

Humorous Patter

by Burling Hull

Many magicians and entertainers have wished to include humorous patter in their routines and have purchased numerous books on the subject only to find it practically impossible to fit the patter therein to their own respective offerings.

Those who have witnessed the acts of Bill Williston, Russell Swan, Al Flosso and, particularly, George Jason have felt that humor is more important in winning success than even good magic. This is logical as these chaps use simple effects as it is easier to inject comedy with that type of magic. The tricks, of course, are deliberately selected so as to allow opportunity for comedy.

After perusing various books and publications which contain excellent humorous patter and selecting those that appeal, the reader finds it next to impossible to work the gags into the act. Why? Because there is a technique which must be acquired very similar to that required for the presentation of a manipulative routine. No one can gather up a lot of moves or routines and toss them together and expect to create a magic act. Consider how confusing for your audience if you worked with a cigarette, then a ball, then a card, then a thimble and then a coin without any continuity or reason. Here would be a presentation without plan or plausibility. A manipulative routine must have a definite plan and a logical routine so that, as a whole, it will appear plausible.

Following the above let us use as an example—catching a cigarette from the air, following a few manipulations, then producing a ball or egg from the smoke of the cigarette, then, with a pass or two, change the ball to a silk. Here some silk sleights might be done and, from the silk, produce an egg, a thimble, cards or other small items and proceed from there to a logical climax.

Seldom can gags or quips be used just as taken from a book and, particularly, “one liners” or short joke lines. These require a “lead in” or a natural appearing excuse for mentioning the subject around which the gag is built. It must seem logical for the introduction of the joke.



Rule One: THE SET-UP. Casually remark that the article being used was presented to you by some fictitious character and then follow with something amusing about the fellow, either his comical appearance, his unusual job or his funny family.

For example: “I shall never forget the time this coin was presented to me by my old college chum, Dizzy Johnson. It was the day he was being married to a girl from his hometown. She had a face that men go for—Gopher-face Jane then used to call

her. She really loves roses . . . Four Roses. Her dad was a bartender in a floral shop. He used to get all the plants potted. His wife had been married before—she was a widow. I think a widow has a big advantage over the average girl. She knows a lot about men—and all the men who know anything about her are dead.

“I saw my friend Dizzy about three months later and asked him how he liked married life. He said that, to him, marriage was just like taking a bath. It’s not so hot once you get used to it. I asked him if his wife had a good disposition. He said that his wife reminded him of an angel. She was always up in the air and harping about something.

“By the way, I am glad you are enjoying my act. The last time I played this town, people said they could hear the audience roaring with laughter way across the street. Yes, Red Skelton was playing the theatre across the street.

“I will say that I certainly stopped the show that night. The fact that I was the last act on the bill may have had a little something to do with it. One thing that can be truthfully said about me is that I always work in the very best places. Last week I worked in the “El Morroco” (the swank club in the city) night club. This week they installed a machine to wash the dishes.”

Rule Two: THE PAUSE. Always pause after the line which forms a picture in the listeners’ mind of the situation you want them to visualize. Example: “Last week I worked in the El Morroco . . .” (pause, count three mentally, then proceed). “This week they installed a machine to wash the dishes.”

Rule Three: EMPHASIZE. Slightly emphasize the punch words like EL MOROCCO, also the words MACHINE to WASH the DISHES. This plants the thoughts squarely in the minds of your listeners.

Rule Four: FIXED IDEA. Most comedy depends on creating a fixed idea in the minds of the listeners of a normal or dignified situation or condition—one that is so natural that it is immediately accepted without question. A slight pause is always desirable to permit this normal situation to take firm root in the mind and form a clear picture. The next step is to completely upset this picture in the spectators mind and substitute a completely opposite and ridiculously different picture in the mind so that it causes an involuntary and spontaneous exclamation of surprise.

Rule Five: EXTEND THE CHARACTER. After introducing one fictitious character and making a few comments of a humorous nature, you can then refer to his family,



Burling Hull producing a giant live rabbit on a night club floor in the 1940s

employer or friend and then launch into a description of his comical jobs, employment, situations, appearance or experiences of the new character or characters so introduced.

Rule Six: SPECIFIC PEOPLE. Prepare a list of several important persons such as the most prominent officers of the club or organization before which you are appearing. Also list the “cut-up” or comedian of the club or locality or the jovial spirit who drinks a bit too much and who may have gotten into the neighborhood news lately. Build a few gags around these persons and, because of their local significance, they will be of treble value.

For instance you might say, “As you all know Joe Doakes’ wife is ‘expecting,’ so he consulted a fortune teller recently to find out whether the baby would look like him. The fortune teller said the baby would look just like him but to cheer up. His wife would love it just the same!”

One with a very large family might be mentioned as wanting to name the last child Eisenhower. But his wife called it Quits.

At banquet shows where the performer is at the head table there is plenty of time after the Toastmaster made the introduction to introduce many fictitious incidents of a humorous nature and which might have occurred at the banquet, on his way to the city, on his way to the hotel or at any other time.

It is not necessary to be a comedian, a clown or to be deliberately funny as more often the serious appearance of the performer or the more serious the offering the more mirth provoking will the gags and cracks appear especially if they have the appearance of being “sprung” in an offhand manner. Many professional comedians employ a “dead pan” expression just for this reason. One of the funniest bits on the radio today is the somber voiced undertaker who appears in the “Life of Reilly” skit.

Rule Seven: LOCALIZE JOKES. List local and national significant events that appear in the local newspapers as well as the names of individuals that are big news during the week of your show. With this list in hand run through your books of patter, your gag file sheets or your indexed gag file if you have compiled one. Pick out all gags applying to similar situations of Love, Divorce, Politics, Wealth, Girls, Jobs, Law Suits, Jail and any other topics and write them all down on small cards. These cards can be placed on the back of a deck of cards or can be palmed and may be used as a memory tickler if you are unable to memorize the gags, at first. Later you will find that memorizing becomes easier as, with sleight of hand or any other portion of your presentation, practice makes perfect.

My hope is that these suggestions will be of as much help to you in developing humorous patter as the writing of this article was for me.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Burling Hull". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

Burling Hull, 1948