



COMEDY ACTING TECHNIQUES FOR CHARACTER PERFORMERS.

COLIN UNDERWOOD

I feel these techniques are worthy of study but to attain some sort of mastery will involve actual practical application. I have attached some short footage of different types of performances of mine that highlight some of the techniques I have mentioned.

Surprise

This is vital for character entertainers, and increases the magical entertainment. Especially in children's shows. The more you act surprised the funnier the audience will find the routine. I prefer 'the out of control' or 'the magician in trouble' type presentation.

By adding large doses of surprise situations in the show or routine you will be off to a good start. Most performers place way too much emphasis on the finale—e.g. the production of the bunny! All routines should be structured to engage and keep interest. Sometimes, due to the use of familiar props, many of the audience, especially the young ones, are way ahead of you, and will shout out that they have seen this or that trick before. Of course, this is both a good thing and a bad! To counter this, you might consider performing a routine with a different ending—this makes you different, and a more interesting entertainer. I call this 'a reversal-surprise technique'.

The surprise might be at the end of a routine; but I recommend having smaller sub-endings or surprises throughout the routine.

Within a character act there must be a finale moment with many sub moments interspersed. In my experience the public will rarely applaud your antics as they are engrossed in the character's actions. In my walkabout appearances, this is more applicable.

These can be silly misdemeanours that set your character; or in routines such as the 'Washing Machine' type, you keep reaching a false climax. The basic plot being 'dirty gloves need washing' and must come out clean at some point. But what can really happen is they are mutilated, change colour, and undergo any other surprising sub-ending. But be careful that the plot is maintained, and the audience know what you are trying to achieve. However, the final production of clean socks after so much mayhem, may actually be a let-down.



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The silly misdemeanours are e.g. using a glue stick on your lips instead of Lip Ice (or Chap Stick as it is known in the US). You can look surprised at this, and then look again (a 'double-take' technique), noticing that the glue stick is now a proper Lip Ice. This gives you an additional surprise with strong magic content.

I consider sleight-of-hand as a great way to produce props or to vanish an item. The magic is strong in these situations and enhances the surprise. Cigarette sleight-of-hand from the old books is a great place to start, and these moves can be ideally adapted to similarly shaped items of sweets or, in this case, a Lip Ice.

Another strong addition to technique I use is... 'Suspense'!

I find that many entertainers rush over the magic effects as if they are every-day happenings, and they lose those 'magic moments'. I know that many magic theorists have spoken about this at length, so I won't go into its inherent value; but rather write about techniques to use in creating 'suspense'.

Firstly, one has to look carefully at one's current routines and break down the main magic moments that happen along the way. I use video footage—primarily as it allows me to critique my own work. Every routine will have various magic moments; so take care not labour on just the final effect and the many sub-effects along the way. E.g. 'Coins through Table' using four coins would seem to have



only four magic moments—with the last, the strongest; but instead, if you first count the coin vanishing, you will have eight moments. A coin vanishing is a strong moment in itself; then the appearance from under the table is a second moment. I suggest really studying your routines, and break down the moments accordingly.

Once these moments are highlighted, you are now in a position to use the various techniques I will cover here.

'Suspense'—according to Merriam Webster dictionary—is 'a state of mental uncertainty or excitement as to a decision or outcome.'

So we have the 'Dove Pan' routine with all the normal ingredients in the pan. Now we use a very important technique called: 'The Pause!'

Yes, you need to 'pause' a few beats, and verbally recap what has taken place. This allows the spectators to think about and absorb what has taken place. You now mention we need to cook the ingredients by adding heat. Bringing out either an extremely small lighter or a huge Bunsen gas-type burner will add laughter as per my previous article, because of the ridiculous nature of the objects—and this creates surprise.

You now use another technique which is to 'dramatize' the moment. Here, acting skills are used. In the classic cake baking routine you do not just light the lighter, but you prepare your whole body in a position that holds tension; you focus on the lighter and, by lowering your voice to almost a whisper—which is the last technique to add—you will have everyone's attention. Of course, you can now react to the flame appearing by pretending to get a fright—and jump. Because of the suspense created, you will have a good laugh at your own expense. Now you repeat the action and s-l-o-w-l-y advance to the pan. Imagine a cello player playing dramatic chords in the background. You now light the pan and, if you have large flames, you once again react to this. Once you have recovered, you quickly place the lid on the pan. Here is another moment to pause, then slowly (too many magicians rush the climaxes) lift the lid. You can look in through a thin gap and give yourself another fright. All this has added further suspense or tension, as

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Colin Underwood currently resides in Johannesburg and is considered one of the top corporate magicians in his field.

This unique multi talented corporate entertainer has had a diverse and rich career spanning nearly 35 years of performing professionally around the world. He has appeared on numerous variety programs on South African television as well as in the UK.

He is also booked for many character roles and really excels at playing different characters for large productions at Casinos in South Africa.

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they will now want to know what is in the pan.

Other techniques that character entertainers can use are of a theatrical nature in increasing the suspense, and can be used very effectively when you are working in a theatre environment. Music is a very strong tool to increase the feel of the moment. I say this in general terms, as one can use it to increase a happy climax, create tension, etc. Lighting adds to this too. Think

of horror movies which are always depicted in the middle of the night—and it's always raining. We all know that, just as the poor victim is about to be chopped up, the lightning will strike. You get the point, I think.

I have used a clapping technique on occasions to enhance a moment. You get the audience to clap in unison (a lot of gags are possible here) to each footstep you take. Of course, at some stage





you pretend to take a step and the audience claps out of time. This gets a good laugh. Finally, the reveal takes place as per the routine. I have used this when I need to move quite a far distance across the stage to open a box, or reveal something in a cabinet. Street performers use this as they run and jump on a unicycle.

It is important to release the tension moments in the routines. Using tension is somewhat like doing a dance between extreme focus followed by relaxation. Many times on the relaxation beats one can do the secret magic move—but that's another topic altogether.

I would suggest you take time out to watch live pantomimes and comedy horror movies, and observe these techniques in play. All of these techniques will only work if you are in the moment fully engrossed in the action (and not thinking of the shopping you have to do, or how lousy this audience is).

Finally I refer to ACTION REACTION as the main technique to be aware of.

Action/Reaction for me is to act, and then to react. For every action you make, a contextual reaction must also take place. You need to break up your actions into many smaller sub-actions, very much the way you did for the Surprise technique; and, in fact, the same cue points for the Surprise technique will be used—but the appropriate response might be different. With these points in mind, you apply the appropriate response to the action. This might be surprise, or sadness, or whatever.

What this does is stop you becoming a 'robot performer', and makes your show spontaneous. There are so many bad magicians—not because their technique is bad, but they do not believe in the 'magic' and the character they portray. Yes, they make certain stock lines at the appropriate moments, but if they portray genuine astonishment or emotion appropriate to the action at the same time as the audience does, the better they will engage in the moment. The more you show the same or exaggerated emotion the audience does, the more you bond with them. Salesmen will

mirror their clients' body positions in sales meetings as a way to link with them.

I refer to the video content to see these techniques in action.

