

Idioms and Sayings and Phrases. Oh My!

By: Mason Yarnell

Throughout the English language there are thousands of phrases, that we humans have developed over the years. They add a bit of flavor to our lives and remind us that things aren't as serious as we make them out to be. While these phrases are very common, their origins have been lost to many of us, myself included until I researched the ones that [hit close to home](#).

It may come as no surprise to the reader that the three idioms I have selected are all related to the theater. For those who don't know, I'm an active member of the theater department here at Ferris State, and I have been involved in theater since my freshman year of high school. The phrases I chose to talk about are: Break a leg, The Show Must Go On, and In the Limelight. I felt that these idioms are well-known to the public, and originated in the theater, which some might not know about.

Break a Leg

This might be the most popular phrase that you'll hear from the theater, and it is common knowledge that it means good luck. The most common theory on this word's origin refers to an actor breaking the "[leg line](#)" of the stage. Originally, ensemble actors were cued to perform and if they were not, they would have to stay behind the "leg line" and would not get paid. Telling an actor to "break a leg" meant that you were wishing them the opportunity to get paid.

Another popular belief of this phrase's origin is back in ancient Greece instead of applause, the audience would stomp their feet. The term "break a leg" would've then developed from them loving your performance so much that they would break their leg stomping. Alternatively, this phrase is said to come from Elizabethan times when the audience would bang their chairs on the floor instead of applauding. Then if they liked the performance, they would break the leg of their chair from banging it.

I was in a production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, back in high school, and I had a memorable experience with this phrase. Our choreographer was having to go on as Jacob (Joseph's father) in a performance and before he took his place, I wished him good luck. In response, he scowled and stated, "it's break a leg, NOT good luck". Though my ill-tempered choreographer's response was unfavorable, I think about that interaction in a more lighthearted way now, referencing it whenever someone says "good luck" while we're backstage.



In the Limelight

Between the three idioms I chose today, "in the limelight" was the most obscure to me. I knew that it meant being the center of attention and had origins in the theater, but didn't know how it got its unique name. After some light research on this topic, I did find out that it had nothing to do with the green fruit it shares its name with.



In the early 1820s, English inventor Goldsworthy Gurney heated calcium oxide ([quicklime](#)) on a flame. This chemical compound would burn at extremely high temperatures and produce a bright-white flame. After this discovery, limelight started being used as a surveyor's tool to help measure the distance between structures by illuminating them. However, they didn't start using them

to light theater stages until 1837.

After the invention of electricity, and stage lights, these fires became unnecessary. While they did produce a bright light, they also had a bad habit of burning theaters down, and needed close supervision for the burning block of lime. I personally like the expression of being “in the limelight” more than saying “in the spotlight”. Referencing a burning pile of lime when talking about being the center of attention has a dramatic flair, and is fitting in the world of theater.

The Show Must Go On

“The show must go on” is a popular phrase used in show business, meaning no matter what happens, stick with the plan and make it til the end. This saying is traditional in the theater but originated with circuses in the 19th century. If an animal got loose or a performer was injured, the ringmaster and band would try to keep things going so the crowd wouldn’t panic.



Before I researched the history of this saying, I didn’t really think too much on it. I always thought that it served as a reminder for actors not to break character if something went wrong in a scene. It wasn’t until I read a quote from Eric Patridge’s *Dictionary of Catch Phrases*, “it is a point of honour not to let the other players down by deserting them when no understudy is available,” that shifted the way I perceive this phrase.

When rehearsing for a show, a director will always tell you to help your castmates if they are struggling in a scene. This creates a security for me when I’m performing in a show because I know that no matter what happens, my castmates will always be there for me and help me out. I realized that over the years I’ve been applying this saying to my life in a way. I’ve carried that feeling of security into my friendships because I know that they wouldn’t desert me “when no understudy is available”. After all, unlike the theater, you have no understudy in life and must rely on your skills, or the people around you, to help. The show must go on.

Whether it's a saying from a movie or real life, idioms are an important part of the English language. They are like inside jokes that we all get to be part of because of our shared history as humans. In the end, our own personal experiences are what shape the way we view these expressions, and decide which ones we might favor. I think that's what makes idioms all the more special.