



Just about as soon as you are old enough to express yourself as an independently thinking human being, you start pretending you are someone else. In my day, little boys assumed the roles of cowboys and Indians, and girls were moms and nurses. As we grow older, we try to emulate our heroes – pop stars, sports figures, actors and actresses, fictional characters. Undoubtedly, there are evolutionary explanations for all this play-acting. Most of us grow out of it, more or less. And then there are those who continue to perform for the rest of their lives – rogues, charlatans, among others, and those who practice their artifice for money. We call them entertainers.

When I was 12 or 13, I was swept up in the frenzy of Beatlemania and persuaded my parents to give me a guitar. Once I'd learned a few chords, I often let myself disappear into the personas of my musical heroes. I tried my damndest to not only play and sing like John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger and then, later on, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker and James Brown – but to more or less become them. As long as I was playing in my own bedroom or in a garage with a couple of friends, it was pretty easy to pretend.

Then later on, a few years past my 40th birthday, I was asked, to my surprise, to be the frontman for a rock and roll band. I've been doing that now for nearly 18 years, and it's an enormous kick. But I still find that the hardest part of it is not playing the right chords or remembering the lyrics. The tough part is "performing" – standing there on the stage, facing an audience in a bar or café, projecting some image that is part me and part who I think I'm supposed to be, and actually connecting to those people who have never seen me before and don't know me from a hole in the ground. The thing is, for most of us, as we grow older, we get more and more inhibited about pretending to be someone else – and that is precisely what you've got to do when you perform. Even – as odd as it may seem – if you are trying very hard to be yourself. Because being yourself with the stage lights shining down on you, with people actually paying attention to you for a change, is also a kind of performance.

To get a better understanding of just what was going on here, I consulted Arnoud van Buuren, a psychotherapist who uses movement – a kind of performance – as both a diagnostic and a therapeutic tool. But I was cheating a little, because he is also the keyboard player in the band. "For children," he told me, "it's very normal to act out, but for adults, we consider it to be pathological behavior. So obviously we learn as people to withhold in all kinds of ways. And we have a name for that process – we call it child-rearing."

Grown-ups, he said, forget how to play spontaneous roles. "That must have something to do with all the messages we get about how to behave and what is dangerous and what you should do and what you shouldn't do." My problem on stage, he suggested, was precisely because I was so stubbornly trying to be myself. "As soon as you play a role, it's OK to act out, to perform, because it's a role. That gives you permission, but if you try to do something which is very close to yourself, that is essentially you – then it's much more difficult, because then all the shame and insecurities about who you are play too important a role."

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

Ever sung into a hairbrush? Indulged in a bit of sly air guitar? Busted some awesome moves on the dancefloor? There's a performer in all of us, yet some people take to it more naturally than others.

WORDS Jim Wake





According to Arnaud, his own wife says he doesn't look like the same person when he is on stage. "I'm playing the role of the musician."

That raises an interesting question when you think about some of the great performers – people like Madonna, or Mick Jagger, or, in a very different world, Meryl Streep or Jack Nicholson. As members of the audience, we have a sense that we know who they are, no matter who else they are playing. But at the same time, there is always – to a lesser extent with a musician, and a greater extent with an actor – this character that they become. And at least when it is live performance, there's also that vital element of interaction with the audience. In psychological terms, says Arnaud, this is "accommodation" – something we experience in our everyday lives as well (which do inevitably involve an element of performance, in any case).

If you tell your husband or wife you had a rough day, you expect sympathy. And if you play the last clanging chords of a rock and roll tune, you hope for a few energetic hoots and whistles to let you know you've got the crowd with you. Preparing for this story, I spoke to a retired dancer about his view on performance. He couldn't tell me if he was more expressing something inside of himself or filling a role when he danced, but whatever it was, he absolutely loved it. So did he miss it now that he'd retired? No, he said, he didn't miss dancing. What he missed was the ritual of preparing for the show, putting on the costume and the make-up. "I miss the action of actually bowing, of coming on the stage and taking a bow." But that, he claimed, had nothing to do with the adulation he felt when a thousand people were applauding.

I believed him at the time, but now I wonder if he was just putting on a little performance. **A**

Above: **Deborah Bull**, principal dancer with the Royal Ballet for nine years, preparing for her first performance in the lead role of *Odette* from *Swan Lake* at Covent Garden.

Photography: Laurie Lewis.

Right: **Mick Jagger** on stage with the Rolling Stones during a show in England in 2006.

Photography: Paul David Drabble.

