



THE TIMES

Stage fright means show can't go on for Alison Steadman

Matthew Moore/Media Correspondent
Tuesday July 7th 2020, The Times



Alison Steadman, centre, had starred in award-winning plays before revealing her fear of performing on stage

From Sir Laurence Olivier to Stephen Fry and Dame Helen Mirren, some of the country's finest performers have been afflicted by crippling stage fright.

The condition now appears to have brought an early final curtain to the West End career of Alison Steadman, who has revealed her own struggles with first-night nerves.

Steadman, 73, is best known for screen roles in *Abigail's Party* and *Nuts in May* in the Seventies but has also delighted theatre audiences for decades, winning an Olivier award for *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice* at the [National Theatre](#) in 1993.

However, she has not appeared on stage for six years and fears her board-treading days are over.

“I’ve got a bit of stage fright now. I don’t think I’m going to be doing theatre again,” she told the *Radio Times*. She had struggled to understand the condition when it affected Sir Ian Holm, her co-star in a 1979 production of *Uncle Vanya*, who died last month, but now recognised the symptoms.

“He’d had stage fright and we talked about it. I was thinking, ‘Gosh, I wonder what that’s like. How does that happen?’ Now I’m there myself,” she said.

“Initially, it made me very sad, but now, I think, ‘OK, accept it. You can do telly. You can do radio.’”

Steadman said she was “devastated” in 2016 when newspapers reported that she was losing her short-term memory, based on a throwaway remark she had made about her struggle to learn lines.



Uncle Vanya in 1979 with Nigel Hawthorne and The Provok'd Wife in 1997

She is now reconciled to the passing of time and content to live a less complicated life. “I can’t multi-task anymore. I get tired. Suddenly, in your 70s, you go, ‘Aha. I get it,’” she told the magazine.

“I find myself now accepting that I can’t do this and I can’t do that. I’m quite happy. It’s not horrible, in any way. It’s just the journey of life. I can remember when I was about 14, I put in a diary, ‘I think I’ll probably die when I’m 35’, and back then that seemed old, really old.”

Her last stage work was an adaptation of Emile Zola’s novel *Thérèse Raquin* in 2014. Her performance as Madame Raquin, the stroke-stricken mother-in-law, was praised as “transfixing”.

She has since focused on roles outside the theatre, appearing alongside [John Cleese](#) in the BBC sitcom *Hold the Sunset*. A third series of her intergenerational

family comedy *Relativity* begins on Radio 4 this month. “I’m at my happiest when I’m in the studio with all the actors.”

Martyn Watts, a psychotherapist who specialises in stage fright, said it was common for the condition to creep up on a performer late in their career.

Olivier endured a particularly debilitating bout for five years in his late fifties. The anguish was so intense that he considered retiring. Mirren has described getting “sick with fear” before some live shows, while Fry walked out of *Cell Mates* at the start of its West End run in 1995, blighted by terrors that pushed him to the brink of suicide.

“It is a form of anxiety that usually builds up over a period of time and can strike, unexpectedly, at any stage,” Mr Watts, who works at the North London Stress Management Centre, said.

“There is usually a trigger or set of triggers involved that can range from feelings of insecurity, a string of bad performances, poor or indifferent reviews or general stressors such as financial, relationship or issues of self-doubt and feelings that the best of an actor’s career now lies behind them.”

Diane Beck, a former actor who retrained as a stage fright therapist after suffering problems herself, said that the condition was fully curable. She has personally treated close to 100 patients. “It’s becoming more common, because we’re now in a culture where projection is so important,” she said. “Every audition actors go to they are being judged — on their looks, on their age.”

Common affliction

Four-fifths of actors have suffered from stage fright at least once, according to research in 2011 by Gordon Goodman. He defined it as a type of performance anxiety often manifested by “freezing” or “choking”. It generally arrives as a sudden collapse. The symptoms include a racing pulse, trembling hands, shaky voice and dizziness.

The condition is so common among performing artists that many therapists have set themselves up as stage fright specialists. Some offer hypnosis.

Adele, the singer, says that she copes by throwing up before shows. Laurence Olivier had several ways of coping, including asking other actors not to look him in the eye.