

## Things to consider when developing your own performance routines

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At a recent clown alley meeting, I performed the world premiere of a new, never-before-seen (and likely never-to-be-seen-again) bit called "Love," a short sketch about the difficulties a young lad encounters while trying to communicate his love to one who doesn't share it. The performance helped illustrate the essential elements of a skit – a short, comic play – and the use of a variety of comedic techniques to make it funny.

When you think "skit," think in the broadest way about any term that would describe your performance style or venue. So, instead of just a 3-minute "skit" planted on stage without links to real life or real time, think sketch, gag, routine, bit, or performance piece.

In developing and performing a clown bit, it's important to **think like a clown**: simple-minded (and doing everything "in the moment"), innocent, childlike (curious, not worldly), and likeable (non-threatening; not scary or off-color). Actions should be simple, exaggerated, and delivered with a comic twist. Your routine should pass the BUR test (your audience **b**elieves, **u**nderstands, and **r**elates) for the humor in it to be real – "real" funny.

**Essential elements.** Beginning, middle, and end – those are the 3 fundamental parts of any performance bit. But beyond that basic 3-part format, there are a number of other elements of comedy to consider (remember, clowns are **supposed** to be funny).

In the **beginning**, your character must:

1. **Enter.** You have to figure out a way and reason to get out into the performance space and "say hello" to the audience. Right from the beginning, let them know YOU know they're there and that you intend to include them in the performance. This is a very important moment.
2. Establish your **character(s)** and their relationship (if there are more than one performer) through your appearance and costuming, character traits such as movement, actions, gestures, mannerisms, and motivation (why are you there, what are you thinking, and what are you trying to do).
3. Establish the **setting** (situation, mood, and location) through props, backdrops, and medium (e.g., oral, visual, non-verbal, physical), including music and/or patter. Keep in mind that it is most effective to play the setting as "here and now."
4. Set the **tempo** and pace through your own movements (and the musical background).
5. **Engage** the audience through the use of one or more comedic techniques (more on these in a moment).
6. Begin the **storyline** (the starting point and sequence of events that make up the plot).

Throughout the **middle**, or body, of your sketch, you will:

1. Develop the story. Make sure you cover all the journalistic w's: **who** is involved (and why), **what** is going on (and why), **where** is this occurring (and why), **when** is this happening (and why), **why** your character is trying to do this, and **how** (OK, one 'h')

your character is going about this (and why). Note that the "why" part is important, and if your character is not convinced of the "why," your audience will never get it.

2. Introduce some sort of **conflict**. It could occur in your character's "inner" thinking, between you and a prop, between two characters on stage, or between you and an audience member, such as a child who's too short or small to hand you a certain prop when you need it. The conflict also could take the form of a problem or a complication (use of comedic techniques applies here in creating conflict, too).
3. Keep involving your **audience**. Consider how and where you want to focus their attention, the staging of the performance (perhaps center stage or down amidst the audience), blocking (how the characters are positioned in the staging area), and resolution of the conflict (something the audience can be actively involved in thinking along or perhaps helping out the character who's "in trouble").

To draw your bit to an **end** or conclusion, you have to:

1. Build the conflict to a **climax**. In the skit "Love," the character has difficulty with spelling while writing a short love letter.
2. Give the story a **surprise** or twist. In "Love," the character finds he loves the taste of the love letter he's just written when he plants a kiss on it. He then proceeds to eat it, leaving him with no way to convey his love.
3. Find a "way out," end with a flourish ("the **blow-off**"), and get the performer(s) off stage. The lad in "Love" does this by discovering a piece of celery in his pocket to take the bad taste of the paper out of his mouth; he then discovers he also "loves" the taste of the celery and he leaves to share this "love" with his off-stage love interest.
4. Maybe you also want to **transition** to the next piece, if the bit, gag, or routine you just performed was part of a longer show you're performing. The character in "Love" could have done this by thinking the celery needed some salt, using some illusion to produce too much salt, then needing some water, spilling the water, and when he goes to get a mop . . . well, you get the idea.

If you **are** linking pieces together in a longer stage performance, you'll also need to consider varying the pace of each so you can take your audience on a bit of a roller coaster ride. Build 'em up, thrill 'em, let 'em relax a little and catch their breath, then take them through one or more additional up-and-down cycles to your crowd pleasing, emotionally bonding, frosting-on-the-cupcake finale.

Here are a few **comedic techniques** that you might consider incorporating and spotlighting in building your storyline and creating conflict:

- √ Surprise (you and/or the audience expects one thing, and something else happens)
- √ Exaggeration (taking an idea or action to an extreme)
- √ Understatement (opposite of exaggeration; takes the air out of the seriousness or intensity of the situation or occurrence)
- √ Timing (such as allowing time for the audience to "get it")
- √ Pace (the quickness of your gait, as well as the intervals and speed of your performance "laughs" and high points; do away with meaningless pauses)
- √ Slow thinker (like a slow reaction to something in the audience, or a double take)

- √ Repetition (rule of 3's: action done once, action done a second time, perhaps with a slightly different result, action done a third time with a comic and unexpected impact)
- √ Twisted logic (don't do funny things; do things funny, and for funny reasons)
- √ Reversal (the situation changes, such as when the underdog – or child helper or even you, the bumbling clown – comes out on top)
- √ Impersonation (pretending to be someone or something you're not, such as a talented musician or magician; could also include tongue-in-cheek disguise)
- √ Imagined predicament (reacting to a danger that's imaginary, such as darkness created by your eyes being closed)
- √ Incongruous (combining two things or actions that don't normally go together)
- √ Contrast (how different something is from what's normal, such as an oversized prop)
- √ Visual (a visual "joke" created by an object or character)
- √ Physical (a "hurt" inflicted on the clown character to comic effect, such as a finger accidentally closed in a trunk)
- √ Voice (through the use of language, gibberish, tone, clever patter, jokes, funny words)
- √ Interruption (derail a train of thought or action in order to pause for laughter, mental transgression, draw out/heighten/suspend action to build anticipation or suspense, go off on a tangent or random direction, competitive one-upmanship, "don't say it!")
- √ Reaction (your reaction causes audience reaction and laughter; they are barely listening, but they ARE watching, so you should play for and do – this could be a take, an aside, or any action that comes naturally and spontaneously from your character)
- √ Audience connection and involvement (break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall with comic "asides," move the action out into the audience area, like climbing over people to retrieve a dropped prop, or pull an unwitting audience member up onto the stage to help with a task)
- √ Trouble (clown gets into a fix, needs audience help or a creative solution to get out of it)
- √ Mishap (something "goes wrong," such as a prop falling apart or other clown character doing something unexpected).

Bruce "Charlie" Johnson authored a terrific book on comedy techniques a few years back entitled *Comedy Techniques For Entertainers: Charlie's Comedy Creation Course*, his first and most popular book. According to his web site, it has not been available for over a year because the publisher had declared it out of print. However, he recently found a box of unsold copies, so the book is available again until this limited supply is sold out.

(I receive no royalties for this plug, other than the pleasure knowing that a few more folks may pursue and use this excellent resource, used extensively in developing this article.)

So, where do you get started in developing your own performance routines? **Story and performance ideas** can come from:

- popular children's and family programming (such as *Sesame Street*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Teletubbies*, and *SpongeBob SquarePants*),
- old and new TV comedies and sketch comedy shows (such as *I Love Lucy*, *Carol Burnett*, *Mr. Bean*, *Cedric the Entertainer*, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Jamie Kennedy Experiment*, *Mad TV*, and *SketchCom* – BUT, be sure to adapt them to your character and performance style AND G-rated clown standards),

- silent films, especially "shorts" by Laurel & Hardy, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton,
- characters in cartoons, comic strips, books, and magazines your clown is like,
- camp skits, such as those you can find on scout and campfire web sites,
- live performances of improve troupes, clowns, and other comedy characters, and
- storylines developed around a favorite gag, joke, trick, pratfall, prop, folktale, fable, situation, lesson, or Bible story.

Even though the sketch "Love" that was performed improvisationally at that June 2003 clown alley meeting wasn't a good example, **rehearsal** IS important to effectively performing a skit. Master and perfect it before performing it! And be sure you work on timing, naturalness, flow, and simplicity.

Here is an exercise you can do with a partner, small group, or your own alley to begin trying your hand (and clown mind) at developing your own bits. It also reinforces the importance of rehearsal and thinking like a clown.

Here's how it goes: choose a simple task, such as "read a magazine," and break it down into no more than five separate, distinct actions. After a short, private rehearsal period to learn and become comfortable with the actions, their sequence, and timing, then choose one of the actions in which to inject a comic twist or comedic technique. (For instance, encounter a physical mishap and have something go wrong.) Then, using clown logic, devise a "way out" or solution to the problem.

Here's how you can practice developing routines with physical mishaps on your own:

1. Pick a simple task from list below.
2. Break the task into no more than 5 different pantomime actions. Run through it at least 3 times. Don't use props or patter, so you can concentrate on delivering strong, simple, understandable actions.
3. Now, after one of the steps, improvise something that could go wrong through a physical mishap.
4. Use clown logic to find a creative clown solution to solve the problem.
5. Rehearse and present it to a "friendly audience" (partner, friend, fellow clown, group).

Pick a simple task from this list (or come up with your own that fits your character):

- |                    |                     |                    |
|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| ✓ read magazine    | ✓ dance with        | ✓ open the window  |
| ✓ put on shoes     | someone (or thing)  | ✓ dig a hole       |
| ✓ pick a flower    | ✓ dance by yourself | ✓ shine your shoes |
| ✓ make a bed       | ✓ react to rain     | ✓ dust someone off |
| ✓ set table        | ✓ wave to a child   | ✓ toss a baseball  |
| ✓ eat dinner       | ✓ carry a bag       | ✓ hit a golf ball  |
| ✓ paint a wall     | ✓ blow up a balloon | ✓ smell something  |
| ✓ lift a box       | ✓ sweep the floor   | ✓ sit on a chair   |
| ✓ pull a wagon     | ✓ eat a banana      | ✓ direct traffic   |
| ✓ cross the street | ✓ kiss someone      | ✓ swat a bug       |
|                    | ✓ wash the window   | ✓ take out garbage |

- ✓ write a note
- ✓ open a box
- ✓ see a friend
- ✓ chew some gum
- ✓ brush your teeth
- ✓ enter the room
- ✓ leave the room

A second step to this exercise is to choose another comedic technique other than “mishap” (perhaps one that better fits with your own character) and insert that at Step 3.

When you're ready for more advanced comedy routine development practice, tackle some simple **WAITER/WAITRESS!** restaurant scenarios that can be found in books like *Pantomimes, Charades, and Skits*, by Vernon Howard.

Few situations offer such a fine opportunity for a pantomime comedy sketch as that of a waiter serving a diner – or a group of diners. Vary the characters, vary the setting, vary the blow-off – even if several groups use the same storyline, the end result is bound to be different, and just as hilarious! Each bit involves 2 or more clowns, and the materials needed are just a table and chair(s).

1. The diner cannot catch the waiter's attention.
2. The waiter spills imaginary foods and drinks on the diner.
3. The diner changes his/her order several times.
4. The waiter eats the diner's food.
5. The diner goes to sleep while waiting.
6. The waiter brings the wrong orders.
7. The waiter helps him/herself to trays intended for another table.
8. The waiter hungrily watches the diner eat.
9. The diner chokes on the poor quality of food.
10. The waiter carries the food in his/her pocket.
11. The waiter sits with feet on table while taking the diner's order.
12. The diner complains of poor service.
13. The waiter drops dishes just as he/she is about to serve.
14. The waiter whisks up dishes just after the diner barely tastes them.
15. The diner chokes on hot food and hastily gulps water.
16. The waiter seasons the diner's food by pouring huge amounts of salt and pepper on it.
17. The waiter clears the table by tossing dishes over his/her shoulder.
18. The diner gets so hungry he/she begins to eat article of own clothing, such as necktie.
19. The waiter passes several times, holding fingers in ears so as not to hear the diner's frantic calls.
20. The waiter pours water from pitcher into glass, drinks it him/herself.
21. The waiter, who has been sweeping the floor, brushes off diner with broom.
22. The diner finds he/she is without money to pay.
23. The waiter holds out hand for his/her tip and the diner pours water into waiter's palm.
24. The diner shows the waiter how to serve and ends up serving the waiter a full dinner.

Remember to do things funny, and keep 'em laughing!