



American Expression E0001 Break a leg

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

"Break a leg" is an idiom commonly used in the performing arts, particularly in theater and live performances. It is often expressed as a well-wishing phrase to actors before they go on stage or take part in a performance. However, the phrase might seem puzzling or contradictory at first glance.

The origin of the expression is uncertain, but there are several theories. One theory suggests that it comes from the superstition that wishing someone good luck directly could actually bring bad luck. By saying "break a leg" instead, it was believed to reverse the jinx and bring about good fortune.

Another theory suggests that "break a leg" refers to the act of bending one's leg during a theatrical bow at the end of a successful performance. A deep bow requires bending the leg, and a greater response from the audience is symbolized by a broken leg.

While the phrase may sound negative, its meaning is quite the opposite. "Break a leg" is an encouragement and a way to wish someone success and good luck. It is an acknowledgment of the hard work, dedication, and talent of performers.

When someone says "break a leg" to an actor, it carries the meaning of wishing them a stellar performance, a standing ovation, and applause from the audience. It implies the hope that the actor will give an outstanding and memorable portrayal of their character.

The phrase reflects the unpredictable nature of live performances and the excitement and anticipation that comes with them. It acknowledges the inherent risks involved in theater, where anything can happen, and success often comes from taking risks and giving one's all on stage.

In the performing arts community, "break a leg" has become a tradition, a way to express camaraderie, and a lighthearted way to encourage performers before they take the stage. It has become a part of the theater culture, an expression that holds meaning and significance within the context of the performing arts.

So, if someone tells you to "break a leg," don't be alarmed or take it literally. Instead, embrace it as a well-wishing phrase, a symbol of support, and a reminder to give your best performance and leave a lasting impression on the audience.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some possible origins of the phrase "break a leg" in the performing arts?
2. How does the phrase "break a leg" challenge the traditional notion of wishing someone good luck directly?
3. What does the phrase "break a leg" symbolize in terms of a performer's dedication, talent, and hard work?
4. How does the phrase "break a leg" capture the essence of the unpredictable nature of live performances?
5. Why has "break a leg" become a tradition and a symbol of camaraderie in the performing arts community?