Theatre/Practice: *The Online Journal of the Practice/Production Symposium of the Mid America Theatre Conference*

Volume 15, 2026

Fear: An Essential to the Designer

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Fear is deeply embedded in the creative arts; and yet while 'stage fright' is a term commonly used from a performer's viewpoint, there is a definite lapse of knowledge and writing about its role in design practice. Thus, the corollary experience of fear within theatrical design remains relatively underexplored. Designers, too, confront uncertainty and vulnerability alike to the experience of performers. However, without an aspect of embodied visibility, a designer's fear is often imperceptible, unspoken, or mistakenly interpreted as a lack of confidence rather than an integral part of their creative cognition.

The purpose of this article is to reframe fear as an essential mechanism in the act of designing and creative decision-making for theatre production. I argue that fear provides designers with information, directional cues, and the cognitive activation required for innovative thinking. This reframing challenges common narratives that portray fear as an obstacle that must be eradicated or overcome. Instead, I propose a theory of fear-integrated design practice, in which fear is acknowledged, permitted, and constructively engaged. Interweaving interdisciplinary research with autoethnographic accounts from my own practice as a scenic designer and aerial dance instructor, I examine fear not as an opponent but as a collaborator.

Through this approach, I seek to illuminate the complex psychological terrain designers navigate and to provide a more holistic understanding of how fear can contribute to creativity, pedagogy, and artistic growth.

Psychologists have commonly defined fear as an emotional state tied to physical activation and avoidance. Yet, contemporary work in psychology and neuroscience has uncovered a much more nuanced biological operation. Fear does not appear in a single place in the brain, nor does it behave in one predictable way. Neuroscientist and psychologist Dr. Joseph E. LeDoux's work indicates that instead, it activates multiple regions such as the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex to create a state of heightened perception, sharper attention, and increased cognitive alertness.[1] Importantly, these changes can either disrupt or support overall performance, depending on the situation and the mental complexity of the task at-hand. Creative tasks, by nature, demand a high degree of cognitive engagement. This distinction is reflected in common pedagogical assessment models of student learning, such as Bloom's taxonomy, in which creation is consistently positioned as the final demonstration a student can provide of fully learning a concept.[2]

Within this perspective of the cognitive load of design work, neuroscientist Katherine Vytal et al. offer a particularly useful lens for artists and designers.[3] Their research shows that anxiety does indeed tend to negatively impact simple, low-mental-load tasks. However, under complex, high-mental-load conditions, anxiety can actually help by activating these cognitive areas for heightened processing. Because theatrical design work requires deep focus and layered

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[1] Joseph E. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 163–170.
[2] Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).
[3] Katherine Vytal et al., "Describing the Interplay between Anxiety and Cognition," *Psychophysiology* 49, no. 6 (2012), 848–850.

decision-making, science supports that the presence of fear may serve as a focusing agent rather than an obstacle. In the inherently high-mental-load environment of design, fear can act less like a barrier and more like valuable information that sharpens attention and clarifies artistic choices.

This argument, that fear is a positive force in the design process, may be misunderstood when confronted with the familiar sympathetic nervous system response most commonly classified as 'fight or flight.' Germane to common manifestations of fear in art-making, later research expanded this theory to include 'freeze' in these biological responses.[4] However, research from Melanie Tannenbaum et al.'s meta-analysis on fear helps to explain this conflict of ideas and provides a useful framework for understanding fear's role in artistic decision-making.[5] Their study illustrates that fear motivates action only when accompanied by one's belief in their ability to act effectively. One of their conclusions of research is that without this efficacy, fear may become paralyzing.

As an illustration of that art paralysis (or 'freeze' response), I recount my earliest personal ordeal of dealing with fear in theatre design. This experience came in the form of a 2010 Stage Rendering course in my BFA Theatre Design program. This course taught me not only visual artistic techniques for scenic design renderings, but more importantly, the most constant lesson of my career–that creation breeds fear. As an introduction to my first project of this course, I was given a blank sheet of paper, a sharp #2 pencil, and the directions to "draw who you are as a person." I panicked, experiencing a familiar biological 'freeze' response. I thought of all the ways to illustrate my personhood with the pencil lead in my hand. Looking

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[4] Harvard Health Publishing, "Fight, Flight, or Freeze," *Harvard Health Publishing*, accessed December 13, 2025. The original "fight or flight" response was described by Walter Cannon in 1915, but later research expanded the model to include "freeze" as another common reaction to threat. Further variations of this model include yet additional reactions not listed here.

[5] Melanie B. Tannenbaum et al., "Appealing to Fear: A Meta-Analysis of Fear Appeal Effectiveness and Theories," *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no. 6 (2015): 1178–1204.

back, it is clear that this lesson was never meant to produce or even assess artistic drawing skills. Perhaps its purpose was to induce some amount of stress, possibly fear, to investigate my intellectual response as an artist. Perhaps the true lesson lay in problem-solving and individual ideation within deliberately vague or multi-faceted project direction. What this lesson certainly did provide me was an exposure to the fear of technical inadequacy, of authentic representation, and of misinterpretation. Nonetheless, it became a moment of self-revelation as my first chance to decisively engage with fear in art and design. From this moment on, I began developing my personal inquiry into how and why I find fear as a constant, embedded presence in my practices. Further examining the types of fear a designer may encounter in their career, I turn toward interdisciplinary arts practices. Distinguished choreographer and writer Twyla Tharp lists her top five outstanding fears in her book *The Creative Habit*. They are as follows: 1) People will laugh at me; 2) Someone has done it before; 3) I have nothing to say. 4) I will upset someone I love; and, 5) Once executed, the idea will never be as good as it is in my mind.[6]

Visual artists David Bayles and Ted Orland have a similar inclination of fears in their 1993 book *Art and Fear*, writing: "But if making art gives substance to your sense of self, the corresponding fear is that you're not up to the task–that you can't do it, or cant do it well, or can't do it again; or that you're not a real artist, or not a good artist, or have no talent, or have nothing to say."[7] While I certainly empathize with these expert analyses, I consider my own experiences in both teaching and practice to come up with my own, even more condensed list. That is: 1) What if mine doesn't look like yours/look like it's supposed to? and, 2) What if I'm actually terrible at this? In each of the disciplines I teach, I have assessed that the majority of fear

[6] Twyla Tharp, *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 21–22.
[7] David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking.* (Santa Cruz, CA: Image Continuum Press, 1993), 13.

I deal with stems from these two thoughts. Among these, the origin of fear emerges from the act of being seen and/or evaluated. Designers often fear the visibility of their own voice because of its perceived insufficiency, its unfamiliarity, and its vulnerability.

Fear of negative critique activates a primordial social-threat response that informs an individual that there is real danger in a negative perception by others. Comparison to others whom they deem more successful in their practice exacerbates this fear. In today's contemporary context, constant digital comparison is rampant and almost unavoidable, a fact that compounds for every new generation of artists. The cognitive stress associated with social comparison correlates with decreased confidence, heightened anxiety, and diminished creative risk-taking.[8] These psychological realities underscore the need for design pedagogies that name and normalize fear rather than treating it as a weakness or deficiency.

Because design classrooms emphasize critique, verbal presentation, and public display of creative work, fear is quickly and easily activated. When fear remains unspoken, students may interpret it as evidence of their own inadequacy. Through my own pedagogical examination, the most encouraging technique I have implemented when dealing with a fear-stricken student is to shift my language to carefully highlight their progress alongside their fear, definitively, and without judgment. Early in my teaching, I had mistakenly attempted to reassure students with sentiments like: "It's okay to be where you are." While empathetic, this phrasing often reinforced feelings of deficiency. Without internal efficacy-building, external reassurance like this reduces fear's motivational usefulness–as illustrated in Tannenbaum et al.[9] The more effective approach is to make fear visible and welcome in the classroom. This may manifest in instructor tactics

[8] Dan Warrender and Rosa Milne, "Social Media, Social Comparison and Mental Health," *Nursing Times* 116, no. 3 (2020), 58–61.
[9] Tannenbaum, et al., 1178–1204.

such as naming it, normalizing it, and pairing it with concrete evidence of progress. Careful pedagogical consideration surrounding fear is crucial in supporting students to interpret the emotion of fear not as a sign of inadequacy but as a signal of meaningful effort. Unacknowledged fear may quickly develop into shame, which is a paralyzing force in learning environments. Shame reliably arrests artistic processes and may drive a student deep into internalized doubt and self-defeating thought patterns. A substantial amount of emotional labor is needed to overcome such a spiral. To counter this, instructors who lead with skill-building, autonomy, and reflective practice create conditions in which fear can be recognized as informational rather than incapacitating. Within such environments, students begin to develop the individual capacity to respond productively to fear and continue moving forward in their creative work.

Artist Shaun McNiff articulates this development of agency in practitioners in his 1998 book, Trust the Process. He examines the utilization of fear in a creative process, arguing that "training in creativity requires the ability to relax in periods of uncertainty and to trust that the creative intelligence will find its way."[10] In this sample, McNiff implies that trust in oneself is a remedy to fear, here framed as uncertainty. This gentle language, that of relaxing and trusting when discussing the virtues of courage, is wholly genuine to the artistic courage required to make art. The goal of those who wish to conquer fear appears to be an accomplished future without fear or hardship–a future not realistically possible. Acknowledgement of fear must therefore not be misconstrued as an aggressive confrontation, as this action subverts the benefits of fear. According to McNiff, the bravery that inspires the action of acknowledgement is more nuanced than the idealist implications of vanquished fear.

[10] Shaun McNiff. *Trust the Process: An Artist's Guide to Letting Go.* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), 2-3.

This reframing of fear management is particularly urgent in the contemporary educational landscape. Research like that of Hu et al. indicates that students emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic experience elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and fear, accompanied by reduced confidence and disrupted learning processes.[11] These psychological shifts profoundly shape how young designers experience risk-taking, criticism/evaluation, and overall creative vulnerability. For artists shaped by formative years marked with limited face-to-face connection, the expectation to vulnerably create and share original work from personal understanding can feel sudden and unfamiliar. It is no wonder it inspires so much fear. Perhaps even more daunting for students is the prospect of pursuing a career in live performance after a devastating blow to theatre-sector employment amid government shutdowns of performance venues in mitigation measures of the COVID-19 virus. Doubts of one's choices in career path are easy and pervasive for young scholars and professionals in this post-pandemic culture, which definitively adds to fear.

Further investigation into this vulnerability of identity in artistic practice and the associated internal and external types of fear is offered once again in *Art and Fear*. Here, Bayles and Orland propose another condensed list of fears among artists–articulating that "fears about art making fall into two families: fears about yourself, and fears about your reception by others. In a general way, fears about yourself prevent you from doing your best work, while fears about your reception by others prevent you from doing your own work."[12] Continuing deeper into this argument, It is important to consider that, perhaps, 'art' and 'design' have different functions and modes but we can marry these terms in definition of the process of art making and that of

[11] Kesong Hu et al., "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on College Students in USA: Two Years Later." *Psychiatry Research 315* (2022).
[12] Bayles and Orland, 23.

designing. Though design brings purpose and parameters to art, at its core, it is still self-expression.

Bayles and Orland further explain this vulnerability, stating that "making art can feel dangerous and revealing. *Making art is dangerous and revealing.* Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be."[13] One can infer that artists are experiencing a fear of failure that is simply not unique to their profession, but a universal experience and a fact of any endeavor. Yet the nature of creating art requires the work to be imbued with some part or personality of the artist. There is no full separation between the worker and the work in art. And so, vulnerability inspires fear and allows pervasive negative thoughts such as, "If they do not like this, they must not like me." Practice-ending or even career-ending shame may materialize as a product of this personal insecurity. The antidote for this insecurity is not to create 'better work.' It is acceptance. When fear is worked with rather than suppressed, it provides designers with the necessary cognitive focus, motivation, and artistic courage to work past shame.

Some of the crucial information provided by fear is that it often coincides with inventiveness in art making. To create is uncomfortable because it requires an artist to think in ways they hadn't yet imagined, and to leave their previous works behind. Tharp also touches on this in The *Creative Habit*. "It's not only Nature that abhors a vacuum; fear of empty space affects everyone in every creative situation. Where there was nothing, there will be something that has come from within you. That's a scary proposition."[14] Innovation requires divergence from familiar patterns, and fear often accompanies any departure from the known. Critically,

[13] Bayles and Orland, 13. Italics added by the article author for emphasis.
[14] Tharp, 33.

there is a misperception that laziness is the prime factor that may cause a designer to repeat themselves. However, having worked alongside intelligent, creative, and hardworking designers for the entirety of my career, I identify more evidence indicating that fear is the obstacle, not indolence. A designer overtaken with their fear may begin to design based on what has worked before, what is safe, and what is functional, if not original. They may spend hours justifying and modifying the repeated design, while clearly, undertaking an original creation would likely have been a less taxing process. Quite evidently, fear must be dependent on risk. There are hardly any circumstances where one is present without at least the perception of the other. Architect Lisa Huang speaks to this in her book, *Learning from Failure in the Design Process*:

> …inability to accept/overcome fear is indeed limiting in the design process. But the presence of fear is a clear indication of innovation. The tendency is to fall back on material and construction conventions and standards, dictated by a construction industry frequently reluctant to any kind of risk-taking. We often forget, however, that steps in the design process are not meant to be final, and that while on the journey of design, it is important to keep our eyes open to see potential innovations.[15]

Because of the interwoven nature of risk and reward, designers must consider how to appropriately manage fear in a way that honors the innovation it surrounds.

In my own design practice, the first inkling of fear affirms that I'm on the correct path. The very presence of fear tells me what I'm doing is innovative, interesting, and important to my growth. Far from impeding me, it informs me I am doing the real work. Scenographer Beeb Salzer shares this notion in the article "Thoughts on Success and Failure While Moving." He muses on beginning a design process that "part of the excitement of any show has been pitting

[15] Lisa Huang*, Learning from Failure in the Design Process* (Boston: Design and Research Institute, 2020), 17.

myself against all the variables that conspire to daunt me."[16] Fear may easily be reframed as excitement, as they often share similar physiological markers. Like fear and excitement, design processes often oscillate between opposites of positive and negative feelings over the course of the project. However, reframing fear as a more colloquially positive energetic activation allows designers to reinterpret physiological arousal not as threat but as momentum. Designers must be internally driven to collaborate with fear, or it will be avoided. Once invited, fear may build direction and inspiration to indulge in yet unexplored artistic possibilities.

This brings me to the very crux of my experience and research into fear's mechanism within design work. Years of working and teaching have shown that the notion of managing fear through banishment is fundamentally flawed. Instead, fear has consistently proven useful, grounding, and invaluable to my successes, both large and small. Remembering my personal condensed list of fears from above, I observe similarities emerge across the forms in which I engage and teach, scenic design for theatre and aerial dance. These two art forms may seem worlds apart: one grounded, the other airborne; one visual, the other somatic. Yet both are expressive practices requiring vulnerability, self-trust, and interaction with risk. Strikingly, they are similar in their shared fears, and those two fear-inducing doubts play a vital role in each. A key difference between the use of fear in each is the question of 'safety.'

As an aerial dance instructor, I have seen fear keep my students safe. It has kept them from climbing higher than they could safely navigate, spinning out of control, or injuring ligaments that are not yet strengthened sufficiently to accomplish the movement at hand. I've also seen fear hold them back. When fear is suppressed rather than acknowledged, risk escalates.

[16] Beeb Salzer. "Thoughts on Success and Failure While Moving" *Lighting Dimensions*, (September-October 1982), 41.

Fear may quickly become an impasse to a remarkable new experience–this is true in any practice. Likewise, the absence of fear in aerial dance may lead to injury, competitiveness, a lack of empathy for classmates, and reckless behavior. When fear is named and respected, students learn to distinguish protective fear from avoidant fear. Some of these same consequences can also be true for designers. Social science researcher Karla McLaren speaks to this trust in her 2001 book *Emotional Genius*. In it, McLaren reiterates the purpose of fear, explaining that "true and flowing fear is nothing more–or less–than your instincts and your intuition. Fear hones your senses and alerts your innate survival skills while it increases your ability to respond effectively to novel or changing situations. When your true fear flows freely, you will feel focused, centered, capable, and agile."[17] In both fields, fear contains crucial information, and this offers some similarity in pedagogy practice. In both, fear provides cognitive and emotional information about the stakes of creative work, and so, fear unites artists of all disciplines. In each practice, I invite my students to feel and utilize the fear, experience the discomfort, and ultimately to trust in their own abilities. It makes no difference if the end goal is an acrobatic feat or a dynamic and engaging set.

The trust to which I am referring may be scaffolded on an instructor's trust in their student, but it cannot be built on this alone. When an instructor builds agency in their student alongside the acknowledgement of fear, resilience and self-efficacy are formed. Readiness to embark on an artistic process must be felt internally, and readiness does not represent the absence of fear. They are not exclusive. In fact, they can and should co-exist. Given this philosophy, the action of doing alongside fear is not the same as overcoming. Fear offers valuable information about a task's importance, value, and authenticity–qualities essential to

[17] Karla McLaren, *Emotional Genius: Discovering the Deepest Language of the Soul* (Encinitas, CA: Laughing Tree Press, 2001), 308.

both artistic practice and intellectual progress. In this sense, the possibility of failure is as vital as the possibility of success. A familiar saying dictates that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the act of doing alongside it. This adage is objectively a simplification of broader concepts, but it is crucially missing an exploration of fear's function. To represent the function of fear, I will be using a recent conversation with a student of mine, Hannah, as a case study.[18]

Hannah was a painfully shy student with a concentration in stage management. Although she is an objectively brave young woman—in fact, she skydives recreationally—she deeply feared public speaking. Despite her reveling in her somatic fears by jumping out of airplanes, her evaluative fear paralyzed her in class and halted her progress as an engaging presenter. Notably, over the course of a few months, I started to notice a small but steady shift in Hannah's level of confident engagement. Previously barely sharing a hello in the hallway, she began visiting me in my office to run through her class projects and eventually agreed to speaking engagements in front of hundreds of people. After asking Hannah what shift in mentality brought her the courage to speak up often and freely, she quietly explained that she had bought a book on "overcoming" fears. Each day, she was directed to sign up to do something she was previously afraid of.

Because of this directive, Hannah began agreeing to speaking engagements, leadership opportunities, and opening herself up to conversations with unfamiliar people. Contrary to this book's wording on 'overcoming' fear, Hannah's transformation did not arise from eliminating fear but from practicing fear-engaged action. Moreover, her fear led not only to her personal self-development in public speaking skills but functionally gave her an interest in accomplishing these opportunities. Fear's information often precedes fear's utility: she became interested in opportunities only after choosing to engage with what scared her. Hannah's transformation

[18] Hannah R., story shared with permission (personal communication, March 18th, 2025).

demonstrates how fear can guide both personal and artistic growth when paired with intelligence and determination. Hannah's own agency taught her that fear functions not simply as risk but as directional intelligence, modeling a level of fear acceptance and utilization for which most artists strive.

In considering this notion of bravery, one can make an undeniable statement that designers and artists are, by nature, gifted with the capability of vivid imagination. However helpful this trait is in dreaming up new designs and artworks, it may also create and compound fear when imagining possible failure in equal clarity. As a result, the artistic process navigates terrain that is psychologically fraught and potentially destabilizing. Yet, at the core of art making lies the necessity of moving forward through these doubts rather than waiting for their resolution. Rollo May suggests one way of perseverance in his 1975 book, *The Courage to Create*, "we must be fully committed, but we must also be aware at the same time that we might possibly be wrong."[19] Though this wisdom is a helpful acknowledgement of the perils of choice, it also has the potential to confuse and frustrate any novice. No person, artist or otherwise, desires to be fully committed to the wrong choice. And yet, artistic creation requires a practitioner to accept the possibility of doing just this.

To offer a diminishment of this frustration, I reflect on examples of fear in my professional experience working alongside more seasoned designers than I. Repeatedly, the strongest designers are not fearless but have learned to accept fear and to enthusiastically continue in its presence. These designers stand apart by allowing honesty to triumph over the stigma surrounding fear in professional practice. They often speak openly about their uncertainty during the design process, acknowledging that their ideas have not yet settled into answers.

[19] Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 20.

When fear is permitted and shame barred, this uncertainty becomes not only tolerable but exhilarating to work alongside. Such an approach fosters meaningful kindness toward oneself as an artist and toward one's fears. Without fear, challenges flatten, risk recedes, and growth is easily diminished or stalled altogether.

As I move through my creative career and experiences, some of the fear has subsided. That may appear as progress towards a confident future, but meeting fear with gratitude advances my work far greater than the absence of it. Novelist Elizabeth Gilbert sums up her own similar relationship between creativity and fear in her book *Big Magic*: "Fear and creativity shared a womb, they were born at the same time, and they still share some vital organs. This is why we have to be careful with how we handle our fear–because I've noticed that when people try to kill off their fear, they often end up inadvertently murdering their creativity in the process."[20] It is as if creativity exists in the precarious friction between fear and confidence. Both are inseparably vital in art making. Moving with my fear has provided essential direction to my art and has fortified my decisions regardless of the need to make the 'right' ones. My efforts to understand my fears and to know myself have concluded in the realization that I have learned just as much from my fears as I have from my curiosities.

Fear is not something for designers to overcome; it is something they must learn to understand, engage, and honor. When met with intention, fear sharpens perception, fuels innovation, anchors authenticity, and guides artistic growth. When fear is reframed not as an adversary but as a collaborator, designers gain access to its full creative utility. McLaren echoes this sentiment as she writes, "While it's important not to let fear stop you completely … it's even more important to find ways to work with (not against) the instinctive brilliance your fear brings

[20] Elizabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), 24.

to you… When you can channel your fear properly, it will contribute a grounded sense of self-preservation while it pushes you to study, prepare, and renew your understanding of courage as the capacity to live life on your own terms…"[21] By naming fear, working alongside it, and teaching students to do the same, we cultivate designers who can navigate uncertainty with resilience and courage. To fear unafraid is not to eliminate fear, but to move with it. When fear is embraced as a teacher, a navigator, and a companion, it creates the conditions for deeper, more daring art. Once this is accomplished, art will be made with utmost clarity, vitality, and truth.

[21] McLaren, 315.

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