

7 Funny Things About Comedy – November 2023

I think it's safe to say that everyone in this room understands the role of humour in engaging an audience. We know we retain most in moments of enjoyment and leave situations rejuvenated when we've had fun. But how do we put it in our writing? Here are 7 tips:

It's funnier if it's personal. Speeches aren't declarations or statements. As TMs we want to build rapport with an audience; relationships. If I tell you something that's not only true but personal, I've worked hard to connect to you. For example I could say Liz was confused about conception as a child. I can't tell you exactly what she thought, I'm not her. It's easier and more connecting to tell you what *I* thought: that the sperm and the egg marched across the bed and shook hands when they met. True, and personal. Which is why jokes can fall flat; someone else's gag churned out is less exciting than a fresh gag, made specifically for an audience. Simon Bucknall, TM World Champion says comedy is just real life put into a speech. Use whatever already makes you laugh and you don't have to invent anything. He also says: 'great speeches aren't written, they rewritten,' which is, of course, true.

Show your vulnerability. Another world champion, Mike Carr, reminds us that showing our flaw, cracking ourselves open, builds trust. All good heroes have flaws. Remember *Save the Cat*? A young man jumps into a river to save a drowning cat. Big deal. A man living rough under a bridge sees the cat, thinks: 'Sorry cat, I've not eaten for 3 days and have no way of getting warm if I jump in. Oh hell... Splash. There you go cat. Brrr.' We love him no? Humour can even be used to talk about vulnerability itself; things we don't want to talk about but may feel we need to. For example I could tell you I'm terrified of getting old. Or I could say, 'I've discovered worrying new symptoms: hair growing in places I've never seen it... (*pluck chin*) and falling out in the places in which... you know, I quite like it... (*look down*).' A word of warning from Simon Bucknall about vulnerability. Be sure you're ready. Some things are too private and painful to share, ever. Others shouldn't be shared *yet*. 'Share from the scar not the wound' is his advice. Wonderful.

We've talked about the intention behind humour. Now let's talk about how to construct it. Humour and tragedy essentially work the same way. Both rely on the contrast between what people expect and what is delivered. Both take an audience in one direction, then make a hard turn that surprises the brain, and provokes laughter or tears. For instance: Sandra and Paul drove along the Grande Corniche in their convertible, dazzled by the impossible blue of the sea, blissfully unaware that the complicit look between them would be... their last. See the turn? Similarly with humour: A man says to his friend: 'I built that bridge. Do they call me Bob the Bridge Builder? I made that road. Do they call me Bob the Road Maker? But you shag one sheep...! We humans are wired to enjoy mental jolts. If you can achieve them, you're captivating your audience. You're touching their hearts.

Balance similarity and novelty. A good story needs both. An audience that thinks 'this is about me' is engaged. But say the identification is about falling over in public. Mildly connecting. Strangely, *differences* are more connecting than *similarities*. If I told you that last week I sat in a dentist's chair, wishing I'd remembered to brush my teeth and worn a better jacket, you might say: 'Been there.' But if I told you I really fancy my dentist and stared, open-mouthed, clearly, into his eyes, thinking 'I wonder if this is the only way I'll ever look into a man's eyes again,' it's different isn't it? An ordinary story that's not quite so ordinary.

Don't make it stand-up. Stand-up relies on a very fast pace; a gag every 15 seconds it's said. It's humour just for the laughs. A speech is more. It's a story with a beginning and an end, an arc. So use the condiments of humour sparingly. Emphasize *A* point, not *EVERY* point.

If you're enjoying yourself, your audience is too. Novelist Sarah Winman says: 'The more tears on the page, the more the reader feels them.' It's the same with comedy. Ask yourself what do I want from this speech? To entertain? To deliver a message? Decide what you want and be transparent. It's your speech. It should please you. Chances are if you're writing comedy and you're not laughing, it's not that funny. If you're genuinely tickled, your audience will be too. Be generous. Give them your best. Don't hold back anything for next time. You'll have better ideas the more you give away this time. Unless it pushes you over the time limit of course.

Serve your audience. In TM we steer clear of politics and religion; topics that can ignite people and emphasize the difference between them. Similarly with humour, choose what's appropriate and what isn't. What character you want to be to create it. Often, it can be just a change in intonation. For example: Johnny's been caught smoking weed. If Johnny's 14 you might say: 'If I ever, ever catch you again I'll... (*slap action*).' If Johnny's 47 you'd be like: 'Oh Johnny, you *promised*...' And if Johnny's 86 in a retirement home you'd go: 'Found this in your bedside Johnny. Careful 'cause if that cow Beryl finds it she'll 'confiscate' it again won't she?' Remember, there's no universal human. Not everyone does self-deprecation for instance. One of my favourite jokes is this: 'Sure, I have dual airbags: my wife and my mother.' Tell that to an Italian and he'll be like: 'You say wha' about my mother? Wha' you say?'

There you have it folks; my 7 tips for making it funny. Of course then there's wit. Humour taken to another level, often appearing impromptu as a retort. It's what we all aspire to, like Anne Hathaway who replied to: 'You're kind of opinionated for a woman,' with: 'You're kind of ignorant for a man.' Comedy gold. There's only one way, like most things of value in life, to achieve it: practice, practice, practice. Which is why my friends, my best advice is to get out there and have a whole lot of fun. Maybe even tonight. Bonsoir!