



# THE PERFORMING ENVIRONMENT

COLIN UNDERWOOD

The performing environment will either enhance your performance, or be a distraction — depending on various factors and how you handle them. Each venue must be evaluated on its own merits. I must admit that my stress levels lower once I am actually in the performing space.

You obviously must arrive early at the function. Once you have checked in with the function organisers, you can do a reconnaissance of the area. I suggest that it will help if you ask them which areas they want you to service . . . especially at large fairs or agricultural shows.

The basic idea is to observe the interactions taking place in the space; which elements are fixed — such as furniture, seating arrangements, serving stations, and where the band, if any, is situated. I always gravitate to the dance floor toward the middle- or end of my set, once I have created the character in different parts of the room. In fairs or agricultural-type shows, I will find a common spot with a good flow of people. It is important to observe what might be obstructed due to your crowd-building; i.e. entrances to shops, escalators, or private areas. Also, security issues might apply — such as in casinos. I have performed many times in the Middle East, and often had to observe prayer times and not perform.

A conference function will have more fixed points: the décor, band area, and the flow of staff. In a trade-show you might be booked to move around and be visual. I recommend either stilt characters for huge crowds, or a mini vehicle of sorts to enable you to move about quickly — but in a quirky, entertaining way. Imagine the crazy businessman coming past on a mini scooter or mini car.

If you are doing set shows in one area where the public comes to you, you must apply the same principles of safety and maximum impact.

Certain items from the performing space might be used. For example: a shopping-centre has benches or dustbins spaced throughout the mall. Cleaners will be roving around; and, of course, in supermarkets you have shopping trolleys. All of these are objects that can be used by the character. For example: a shopping basket is needed, but the character cannot decide which one to use. Maybe he/she has OCB and needs to clean the basket



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first. While getting out a sanitizer, the basket is taken by another shopper. The character can be surprised — and act accordingly. In the shopping-centre days of my past, I had the idea of fixing a customized puppet onto a shopping trolley. Most of the work in those days was at malls, where trolleys were readily available.

The extreme that I have gone to was to make the character so engrossed in e.g. reading a map, that he walks completely over benches or roads (pretty much like the Pokémon Go crazies are doing today). In the *Mr Bean Vacation in Paris* movie, Rowan Atkinson has the character walk over park benches in his determination to find a train. Of course, the opposite is applicable — and you can walk around in circles, ending up by not going anywhere.

When there is a live band, I highly recommend enacting near the band. The music in the background is highly effective in enhancing the routines. I suggest taking note of the songs and — with Shezam, or asking the band during a break for the name of the song — you can start making a set with music, and bringing your own sound system. There are many ways to carry mini-speaker amps which are linked to your mobile. This amp can be hidden in the bag or pram; and, if you are on a scooter, it will be ideal to have music backing while you move about . . . further enhancing the character experience. I have a friend in London who makes his whole act



centred around sound effects, which are all programmed and operated from his suitcase handle. With modern technology, music should be a criterion; and it really enhances the character, as well as making it easier to build a crowd. At a recent Valentine's Day function I was requested to 'be' a French painter. I added well-known love-songs to my playlist. This worked a treat, and set the mood.

I recently came up with the idea of creating situations by bringing in a prop that I could play off. For example: A ringing mobile for the extremely portable version of this idea, as well as a more fixed-type phone-on-a-stand in larger spaces. The phone would continually ring, ending with a long conversation with someone on the phone. The comedy is gained by the interruptions throughout the act, especially if you are struggling with a particular situation. You put the phone down after a very long chat, and say that it was a 'wrong number'. Clowns in circus shows have used this phone idea extensively.

I would love to set up a so-called spontaneous performance using the props on hand to create a show. I think this is possible in a theme-park environment. A small application of this idea that I have used is to place the Healed-and-Sealed-Coke can magic trick in a nearby dustbin, all ready for the restoration. 'Flash Mobbing' is a modern idea using multiple elements to create a performance.

When taking a booking, I highly recommend finding out as much about it beforehand as possible. There is a relationship between the environment, the number of people at the function, and its duration. All of these dynamics can affect your performance. For example: A small audience in a closed-in space with too long a performance-time will result in you running out of material... having consequently less impact, and eventual boredom of the audience.

Rather, it will pay to explain to the client that a shorter time is better than what they have asked for. The other solution is to break the performance into two parts — with you doing a 'disappearing act' in between. Sometimes you will be booked for two hours but, halfway through, the CEO gives a thirty-minute speech. During that time you are unable to perform.

## WHO IS COLIN UNDERWOOD?

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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Street performers are adept at using their surroundings to maximise their performance. I have seen a performer straddle up between two pillars to the height of six metres to close his show. I have used a skip to stand on. The concept of height is used to maximise your performance. You might like to think of making the exact same character for stilt-walking; this is easy, as the costume is merely extended. But note that certain iconic characters do not allow you to

do this — for example Charlie Chaplin and Santa Claus. Both will look stupid and out of character.

Noisy areas will force you to be more visual. If I am working 'silent' from the start, I prefer to stay silent. I feel that my voice or accent might not fit the character. Look at Mr Bean — when he does talk, he mumbles or does double speak. In this case, the voice enhances the character.

Outdoor functions are at the



PHOTOS: A variety of venues Colin has performed from outdoors to casinos.



mercy of weather conditions. If I must perform outdoors, as the extreme option I will place the audience in the shade and me in the sun. Hot audiences are not happy audiences. Wind conditions will affect you as well. In a forthcoming article, I will discuss costumes that can overcome inclement weather.

My rule for outdoor functions is mobility to service all areas as well as possible . . . and being visual. Golf carts are perfect; or bringing your own little car, unicycle, or stilt costume will help to increase your booking options. The use of your audience to increase your performance will allow for a sustainable performance. Crowd noise will attract more crowds, as seen in all street-shows around the world.

And lastly, different times of the day might be a factor. For example: you perform outside a church, and the priest comes to remove you because the wedding procession is arriving. Drunken people are one of the major hazards, and so it is best staying away from areas serving alcohol.

I highly recommend you observe fellow performers should you have the opportunity, and watch how they handle the space — as well as think how you would handle such a situation should you be booked there. Watching the local street performers (if you have them in your town or city) is a great learning opportunity.



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