

## Consciousness Fragments Again.....

### Why Actors Experience Blackouts during Performance?

#### Abstract

This paper explores the idea of consciousness fragments in live performance situations. Consciousness fragments is a psychophysical condition that some actors experience during performance. This psychophysical condition is commonly known as 'stage fright' and a little research has been done to explore its nature. Bella Merlin provides an insightful investigation on how the actor confronts with the fragmentation of consciousness and ways of preparation for this psychological ambush. Built on such research, this paper discusses why actors experience such psychosomatic transformation during performance. Aligned with cognitive science, this paper further extends the discussion by applying phenomenological exploration to such psychosomatic ambush through a case study investigated at the study program of acting at the Department of Drama and Theatre at UVPA, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Actor Nipuni Sharada's acting experience in a monologue performance is investigated as a case to scrutinize the complexity of such 'alienated self' in the performance situation. This paper thus concludes that the consciousness fragments is not a pathological state but rather a way of rearranging and restructuring the actor's corporeal connection to a particular performance environment. In so doing, this paper suggests a phenomenological understanding of the consciousness and its fragmentation in the live performance situation.

Key words: Consciousness, Live Performance, Consciousness Fragments, Psychophysical ambush

#### Short Bio

Dr Saumya Liyanage is a theatre and film actor whose acting career has been expanded for two decades. He received his Masters of Creative Arts Degree from Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia and in 2015, he received his PhD from La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria. Saumya is a senior lecturer in drama and theatre and he is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka. His latest book is titled *Meditations on Acting: Essays on Theory Practice and Performance* published by DEV publishing, Mount Lavinia.

Dr Saumya Liyanage

Dean

Faculty of Graduate Studies

University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA)

21, Albert Crescent

Colombo 07, Sri Lanka

E: [spdl@mail.com](mailto:spdl@mail.com)

T: +94 718328086

# Consciousness Fragments Again.....<sup>1</sup>

## Why actors experience blackouts during performance?

Dr Saumya Liyanage

Dean | Faculty of Graduate Studies  
UVPA, Colombo, Sri Lanka  
[spdl@mail.com](mailto:spdl@mail.com)



Figure 1: Actor and Graduate Student Nipuni Sharada

### Introduction

This paper examines the idea of consciousness fragments commonly known as stage fright that actors experience in performance situations. Bella Merlin's seminal paper titled '*consciousness fragments: A personal encounter with stage fright in performance*' explores the cognitive and cognitive-phenomenological aspects of the actor's stage fright. In this paper, I will further extend the discussion of consciousness fragments in actor's art by bringing some experiences pertaining to acting program at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka. In this, I will explore student actor Nipuni Sharada's experience during a short play performed and further discuss how she experienced this psychophysical disruption during the performance. Furthermore, this paper expands the discussion of actor's consciousness fragments not only as a psychological dilemma but a condition of phenomenal body that is operated and adjusted its schematic structures with changing environments in the theatre. Having argued that, I want to show that the stage fright is not a psycho-pathological condition but a 'phenomenological state of being' and this fragmentation can be overridden with the correct training and cultivating habits pertaining to the performance in context.

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## Sharada's fear

The curtain was rising and I was watching the series of short plays at the Students theatre festival titled "Academic Thespian Theatre Festival organized by the students' drama society of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2016. The audience was packed with undergraduates, academics, industry professionals and parents. The audience lights went off. The curtain raised and in the middle of the proscenium theatre, a girl with a skirt and a blouse appeared under the spot light. She is Sharada. This is the monologue she was rehearsing for the last few days. Everyone was anxious. Sharada started her performance.....



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 2 and 3: Sharada starts her performance again just after her experience of consciousness fragments

A few moments passed. I was watching the play for a couple of minutes. Suddenly everything changed.....I noticed that something went wrong with the actor on stage. She was struggling to utter her lines but suddenly stopped her performance. The audience was engulfed in the darkness waiting to see the next moment. the actor was frozen on stage; everything was stand still.....then, Sharada looked at the audience and said in a trembling voice....."I am sorry" .....and then she ran to the dressing room. At this moment, I realized that something went wrong with the ongoing performance. I suddenly got up and ran to the dressing room.

When writing this paper, I met Sharada, several times and at one occasion, I was able to interview her about this dark experience. Sharada speaks now:

*During my performance, I suddenly lost a key line of the text and lost the control of the performance. I incorrectly uttered a line which was written in the previous text (The play text was continuously been edited and rewritten throughout the rehearsal process). But I realized that I have missed a very important line and also came to understand that I*

*cannot go further without this line. I was vehemently trying to correct what I did and trying to remember the lost line but I realized that my attempt was pointless because I was going away from the line further as I was continuously trying to remind it again and again. I felt like I was thrown onto the stage from nowhere. Then I began to realize that I am no longer Kanchana but I am Sharada....and I am in front of an audience. I began to feel that my throat was drying out and hard to breath; I coughed a few times.....I stood still where I was.....I heard that the prompter was murmuring the line....but I could not hear.....no I heard it but...however, I didn't hear it.....I did not look at the backstage people but I sensed that they were eagerly watching me from both sides of the theatre. I saw them moving in slow motion.....I was directly looking at the audience though it was partly in darkness, I was seeing very face of the audience including my parents, my uncle and aunt, my thammamma (grandmother), friends, teachers and professionals. I heard nothing....except a deep sound of beeeep.....my eyes were running around the audience and they were looking at me and the they were moving slow motion too. Gradually, I saw that the audience was enlarging like a big figure together and moving up like a tall image. I felt like being in a glass bowl....everything outside began to engulf in the darkness as it was like dimming the lights after finishing a play. It was a terrifying feeling of being in a glass bowl and... my vision was blurred. I felt like many humans like me started talking in my head. I think I was standing on the box on stage for a long time while keeping my right hand up.....I don't know how long I was standing there...but felt very uncomfortable and I said "sorry" to the audience and ran from the stage to the dressing room" ( Pers. Comm. Sharada, 10 June 2018).*

## **Cognition and Acting**

Long time ago, Stanislavski understood the importance of being on stage and forgetting (bracketing) the mundane daily life on the stage. Stanislavski instructed his actors to be live through the character (*Perezhivanie*) without focusing on their daily realities existing outside the proscenium. He introduced the idea of 'forth wall' allowing actors to believe and engage in the performance space by bracketing the life-world beyond footlight. This idea of forth wall allows the actor to imagine her/his environment and heightening the awareness of being with other actors on stage through given circumstances.

Bella Merlin, an actor and the actor training theorist have documented a compelling account of her encounter with the stage fright. Writing an article about her own experience, Merlin explores the 'ambush' or the 'consciousness fragments' that actors experience and how this phenomenon is related to the construction of self and self – defense mechanism operated in the human organism. Drawing Antonio Damasio's long running research on human brain and cognition psychology, she argues that the actor's self is a construction of auto-biography related to the lived past and anticipated future (Damasio, 1999, p. 196).

Nicholos Ridout also writes extensively about the stage fright and says that it is a 'violent exposure' similar to 'a snail ripped off from the protection of its shell', or rather the infinite vulnerability of the slug that has never known the comfort of a shell' (Ridout, 2006). As he further argues, the stage fright is not just a all-time psychological dilemma of actors but a cultural and social specific catastrophe that has been immersed through 'existential pressure of the urban living (Ridout 2006, p. 41).

## Phenomenology and stage fright

My intention of this paper therefore, is to provide a phenomenological understanding of the phenomenon of stage fright. Merlin and other researchers have largely focused on the actor's performance fright through a new development of cognitive science and cognitive psychology (MacCatherine & Sellers-Young 2014, Schlenker & Leary 1982, Papsdorf 1989, Lehm & Schmidt 2006, Lehrer 1987). However, I am of the view that providing rational analysis of the phenomenon in the context does not provide a justification for the problem pertaining to acting practice. Rather my attempt is to describe the phenomenology of actor's stage fright and how this phenomenon can be scrutinized through a philosophical lens.

As Merlin explains in her paper, she faces a terrified feeling and dislocate her performance because her eyes connect with a particular audience member (Merlin 2014, p. 58). The role of the ocular function and visuality play a key role in creating the disruptive performance. The supremacy of the 'eye' (ocular centric) in the perceptual process is highly emphasized in her description to discuss how this arbitrary connection between the actor and the audience member could lead to a consciousness fragments which disrupts the flow of the action. As Mark Johnson argues, 'Western epistemology has been trapped by Mind's Eye and Mirror of Nature metaphors for knowledge' (Johnson 2008, p 3). In contrast to this, Merleau-Ponty argues that the body has a power to recon and this body operates in a primary level before we rationally perceive the world. Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'gearing into the world' to denote the bodily interaction with the world and bodily power of perception (Krasner & Saltz ed. 2006, p. 132). He coined this power of perception as the 'intentional arc'. In line with this, human perception is not a one sided activity that mirroring the outer world in the mind of the perceiver but a network of myriad of bodily faculties gearing into the world. Merleau-Ponty argues that human experience and understanding comes through both nonhuman and human agencies (ibid, 135). Here Merleau-Ponty's body schema and Sartre's three ontological categories of bodily-being-in-the-world further provide opportunities to understand Sharada's fear of being on stage.

## Fragments of the body schema

Body schema has been a much debated topic in phenomenology and cognitive science. However, Sean Gallagher explains how the body image and body schema can be understood in two different ways: He argues that 'A *body image* consist of a system of perception, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body. In contrast, a *body schema* is a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual awareness' (Gallagher, 2005, p. 24). Merleau-Ponty understands the body schema as the function of the bodily habits through non-thematic or pre-reflective ways. This type of knowledge acquisition that Merleau-Ponty calls "habit" 'consist in a kind of noncognitive, preconceptual "motor intentionality"' (Merleau-Ponty cited in Carman, 1999, p. 219).

Sharada's description signifies a three different stages of bodily 'being-in-the-world'. First as an actor, she begins to perform a character, a cultivated styles of habits she has learnt over a couple of weeks during the rehearsal process. This body is a 'body for itself' or 'my point of view to the world'. Sharada's lived body (*Lieb corporeal*) thus functions within the proscenium theatre to execute un-thematic actions that have already been learnt and embodied during rehearsals. In this stage, Sharada's body becomes a 'null point' (Nullpunkt) or a transcend entity via which the action of the character is brought forward through the body (Priest 1998, pp. 73-74). In this stage the body works as the 'tacit cogito', the hidden body (body as a background) to be able to execute the desired actions (Morris 2012, p. 54). However, when she loses the important line of the play, she becomes frightened about the situation as she is not any longer capable of continuing her habitual body to execute the action. Her habit body or the body schema is being fragmented due to her conscious awareness raised during the performance. Merleau-Ponty argues that

‘analytical perception interrupts unity: it interferes with the flow and musicality of everyday moving’ (Morris 2012, p. 53). In this situation as Sartre describes, the human being (the actor in this context) has another dimension of lived body which is known as the ‘bodily being for others’.

In her interview, Sharada further explained how she felt when she ran away from the stage to the dressing room. Her description further explains another ontological existence of the actor who is away from the performance moment but how s/he still be in another ontological dimension. Sharada extensively discussed about how she was feeling embarrassed after the failure of her performance in front of the audience. Been a student actor, she express her feeling of been sympathetic by the audience. Sharada’s experience of the aftermath of performance disruption explains the third dimension of Sartre’s lived category which is known as the ‘body for itself-for-others’. In other words, this dimension can be explained as “I exist for myself as a body known by the Other” (Sartre cited in Moran, 2011, p.44). In this terrain, student actor Sharada experiences her body as ‘not on my own, but as reflected in the experience of it by others’ (ibid).

## Conclusion

This paper discussed about the consciousness fragments commonly known as stage frights in performance practice. This phenomenon has been explored as a psychological or pathological condition of performers. Using phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Sean Paul Sartre, I have attempted to understand the phenomenon of stage fright as a passage of three different lived experiences in actor’s work. First Sharada’s live experience of being on stage is disrupted due a forgetfulness of a particular line of the play. In this passage, her immersion of the body in the performance score is disrupted. The body schema that has been stylized to perform a particular cluster of action has been fragmented due to the disturbance of the schematic structure of the body. In this situation, her lived experience of ‘being for itself’ is changed into a ‘being for other’ which is the second layer of ontological existence of her performance. After the fragmentation of her lived experience, she experiences the third layer of being, which she experiences as the ‘Other’ through alienated self. As Sharada’s description reveals, her consciousness fragments is not a psychological break down but a disruption of her corporeal schema and her style of habits that have not been fully embodied through rigorous rehearsal practice. What this paper suggests to avoid the consciousness fragments is a thorough rehearsal practice and develop the style of habits that allows the actor to perform her score of action without being psychophysically disruptive.

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