

Skits

By David "Do-No" Newcomb

What is it that I can write about that will give my audience the information needed to perform a good skit? Should I write about famous performers that are well known or recognizable and with whom we are quite familiar? Of course, there are Emmett Kelly, a.k.a. "Weary Willie" and Red "Freddie the Freeloader" Skelton who immediately come to mind. Should I write about the "sweeping up the spotlight" routine which Emmett created and delighted his audiences with for so many years? Red's character, Freddie the Freeloader performed for audiences all over the world and gave us all so much love and laughter. Others famous celebrities who merit mention here would certainly include Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Art Carney, Jackie Gleason, Charlie Chaplin, Lou Jacobs, Oliver Hardy, Stan Laurel, Groucho and Harpo Marx and, of course, Do-No and Woe-No. (These last two clown celebrities are the author.)

Getting back to the subject of skits, I believe that these performers and all those who spend their time entertaining their audiences each share similar traits and each has similar goals. As with so many of our goals as clowns, I believe the great ones all attribute their popularity to the same ideals. I believe that each of us has the tools and the talent to excel as skit performers. The process requires preparation and I'll give you the tools and the secrets. The results will be up to you.

For a skit to be successful, there are certain elements which should be considered and a plan to be followed. The rules for skit competition as outlined in the ISCA Skit Competition Rules are a wonderful resource for direction, but the rules only begin to answer the question, "How do I become a good skit performer?" In my opinion, the skit should have the following elements:

The Entrance

The Introduction

The Story

The Punch Line

The Exit

The Memory Factor

The Secret - "KEEP IT CLEAN"

The Entrance is when the performer or performers enter the stage area. Their costumes, personalities and set-up should immediately bring to mind the intended subject matter. Props should be placed in easy, pre-discussed, pre-planned and pre-experienced positions so there will be no searching for them at the time they will be used. Music should be planned and rehearsed so it enhances the background but does not distract from the focus of the skit which is, **FIRST AND FOREMOST**, the performers.

The Introduction is very important. Within the first 5 to 15 seconds, the audience should know who the clowns are supposed to be and what the concept of the skit should be. There should be no question as to what is going on. The simpler, the better. The goal is to make the audience familiar and comfortable with the situation and unaware that something is about to happen that is a surprise.

The Story is communicated to the audience by talking or acting or both. A great skit will bring the audience to a comfortable feeling of easily knowing and understanding what is happening. There shouldn't be any question in their minds as to what's happening. Explaining the simplest details to make sure everyone understands the obvious is "KEY" to the success of a skit.

The Punch Line or "Blow Off" is the funny, unexpected action or comment which results in laughter.

The Exit is simply getting away or off stage quickly. This allows your audience to laugh and appreciate your humor.

These are the basics. The secret, "KEEP IT CLEAN."

What do I mean by saying, "KEEP IT CLEAN?" By this, I mean keep the skit focused. Stick to the story and DO NOT include additional movements, jokes or humor which doesn't contribute to the ultimate punch line. This is a skit and not a series of jokes. In my opinion, clowns are not "stand-up comics" and skits aren't professional joke tellers doing a monologue. My theory for skits is to get right into the story, get to the punch line, deliver it loud and clear and then, make your exit. LEAVE THEM LAUGHING. And remember - the quicker - the better.

The way to rate your skit is by the "Memory Factor." If you hear people talking about your skit hours or days later and they remember the story and the punch line, you've done it. It's that simple. And, to be that simple requires a lot of thought, planning, reviewing and PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.

Many of the skits that we see at competitions have been done, over and over, for years. The Busy Bee, The Banana Bandana, The Telephone Skit with the line, "Let Me Have It" and "Stagecoach" all come to mind. These are simple routines which all have the same elements. They win for their focused humor and they KEEP IT CLEAN.

Other important parts of a great skit include eye contact, costuming, voice clarity and projection, musical background and audience rapport. I'm not saying that you need to vocally or physically interact with your audience but you should certainly be aware of your audience. You should know how to "read" the audience and understand when your audience is ready so you can follow your plan to get from introduction to exit. Pace yourselves so you and your audience are both comfortable. Understand the situation so when you and your audience are ready, you may proceed to the punch line and deliver it with the proper timing.

A good skit performer works with the audience and their audience might be considered by the performer to be, in their mind, "part of the act." The performer should understand their audience to allow for proper timing and reaction time. Ultimately, your audience needs time to digest the story and get comfortable with it before you bring them to the next, important part, "the punch line." Allow time then for the audience to laugh and make your exit. Timing simply brings everything together in a comfortable flow.

Oftentimes, a pause between sentences prepares the audience for the ultimate goal – your punch line. When they are relaxed and comfortable, that should be the ultimate time to surprise them with a punch line - the more unexpected and outrageous, the better. But don't wait too long. The punch line works best when it is delivered "a moment before" it's expected. Surprise adds to the humor.

It is useful to study other successful comedy routines to understand the concept of timing. Listen carefully to the flow of the story and listen to the pace. Pay attention to the pauses between sentences, the emphasis on certain words and phrases and watch the movements of the performers. Pay attention to how the non-speaking performer is usually still while the speaking performer is speaking. This has to do with my concept of "keeping it clean." And, all this preparation is necessary to grow as a performer and become "good."

Remember to speak clearly and to speak loud enough for all your audience to hear and understand. Remember that one person speaking at a time allows for your audience to understand what is being said. Remember that if something is not clearly important to the ultimate focus of your skit, then leave it out. Remember – "KEEP IT CLEAN."

As with most of our endeavors, clowning is about people. Entertaining is about having fun and making people smile. If these are your goals as clown entertainers, you will certainly experience success. If creating smiles and happiness are your goals, then JUST DO IT and HAVE FUN. And always remember, there is no trophy more valuable than the sound of laughter and the smile of your audience.

I hope this helps and, as always, "Keep Smiling."

"Do-No"

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