
BOOK REVIEW

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The Person Behind the Mask: A Guide to Performing Arts Psychology

Linda H. Hamilton. Published 1997 by Ablex Publishing Corporation, Greenwich, CT (131 pp., \$39.50).

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This small volume (100 pages of text) is a gem. I was a bit worried that the book was going to be a rehash of the usual sport psychology performance-enhancement techniques applied to music, ballet, and acting. The title, though, with its reference to depth psychology, suggested that the author was going to explore more than the cognitive-behavioral interventions so common in sport psychology. The title did not disappoint.

This book is must reading for any applied sport and exercise psychologist who is thinking of branching out into the performing arts, especially ballet. Also, for any sport and exercise psychology researcher who wishes to conduct studies with performing artists, the wealth of studies cited and the journals listed are invaluable resources. Rarely are the performing arts studied (and reported) in the sport psychology literature, but there is a substantial amount of research and applied literature to be mined out there, and Hamilton has done a good job of documenting the field.

Hamilton herself has impeccable credentials. She danced with the New York City Ballet under such luminaries as George Balanchine and Peter Martins. She has a doctorate in clinical psychology, has published frequently in refereed journals, has a clinical practice largely dedicated to working with performing artists, and writes a monthly column of psychological advice for *Dance Magazine* (circulation almost one quarter million). Few people would be better qualified to write this book.

What is so refreshing about this volume is its multifaceted approach to working with and understanding performing artists. The "Arts" have a long tradition and connection with psychoanalytic theory. One of the major influences on literary criticism, art criticism in general, and the study of the artist has been Freud (e.g., Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*), so it is almost "natural" for a book on the psychology of the performing arts to have a psychoanalytic slant.

In trying to understand the person behind the person on stage (the "mask" from the title), Hamilton introduces psychodynamic concepts, principally that of narcissism. Her explication of narcissism in its pathological and healthy aspects, and its role in the lives of performing artists, is a helpful and fascinating viewpoint. There is much here that has application to sport performers. An even more

in-depth examination of narcissism in the performing arts would have been a welcome addition. The appendix on narcissism, with its emphasis on the theories of Kohut, is helpful but possibly a bit “foreign” for many sport and exercise psychologists.

Hamilton masterfully blends psychodynamic understanding with cognitive-behavioral interventions and ends up with a picture of performing artists, their concerns, their problems, and their joys that, frankly, makes many sport psychology case studies and formulations of athlete concerns pale by comparison. She starts her “guide,” which is really more a guide to performing artists than it is a guide to performing arts psychology, with a description of training in the performing arts. There are similarities with sport training, but there are also some radical differences. She then goes on to describe in psychodynamic terms the central role of the mentor (ballet master, voice coach) in the training process. Here, and all through the book, are interesting stories about performing artists that dramatically illustrate the points Hamilton is trying to make. Although it is probably not Hamilton’s intention (as a clinical psychologist), one walks away from this book with the impression that the world of performing artists is a tempestuous, neurotic, and anxiety-filled environment that “chews ’em up and spits ’em out”—sort of a flamboyant version of professional sports. Hamilton is careful to point out, however, that there are plenty of reasonably well-adjusted people in the field.

Chapter 2 involves the problem of weight and addresses the issue primarily in the art of ballet. If there is a minor complaint about the book, it is that it focuses mostly on ballet, with some examples drawn from opera, acting, and music. Chapter 2 contains a comprehensive look at the etiology, progression, diagnosis, and treatment of eating disorders within ballet.

Chapter 3 involves personal relationships in the arts and discusses family dynamics, the problems of gifted children, stage parents, competition and cooperation with peer artists, intimate relationships, and the central psychodynamic concept of transference (primarily in terms of interactions with powerful others such as ballet masters). All of these relationship issues have implications for studying athletes and the positive and negative relationships they experience in their careers.

Chapter 4 focuses on performance, performance stress, and stage fright and is a primer on the cognitive, physiologic, and behavioral factors involved when one gets up on stage. Hamilton considers extreme performance anxiety a species of social phobia (fear of negative evaluation by others, fear of embarrassment in front of others). If it is a social phobia, then it is an extremely narrow and specific one. It does seem akin to calling pronounced competition anxiety a social phobia. Her argument is not completely convincing.

Chapter 5 is a treatment of injuries, psychological responses to injury, rehabilitation processes, and the problems of retirement from performing (relatively early for female ballet dancers, later for opera singers, and potentially much later for actors). Hamilton vividly conveys the psychological turmoil of injury and retirement and the problems of overidentification with one’s role as performing artist.

Chapter 6 is an overview of where performing arts psychology is today and how it evolved out of performing arts medicine. It is a young field of inquiry; the journal *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* started in 1985, and the *Journal of Dance and Medical Science* first appeared in 1997. Also contained in this chapter are discussions of ethical issues in the care and treatment of performing artists. The book ends with the appendix on narcissism and a valuable resource directory