

# BEING ON STAGE



# 40

Is it just a number? Would the excitement I felt about my son turning 10 be multiplied by 4? Mmm. As my birthday approached, friends would say, "It's gonna be alright," like I was about to have a colonoscopy. Nobody was rushing to throw confetti. Is it because we're now officially middle-aged? When you're 30, you can still do 20-something stuff, like go to bed late and not feel like you have a hangover from hell the next day because you slept less than 8 hours.

Once I turned 40 in 2021, I felt something break inside of me – like standing on a stage, looking at the audience and forgetting all my lines.

I started acting when I was 13, after a breakdown, one of those teenage moments when you feel pressured from every angle, and a school counsellor suggested I do something fun on the weekends. At acting school, I found my place in the world, where everything made sense. I spent the following 12 years improving my craft, all the

way to university. But by then my life involved moving from country to country and I didn't make room for that central part of me.

In 2011, I inched towards the theatre again and spent a year at The Theatres Trust, where I designed their resource center, creating a library with unique categories centered around theatre. In 2022, I took up singing lessons, and a year later I signed up for musical theatre classes. Over the past 43 years, the theatre has brought me a sense of purpose and connection, and I decided to interview people who share my love for the stage.

At The Theatres Trust I met **Kate**, a cultural enthusiast who always enjoyed being in the audience or helping backstage more than performing. She has vivid memories of attending shows as a child, and took her degree in Architecture to the Trust, where her love for theatre grew. "Each theatre has its own character... the theatre is a place where people interact, where they go to forget." She now takes dance lessons and feels that performance can be freeing, through "purposeful movement and self-expression... you shed a layer you didn't

even know you had."

1st March 2022 – first day of singing lessons. Anxious and eager, I was ready for something new. It didn't matter that I'd never sing on Broadway, I was just thrilled to learn.

**Florencia**, my singing teacher, trained in Argentina. We meet online weekly despite the ocean and 10,000 kilometres between us. For Florencia, who holds a degree in performance,



the stage is a healing place. "It helps us express certain emotions or live vicariously through a character, it helps us feel identified, to see someone else's point of view," which helps actors become more empathetic. "Going onstage is a unique experience that combines happiness and pressure – you feel the joy of showcasing the result of your hard work over months coupled with anxiety." As soon as she steps on the stage, the anxiety melts away and she enjoys

the performance. Some lessons from the stage include teamwork and improvising, because the theatre is a communal space and also a place to practice flexibility – life on and off stage never follows the script perfectly.

Performers need the support of loved ones, she says, because to grow as an artist you need your own audience that you know will be there for you. Mutual support from other cast members is also crucial – complementing each other and helping each other out becomes a healing and learning experience too.

Through singing lessons, I found out that I could actually improve my singing, dispelling the myth that good singers were born with the skill. But was singing enough?

I went online and searched: "theatre class London", and BAM! I bumped into Stage and the City (SATC) and joined in September 2023 what I thought was a regular musical theatre class. Instead, I found out on Day 1 that we'd be performing at a charity showcase in 12 weeks. I met Tabea and Jasmin, newcomers too, and Shalini, who'd been attending for three years.

**Tabea**, a passionate musical-goer and performer, grew up in Switzerland watching Disney classics (especially Aladdin and Hercules), and as a pre-teen fell in love with Glee. She took singing and dance classes separately (hip-hop, street dance, jazz), and loved being transported to a different world when performing. "There's something powerful about being somebody else. It's magical."

After watching *The Lion King* at 15 she felt compelled to watch every show that came to Basel, but there weren't many. She made up for it on every trip to London, and moved here in 2020, "to the heart of musicals". Like me, she wanted to start performing again and combine dance and singing, but had a lot of self-doubt and was nervous when she signed up and compared herself to other people. Unlike previous bad experiences where she felt left behind, at SATC she felt very welcome. Now that she's reconnected with the stage, she's not ready to let go: "There's the energy from the audience... The moment right before you go onstage I forget everything for a second and I go on, and it all comes back with the adrenaline." She lights up when she talks about it. It's almost like the stage is a fountain of life we're all drinking from as we perform. The feedback from the audience makes it all worth it.

**Jasmin** still experiences that nervous feeling before going onstage despite 25 years of performing and dancing at venues such as Kensington Olympia and Jamsil Stadium in Korea. A 31-year-old Londoner, Jasmin worked in Korea as a model and dancer and represented the UK at the K-pop World Festival (2013).

When she was six, she saw Shakira performing "Whenever, Wherever" and

thought, "I wanna do that!" Her mum signed her up for dance lessons (tap, ballet) and she remembers her first performance: she was nervous but as soon as she started dancing, she felt this energy and felt it was the right place to be. At 16, she started a K-pop dance team with some friends, 9034K, and acknowledges that if she can achieve great things onstage, "What's stopping me from doing anything amazing continuing on?" Nothing can stop someone once they lean onto that confidence. "The cheers from the crowd give you an extra spirit boost and you feed off their energy and they feed off yours...it brings people together. There's a spiritual thing."

**Shalini** always wanted to be an actress, and did some work as a TV extra, but then leaned into her passion for humanitarian work. But she always wanted to do something theatrical – she's always felt the need to entertain and perform, she enjoys lighting up a room and making it erupt with laughter. In 2020, she signed up for SATC, and while she knew she wasn't the best singer or dancer, she wanted to do it for herself and be on that stage for the showcase. She loved the thrill of the show and all the backstage moments bonding with castmates, and called the experience "addictive".

**Anna**, the founder of SATC (part of the Anna Fiorentini Performing Arts School), identified as a shy teenager and is grateful to the stage for helping her come out of her shell. Anna was cast as the Ugly Duckling at the age of six and knew she wanted to be an actress. She was so passionate about pursuing an acting career and attending drama school that she fundraised to pay her fees; and later started her business from the ground up to bring drama workshops to others. In her twenties, nothing would get in the way

of her acting career, whereas now, in her fifties, her school is "her baby" and finds it very rewarding. She sees her school's impact on children, who grow in confidence and self-esteem; while adult students say it helps with anxiety and isolation too, forming a small community of performers.

One day I was catching up with **Sada**, whose son attends school with mine, when we realized she had attended Anna's school on a scholarship as a teenager, and twenty years later still feels the impact: "I'm comfortable speaking up for myself, talking in front of people."

Drama was a form of escape, to express herself in ways she wasn't allowed to as a young African girl growing up in a strict household. When she was gifted the opportunity of being someone else, she grabbed it with both hands and enjoyed embodying somebody else's life even for a little bit. "And the energy you get from the crowd is addictive," she says, remembering her showcase at the Hackney Empire.

She did an online acting course for a term recently, but her busy life meant she had to discontinue it, though she would love to explore more scriptwriting and directing.

The stage is as complex as human nature. While the theatre is a place where we can escape reality, I never feel freer and more like myself when I'm onstage, and I am grateful I was able to return in my forties.

# EUGENIA SESTINI

