



Sunday, 7 August 2022

Jack on Jokes

"New jokes are hard to find," claimed Jack Benny. In the vaudeville days, you didn't need to look very often. An act moved across the continent and took the same gags with it. Only with radio was a fresh show needed every week.

The Benny solution was, eventually, to create new characters and situations and then use variations on old jokes. Jack didn't write these—he had Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin come up with the Maxwell and Rochester and Dennis Day's battle-axe mother and Phil Harris' carousing—but he watched over the writers meetings to ensure they got the best show possible.



Coronet magazine interviewed Jack for its July 1941 edition. He breaks down humour more than I've seen him do it in other magazine features.

GAG-COINING AND GAG-FILCHING, AS DISCUSSED (WITH DETOURS) BY AN EXPERT ON BOTH SUBJECTS

THIS ONE WILL SLAY YOU

by Jack BENNY

DON'T get me wrong. I'm no Woollcott, but, well, there are lots of people who think I tell a swell story—among them Jack Benny, Mary Livingstone, and my relatives in Waukegan, Illinois.

Maybe I'm an authority on forms of story and joke-telling because I've had many half-hour programs of practice on good citizens whose only defense is a quick flip of the dial. Maybe it's because I have learned from bores I have had to listen to, what not to say. (This last statement is not necessarily meant for Fred Allen.)

Why, anybody knows you don't have to be a Woollcott to bring down the house—private or public—with a gag, joke, or story. And it doesn't even have to be a new anecdote you're telling. But it has to have a new twist.

Just the other day Mary pulled the latest variation on the oldest joke while talking with Don Wilson, who asked, "Who was that lady I saw you with last night, Mary?"

"That was no lady," she answered. "That was Jack. He only walks that way."

Unless you get a new twist, you may as well detour around a gag like that. It might be a good idea to do it anyway. New gags are hard to find or build. Ask any jokesmith. But there are certain standard forms that are the skeletons for all jokes. "That was no lady" is just one. A second cousin to that skeleton Methuselah, the "my but you have a kind face—the funny kind" gag came out like this in Bob Hope's latest version: "You have a face like a saint—a Saint Bernard!"

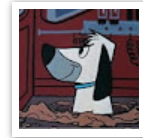
Which not only brings to light gag-remodeling to fit changing times, but also the epigram, the parlor artillery of Mr. "Information Please" Levant. I don't want to steal even a clap of Mr. Levant's thunder, but just as a fact, the epigram is old enough by hundreds of years for pension.

Now if Fred Allen, who loves me like a relative—a distant one—were going to insult me, he might build it up in this way:

"Jack, you know." He smiles and pats me on the back. "You know you're beginning to grow on me." (A pause for effect.) "Grow on me—like a tumor!"

The whole thing amounts to an O. Henry twist. The unexpected comes where you expect the expected. Or does that sound like Gerty Stein? Psychologists have tried to find out what makes people laugh. They are about as successful as celebrities who try to keep stork secrets from Winchell. Even gag-writers who help

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the joke situation. Script writers who work tooth and nail on my screen and radio shows—I find cuticle among the pages—say there is a limited number of dramatic situations. Change of settings and character make them sound different.

HERE's an example of what I mean with a follow-up of the most modern version. Remember the one about G. B. Shaw who was approached by a beautiful actress whose brains were at a one to four ratio with her beauty? Well, the gal proposed their marriage and union, saying, "With my beauty and your brains think what a child we could have."

Shaw deliberated for a moment and answered, "Think how tragic it would be if it had my beauty and your brains."

Well, the other day Joe E. Brown dressed that one up in 1941 togs, explaining that in his boyhood he had had two main ambitions: to play ball like Tris Speaker and speak like William Jennings Bryan. "I played ball like Bryan," he concluded ruefully.

A GOOD memory is handy for the person who wants to be known as a wag. He has to remember those upon whom he has inflicted his jokes. None of the 57 varieties of bores is worse than the one who is loyal to his gags for a lifetime—except the life of the party who takes off on a joke, works up enthusiasm, and comes down the home stretch without remembering the climax.

I know. I've been a member of this group more than once, having to say, "I don't know just how the ending went, but it was very funny—ha, ha, ha." And that was a solo laugh.

On a par with us who sometimes forget the punch lines are those who through lack of imagination or memory miss the point entirely when they record a good joke and muff it in telling. For example, the traveling Englishman who was overwhelmed by the thousands of acres of golden corn waving over Iowa. Hour after hour he had been seeing it on both sides of the train.

At a weatherbeaten rural station, a farmer in straw hat got on the train, sitting beside the Englishman because that was the only empty seat. Seeing his chance, the Englishman, monocle and all, turned to the farmer:

"I say, my good man, what do you do with all these hundreds of thousands of acres of corn?"

"Waaa!, I tell you," said the farmer slyly, "we eat what we can, and what we can't we can."

It took the Englishman five minutes for proper reactions, and he laughed with proper reserve, vowing he would pull the joke on his friends at the Drones Club when he got back to London. He did. He described the corn at length, giving the story a sound buildup. Then one of his impatient friends interrupted—"But, listen, old fellow," he said, "what do they do with all that corn?"

Beaming and on the threshold of triumph, the Englishman capped it off: "Simple. Very elementary indeed.

They eat what they can, and what they can't they tin!"

While I'm on the subject of bores, I might mention the raconteur—Roget's Thesaurus is on my left—who takes an evening's lease on the floor. Inasmuch as most people have at least a favorite joke or story to contribute to the chatter, the monologist freezes them out and sours his own audience.

Among the most obnoxious bores I have known is the variety that condescends, throws Boston "A's" all over the room, and explains the obvious.

Platform speakers, equipped with water pitcher, glass, and note-stand, rarely if ever start a lecture without first winning the audience by revealing an embarrassing experience they've had, or some humiliating incident that can be tied in artfully with the lecture.

Once the speaker has his audience's sympathy, he is ready to go to bat. A story told briefly usually has more

put words into our mouths can't make two and two equal two and two. They can throw out laugh-lines, but they can't write a thesis on the whys and wherefores of them. Most lives of the party are epigrammists, if you've noticed. It doesn't take an Einstein I. Q. to fashion them. Even I made one up once—the "tumor" gag—and then what did I do with it? I gave it to Allen. All I did was get a pattern. Say, for instance, you wanted to tell someone off. Perhaps your wife, landlady, husband, sweetheart, or a speed cop. You might say, "You do something to me"—very earnestly and as an afterthought—"nauseate me."

The old refrain "everything's been done before" covers

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As I shared in my introductory post, o...

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punch than the long-winded kind.

Choosing the right words and details is important, but choosing an interesting subject is even more so. Ripley has something in his oddities. He knows what every parlor entertainer should know—that the spotlight should focus on unusual facts about a subject—not on facts we all know.

Chuckles and smiles a fellow gets from his audience depend a lot on his listeners' mood. But by exaggerating, using punchy colorful words, speaking in a modulated voice—monotones are out this season as they are in every other he can put a lift into his stories. In a minute I'm going to sound as heavy as H. L. Mencken; so I'd better put a stop to this. But, first, have you heard the one about Samuel Johnson, the great literary critic of the eighteenth century?

ALL RIGHT. A brittle and sharp wit, Johnson was so sought after in literary circles that the Emily Post of her day could hardly omit inviting Johnson to her supper party, despite what she had heard about his boorish table manners.

She sat at the head of the table aghast. Everybody was for that matter. Everything they had said about Johnson was true. He siphoned his soup with such vigor that the veins in his forehead bulged and his face glowed. Perspiration beaded above his brows. Glances that withered the lettuce —glances from the many shocked —didn't faze Johnson. He elbowed through his main course under par to the dessert, a steaming hot pudding.

Before anyone else started, Johnson began fanning the pudding with his napkin. Every guest at the long table gaped. What next? He dug in his spoon, shoveling it into his mouth. Suddenly he howled with pain. It burned his mouth, and he spat the blob of pudding back into his dish. Glaring angrily at his hostess, he snorted, "A fool would have swallowed it!"

Stories, jokes, and anecdotes are born every day—perhaps new ones or perhaps remodeled ones. Some of us can remember them. Others can't. Although a memory would be doing us a favor to forget some well-worn stories, the point is, a storyteller must have a good stock on tap, a better than average memory, a feel for what's dramatic, a clear vision of his story, and a capper line at the end.

There I go into things deeper than Joe Miller. First thing you know I'll be talking about something I don't know a thing about.

But, as I said in the beginning, I'm no Woollcott, but you could do a lot worse than read what I have to say about story-telling. For instance, you could talk with Fred Allen!

Among world-famous violinists, Jack Benny is ranked as the foremost radio and screen comedian. His rendition of The Bee is too well known to require comment. Benny lives in Hollywood with his wife, Mary Livingstone, and an adopted daughter, Joan. He points out that in five years in pictures he has never won an Academy Award and is confident that he will never mar this perfect record.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:12](#) 

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