

John McGregor talks to four performers who have made a career out of entertaining others.

1. The Illusionist

Who would expect to find England's answer to Harry Houdini in the sleepy Lancashire village of Mawdsley? Well, Matthew Tate has built up an impressive range of illusions and spectacular magic tricks to shock and thrill his audience, but many attribute his success to the way he manages to involve and excite his audience. They watch as he frees himself after being submerged handcuffed in a water-filled tank. He reminds his audience that failure would mean certain death and even asks them to hold their breath with him, just as Houdini did. I ask him if he can tell me just one of his secrets. My question is met with a cheeky grin and, of course, complete silence!

2. The Living Statue

When people ask Maria Marks what she does for a living, she often tells them "nothing". Every day, she makes her living by dressing in an antique wedding dress, covering her skin in white clown paint and standing absolutely motionless on a pedestal in London's Covent Garden until a coin is thrown into her hat. So, what exactly draws the crowd when Maria "performs"? "Well, people want me to prove that I'm human." I ask Maria if she gets bored just standing there day after day. "No," she says. "I enter an almost trance-like state and an hour passes like a minute."

3. The Actor

Michael Webster has been an actor in London for almost fifteen years. Michael tells me all about the ups and downs of a typical actor's life. "You constantly strive to deliver a perfect performance, often under imperfect or unpleasant conditions."

I ask Michael how he feels when he's performing. "One of the most amazing feelings I have," he tells me, "is standing in front of an audience knowing that they expressly came to see me perform. It fills me with two overwhelming sensations: joy and extreme gratitude!"

4. The Circus Performer

Zhao Jian explains to me how she came to be touring the world as a hand balancer with a circus troupe. "As a young girl I was always jumping around," she tells me, "so one day my mum suggested that I enrol in one of the many acrobatic schools in Wuqiao county. We followed an exceptionally harsh programme, waking at five thirty in the morning each day to begin eight hours of tough physical exercises." And now that she has a job in the circus? "I practise an acrobatic move over and over again before I'm ready to perform it." I ask her if she has any regrets. She answers me without the least hesitation: "No, I was made for this life."

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Which performer mentions the tough training they undertook?

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