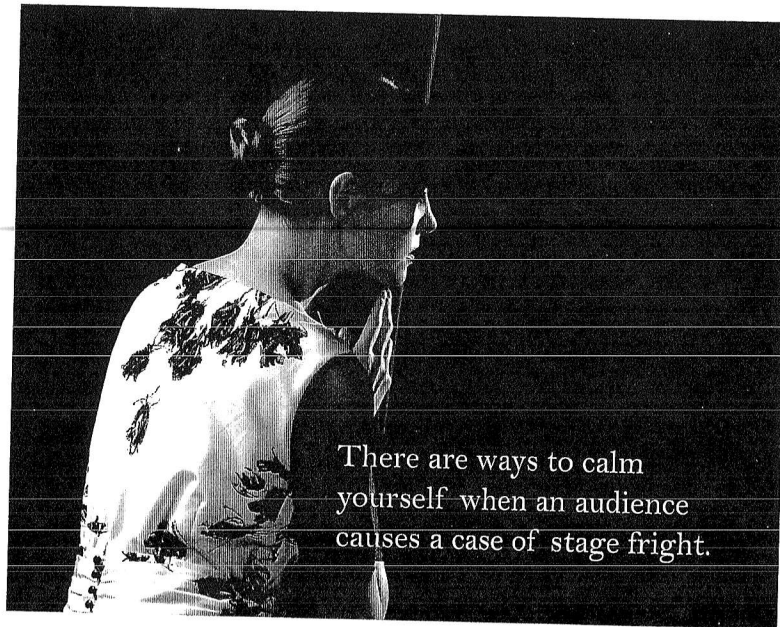
There are ways to calm yourself when an audience causes a case of stage fright.

Stage fright is a scary thing. Instead of releasing your creativity, it can freeze you up inside and keep you from performing at your best. If you should ever find yourself standing in the wings or sitting in the dressing room with a nasty case of stage fright, remind yourself that you deserve to be where you are—ready to go onstage. You got the part after an audition, you worked hard during rehearsals, you followed directions, and you've succeeded in capturing the heart and soul of your character. Now it's time to share your work with an audience.

And don't forget to breathe. Use your breath to relax. Try this: inhale slowly to a count of four, then exhale slowly to a count of four. Repeat this sequence until you begin to feel the tension ebbing. Remember: You're not alone. You're part of a team with your fellow actors. Depend on them. They've got your back, and chances are they're feeling as shaky and unsure as you. So be brave, and act your socks off.

Good Manners for Actors

It's probably fair to say that every occupation has its own set of rules for how to behave. Acting in theater is no different. These rules are a kind of etiquette—guidelines for knowing what is and isn't acceptable. They apply to your interactions with fellow actors and your behavior onstage as well as offstage:

1. Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothes to rehearsals; since you'll be making notes, be

sure to bring something to write with and on. A notebook and pencil will suffice.

2. Be on time for rehearsals. If the call time for a rehearsal is 7:00 p.m., arrive at the theater by at least 6:30 so you have time to warm up, review any notes from the previous rehearsal, and start the new rehearsal fully present and ready to work.

3. Listen to what the director tells you; take the director's notes seriously and incorporate them into your work.

4. Never give an acting note to another actor. Also, never accept an acting note from anyone but the director. If you have an issue with something a fellow actor is doing during a scene, discuss this with the director, not the actor. Similarly, never tell members of the technical crew how to do their job.

5. If you need to practice using your props, arrange with the director or stage manager to come to the theater between rehearsals. Before every rehearsal and performance, check your props to make sure they're where they're supposed to be and ready for you to use. When you're done using them, return them to their proper place. If any of them are missing or damaged, be sure to notify the stage manager.

6. Once you have received your particular costume or set of costumes, do not alter them in any way. If something feels uncomfortable,

bring this to the attention of the director or costumer.

7. Keep the green room and the dressing room clean and tidy. Avoid bringing any food or beverage into the dressing room where an accidental spill can damage or ruin costumes and/or makeup supplies.

8. Be sure to follow the action of the play so you don't miss the cue for your next entrance. Whatever you do, don't watch the play from the wings; during a performance, this area needs to be kept clear, so actors can easily get on and off stage, and crew members can perform their duties.

9. When you're offstage, talk softly to avoid disturbing or distracting the actors who are performing onstage.

10. While waiting in the wings to enter the stage for your next scene, be sure you can't see the audience. If you can see them, then they can see you, and that's something you don't want until you're onstage and in the scene.