Once Upon an Opening Night

Hot, bright lights frame the mirrors. A draft comes in from the open door as more cast members enter the green room. They mark an “X” next to their names, wipe the chalk off their hands, and proceed to the costume rack and dressing rooms. People are sprawled all over the couches, their faces buried in mirrors, scripts, and cell phones. A bowl of grapes is on the table in the center of the room, and some eat away the butterflies, while some shy away from food all weekend. Welcome to opening night…

I was upstairs blending the green Turtle face paint into my hairline and singing to myself. A castmate, Natalee, traipsed up the stairs and sat down next to me, waiting for the song to end. She whispered for me to do it again, harmonizing as the song began anew. Katie took a seat on the other side of me, opening the jar of white Walrus face paint. Moments later, Gary burst through the door, belting a Broadway classic and dancing around the green room. He tumbled up the stairs still singing, toting the black paint for his dark eyes and fake moustache.

“Gary, we love you, but I can hear you in the lobby,” the director called from the base of the steps. Gary always had more energy than a four-year-old, which was needed on a night like this. We giggled as Emily joined us and straightened her bowtie in the mirror.

We did not talk about the show or the audience or our lines or our costumes or our props. These, along with the mention of Macbeth and wishing “good luck” are forbidden topics and bring bad luck. We talked about school, the wedding rehearsal dinner Natalee just came from, boyfriends, girlfriends, their sports… anything to keep from overthinking the show. We helped each other with hair and makeup. Waiting at the bottom of the stairs were children who wished to be old enough for the group in the makeup loft, miniature
versions of us. Everyone starts at the bottom of the stairs, but once you’re in, you’re in for good.

Minutes before the show, the director called all of us down to the green room. We stood in a circle, joined hands, and bowed our heads as she gave us words of encouragement and wisdom. Each night the cast stood in the same order, and each of us held hands with the same two people on either side. Barney, the beloved theatre ghost, played with the lights in the back of the room as a sign of solidarity and well-wishing. “Last call for props!” a member of the stage crew shouted from somewhere backstage. Chaos ensued as we scrambled to collect our props, place them onstage in convenient places, and make last-minute costume adjustments. I strapped on my shell, grabbed my messenger bag, and ran to find Emily…

As thespians, we are people of tradition. We are the only ones allowed to touch our respective props or costumes, and every evening articles are found exactly where we left them the night before. We do our makeup in the same chair, change in the same corner of the dressing room, and eat the same number of grapes as the night before. We do not alter hairstyles or paint and cut our nails; some of us even wear the same shirt all weekend or refuse to shave until the show is over. When places are called, each of us stands in the same exact spot backstage and waits for the same exact cue as the night before. There is always that one guy whose head is rubbed for luck; we whisper “break a leg!” and take quiet moments to center ourselves before the show starts…

Emily, the other children, and I waited in the secret passage as the theater lights dimmed and the last straggling audience members left the lobby, entered the auditorium, and took their seats. The show was about to begin, and Emily and I shared a nervous grin. We each took a deep breath as our characters, Delmer and Turtle, entered the auditorium in the opening scene.

Delmer held her umbrella high above her head, hollering, “Whoooooooah, holy flying fish!” The setting was supposed to be rainy, but the stage lights were too bright and the thunder effects were too quiet. We were responsible for painting a picture for the audience. We squinted through the storm, emulating mail carriers lost on a tropical island. Delmer
asked Turtle where a certain package was, and a comical discussion ensued about the size of the package, which Turtle claimed to have lost. She searched for it everywhere but the most obvious spot: right behind her. The crowd laughed at Delmer’s inadequacy and Turtle’s downright obliviousness. There was a relatively good audience on opening night; they reacted well to what happened onstage. Positive feedback is important in performance; we actors feed off the energy of the audience, not just off the energy of our co-stars. Laughter leads us to build up to the next punchline; tears encourage us to draw out our deepest emotions. Silence either means the audience is dead or the play is terrible.

After remarking once again about the “dreadful nasty” weather, Turtle and Delmer exited the stage amid ironic bird sounds and stage lights resembling the bright sun. Emily and I heard the audience still chuckling as we walked back through the secret passage into the backstage area, exchanging high fives and congratulating each other on another show started well.

Every exit was only the beginning of preparation for the next entrance. We travelled behind the curtain to the other side of the stage, gathered our boxes, and waited behind the staircase. A commotion was heard as the present scene unwound onstage, and we could hear the audience laughing from backstage. As our castmates exited, we leaned through the curtains to watch Joey and the stage crew quickly move the set backstage. Then the lights dimmed, and our characters opened the side door to enter the stage.

Turtle led Delmer to the stage, bumbling down the steps and carrying a stack of boxes. Delmer mistakenly asked Turtle which way to go, causing a sudden change in direction that resulted in a comical pile of packages and deliverers on the floor. The characters got up and shook it off, saying a few jokes about hoping the senders purchased insurance for their mail. The packages were then completely forgotten on the ground as the duo strutted offstage. The audience went wild – it is strange how such a simple, typical situation can evoke such a response.

Once we arrived backstage, Emily and I shared another nervous glance. Our next scene had been the toughest throughout tech week. A large group of the cast was involved, and anything could happen. Lines were skipped or stolen, people spoke out of turn, and
sentences were turned inside out. Once mistakes started happening, it was hard for us to reverse them. Constant stress created a domino effect that seemed to make everything possible go wrong in one short scene. But that was only tolerated in rehearsal – it could not happen on opening night…

Performance for most consists of two parts: acting and reacting. It is simple enough to merely voice our own lines with vocal inflection, facial expressions, and body gestures. Reacting, on the other hand, is the art of being completely focused on the present moment and being utterly disconnected from anything offstage. This idea is the origin of the “fourth wall,” the invisible barrier that separates us onstage from anything happening in the audience, in the real world. We cannot smile at friends or relatives, lights from cell phones cannot distract us, and we are not to notice any noises except the ones made by our castmates. In addition, we have to be completely aware of what is going on in the scene. If a friend skips a line or says something that does not make sense in context, it is our duty to recover for them by either modifying our own lines or making up completely new lines. No laughing or stopping is allowed when someone messes up – the show must go on…

The last moments before this next scene seemed to shorten, and nervous excitement grew in all of us backstage. We did not dare run lines right before we entered; we were too afraid to jinx ourselves. We jumped around and flailed our arms, trying to release as much tension as we could without making too much noise. We waited for our cues and tried to leave our fear backstage. Once we heard Natalee’s character, Rosa, begin her cue line, Emily opened the side door.

Turtle entered, following Delmer, announcing a package for “Sally Mo Mally.” A million thoughts went through our minds. Do not anticipate Rosa’s next line. Face the audience at 45 degrees; do not turn to face the person you are talking to or your face will not be seen and your voice will not be heard. Hesitate here; don’t hesitate there. Cross in front of Emily because the audience cannot see you behind her. Don’t look too excited when the problem line is said without a hitch. Do not drop your pencil. Do not drop your pencil. You dropped your pencil: you are an idiot. Do not cause a distraction by picking it
up; leave it for Joey to pick up and get it from him later. Make sure Emily says the
in character.

The scene went very well; although I lost my pencil, the lines were said smoothly and
the acting was flawless. All our hard work and focus paid off. Emily and I exchanged a
silent squeal backstage as we prepared for the next scene, our favorite. With no real words,
it was by far the easiest scene, and it was the first we had memorized. Delmer and Turtle
had to deliver a package to the monster Slunkersnake underwater. It was the perfect
crowd-pleasing scene: because of our previous scenes, the audience knew our characters’
purpose was to deliver packages. They knew Delmer and Turtle’s punchline by heart. All we
had to do was add enough vocal inflection to our lines of “blub, glub, blow, blub…” in
order to make it obvious what we were really saying. The audience howled as we swam up
the aisles and exited into the lobby.

With only a few short scenes to go, the show was almost over. While waiting for
curtain call, Emily and I changed into our original costumes and grabbed a few extra
packages. We sat on the steps behind the secret passage with Joey and joked around until
we heard the music start playing onstage. The last scene had ended, and the first group of
children would be taking their bows soon. Emily and I ran up to the lobby and waited until
the majority of the cast had taken their places onstage. When our time came, Turtle and
Delmer ran onstage for the last time, mimicking our entrance from the opening scene. By
the time we reached the stage, the audience was on their feet, and we all joined hands and
bowed. We gestured backstage as Joey and the crew waved from between the curtains, and
we acknowledged the sound booth where the director and technicians could barely be seen
waving to the audience. After the last bow, I looked up and smiled at the bright stage
lights, basking in the glory of a successful opening night.