

Stand Up

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Sometimes, I think I must be the worst stand-up comic artist of the century.

I wasn't, of course. At least not in the old days. I was one of the best.

But tastes change.

People don't laugh at the same things nowadays, do they?

I suppose we have education to thank for that.

People tend to think more.

They also seem to understand about things I didn't even know existed.

Not only that, but one ages too, doesn't one?

Forty years on the boards, give or take a year, and this was my last, thank heavens.

Not my last year. My last week, in fact.

Happily, I have retained enough of my old status to entitle me to a private dressing room, so I might not have fallen quite as far as I imagined.

That's because I've had my days of glory. Luckily, glory and celebrity stick to one like pine tree sap on your trouser seat.

Like everyone else on the stage, I started in the realm's smallest and most undesirable towns.

Tiny, dirty halls with creaking woodworm-eaten stages, hardly big enough to stand on.

Hardly even a stage, really, more a step.

In those days, there was no room for a piano, so if you were a singer, you had to learn to play guitar, accordion, or banjo. Otherwise, you couldn't get any work.

From those beginnings, I gradually worked my work up the rungs.

Then, ten years further on, I was performing in the most sought-after places in London, Brighton, and all the country's cities and big towns.'

Then, ten years later, I started working my way back down the rungs again.

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Nothing one can do about that.

New faces appear, and people and, above all, venue managers love new faces.

Every year, there are additional new faces, and what's more, they get younger and younger while I get older and older.

That's the way of the world when one is on the stage, so there's no good complaining.

Anyway, I have to admit that I had a good run for my money. What's more, I have always enjoyed the work and the people.

I gazed at myself in the mirror and shook my head sadly upon discovering the image that gazed back at me.

Over sixty, and looking it at last, no matter how many layers of makeup I apply.

Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not one of those unhappy fellows who pine for the lost days of their youth.

No, I'm pretty happy with what I was and what I've become. Accepting life as it is and getting a few laughs out of it along the way is my secret to happiness.

But people don't laugh at the same things now, do they?

That's life, too.

I paused in my makeup preparation and leaned over to open the fridge.

My last week.

I extracted one of the bottles of Champagne I had put to cool.

One for each of the last weekdays and two for Saturday.

However, as an extremely experienced professional, I knew it was wise to drink my health before the show rather than after.

I poured myself a glassful and leaned back in my worn, creaking, leather swivel chair.

I love Champagne, don't you?

I never get drunk on Champagne, even after a whole bottle.

Perhaps I do, but there's something about Champagne that makes one feel one isn't drunk.

I just feel, well, I feel uplifted and distinctly brilliant, don't you?

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I believe I've said the cleverest things I have ever said and made the funniest jokes I've ever invented after a bottle of Champagne.

I also sleep like a baby.

I find that Champagne's sleep also wipes out all the unpleasantness that might have occurred the previous night.

Brilliant stuff, Champagne...

As I said, this is my last week at this job.

Time to leave room for the new generation.

God! I shudder with embarrassment when I hear some of those people.

They joke about things no self-respecting comedian would ever have said in my days. Well, at least on stage.

We all like a bit of a fruity joke, don't we?

But only between friends.

A dirty joke is still a dirty joke, no matter how you wrap it up, and some things are best left unsaid, aren't they? On stage, I mean, of course.

If you want dirt, well, go down to the pub, not to the music hall.

I don't mean those sorts of jokes don't make me laugh. I'm human, after all. But well...

I call that joking below the belt.

That's not something I can come to terms with.

Well, that and politics.

Politics gets more laughs than dirt nowadays, so I suppose that's some sort of consolation.

Anyway, that's no longer my problem.

A few more days getting the Bird, and that's that.

I refilled my glass and sipped some more champagne.

Expensive stuff. But after all, this is the final week, isn't it?

And don't imagine that the sad old man is going to spend the rest of his life starving to death in a dingy old bed and breakfast somewhere up north.

No way!

Over the years, I managed to put away a nice sum.

Not only that, but I used my earnings wisely. The proof of this is that my better half now has lovely tearooms in the centre of Canterbury.

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My dad and his dad before him were saddle-makers and had a big corner shop there. That was back in the early nineteen hundreds.

There is not much of a market for that sort of thing nowadays.

But the premises were theirs, including spacious living quarters in the two upper stories. Nice place.

God knows how much you'd have to pay for a place like that nowadays, especially smack in the centre of a thriving town!

So when my old man passed on, I invested my savings to convert it, and my wife was tickled pink by the idea of running the place.

Ten years down the road, the place runs smoothly and is always well-packed.

It was initially designed mainly for the older generation, but the wife quickly saw that younger people needed an entirely different environment.

She got our niece to work out precisely what sort of place this younger generation of customers would appreciate.

The stroke of genius was to create a separate section for the young would-be cinema actresses, book-reading intellectuals and such.

Furthermore, being a corner shop, they used one side for the entrance of the young set and the other for... Well, "other" customers.

Naturally, the food and drink come out of the same kitchen. Still, it's guaranteed to have a completely different taste depending on which side of the thick separating wall one sits on.

The niece took over the running of this section; believe it or not, it's nearly always full, too.

So, the place is functioning marvellously and is now bringing in more than my current monthly income.

As I said, my earnings were well-spent and well-invested.

And that is where I am headed on Sunday morning.

My niece is adamant that I will not be authorised to crack my jokes in the youthful intellectuals section.

Sadly, my wife suggests that I had best avoid the temptation of 'amusing customers' in her section, too.

What I'll do with my time still needs to be clarified. However, I know I will not starve and will have a nice, comfortable bed to sleep in.

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Anyway, there are plenty of good pubs within stumbling distance, so I will be able to bore the locals stiff with outdated jokes.

I have thousands of those, of course, so I'm unlikely to be accused of repeating myself.

I filled my glass again, beginning to feel the exhilaration of the athlete on starting the final half mile of his marathon.

Four more evenings of "the Bird" and then bye-bye birdy.

I allowed myself a long, contented sigh and returned to my makeup preparations.

A few moments later, there was a discreet tap on the door, and Young John stuck his head in.

'Six minutes, Mr Crabtree.'

'Thanks, John,' I smiled. 'On my way up.'

The head disappeared, and I sighed again.

I didn't need to check my script or anything like that. I always did things ad-lib. I improvised depending on the audience.

As I said, I have thousands of jokes and know them all by heart. I can slide smoothly from one to the

next without thinking. It all depends on how the people react.

No matter what happens, I always have a joke ready to fit the situation.

Even if someone throws a cabbage onto the stage, I'll have a suitable joke on my lips before it has bounced twice.

Forty years on the boards teaches you a lot.

I pulled on my flashy jacket, relieved that most of the sequins stayed in place. Admittedly, a good number were now only held in place by a few frayed threads, but it would be ok for the last week, then into the bin.

I stood, stretched, and returned the remainder of the Champagne in the fridge.

I also put the glass in it to cool it.

I was looking forward to the last few glasses before bed.

The best way to finish the evening, I think.

As I closed my door and walked up the narrow and cluttered corridor to the bottom of the stairs, I could hear the singing and tap dancing above me.

Now, that was a nice little act.

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Two extremely pretty young women in their early twenties.

They could sing well and could dance like Fred Astaire. They were far too pretty to last long in this job, though.

Some wealthy bachelor would sooner or later want to marry one of them, and that would be the end of the act.

Mind you, these girls were not only good and pretty, but they were also intelligent.

Catching a wealthy bachelor was precisely what they were angling for.

Their mum had been on the stage, too, so they were trained to be able to spot a good catch when they saw one.

The one that first reeled home the big fish would look after the other.

Ah well!

That's the stage for you.

I climbed the steps, stood behind the heavy purple curtains, and watched their lithe bodies weaving and skipping artistically across the stage as if they were as light as feathers.

The old stagehand scowled at me.

He didn't like me.

I didn't like him either; I never have.

The girls finished their number and exited amid a thunder of applause and a few bouquets of flowers.

They rushed off, stopping only to give me a kiss and to stick their tongues out at the stagehand.

At the same time, the manager strutted on from the opposite side and announced to me.

Then, turning in my direction indicated me.

'And here he is...'

I put on my standard idiotic smile and stepped out into the lights.

As I did so, the old stage hand puffed out his cheeks.

'Bloody loser,' he said.

I got several strides out into the stage lights before this registered.

Then, three glasses of Champagne and a shock of the insult pulled me up short.

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I whirled around and glowered back, 'What did you say?' I shouted.

The theatre was packed to capacity, and five or six hundred people gaped at me, unsure what to think.

'I said Looser,' the man called back.

A good number of the audience heard.

Always an actor, I turned, gazed into the floodlights, and spread my arms in mock amazement.

The audience decided to laugh, albeit without a great deal of enthusiasm.

I turned back and gazed into the dark recesses behind the curtain.

'Looser, you say? Ha!' I shouted. 'Coming from something which resembles more a slug that someone has trodden on than a human being, I'm not sure that's a criticism or a compliment.'

This time, there was decidedly a ripple of laughter.

I turned back to the stage front, shrugged and pulled a comical face, which was followed by applause.

But I wasn't counting on the old stagehand having any sort of energy left in his old frame.

'Who are you calling a slug, you damn decrepit loser.'

This got us another round of applause.

I had had far too much experience not to realise that I was onto a good thing here. This looked like saving me the Bird for once.

I threw my arms into the air theatrically and gazed idiotically at the audience, shaking my head with mock amazement.

'Oh yeh!' I shouted even louder. 'When you can't even remember to pull that damned curtain rope without someone giving you a kick in the backside. Does that make you less of a loser than me? Looser indeed!'

Another, louder ripple of laughter went around the theatre.

'If you think you're so damn good,' I continued. 'Come out here and show us what you're worth.'

With this, I turned to the stage front.

'Shall we ask the gentleman to show us his exceptional talents, ladies and gentlemen?'

A roar went up. 'Yessss.'

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Now, the stage manager was just as experienced as I was and clearly spotted a way of saving the evening. He had sprinted behind the curtain and shoved the old stagehand toward me.

There was a loud commotion and a good deal of swearing and clumping of heavy boots. Then, suddenly, both men tumbled to the stage.

An enormous roar of laughter filled the air.

The audience was clearly licking this up.

No Bird for me tonight, then. That was good news for my final week.

The stagehand leapt to his feet and made a dash for the wings but was tripped up by the manager before getting there.

Laughter filled the place again, and I then saw the manager whisper something to the stagehand, who gasped. The manager nodded, and the man turned back hesitantly.

I guessed a substantial sum of money had been mentioned.

The stagehand spun around and glared at me.

I nodded, a wry smile crossing my face. Now, this was going to be fun.

The audience gazed at the two of us expectantly as the man stomped menacingly towards me.

He stopped two feet away and prodded me sharply on the shoulder.

I pretended to be shoved harder than in truth and stumbled backwards amid applause.

'Show us your talents,' came a cry from the back.

'Yeh. Give it to him, sluggy Joe,' called someone else.

Laughter filled the place.

'It's not Sluggy Joe,' I cried. 'He prefers just Slug.'

'Shut your damn mouth! Looser,' cried the furious stagehand.

'Oooo!' I said, turning to the audience. 'I believe our friend might be a tiny bit riled.'

This got me a round of applause as I tuned back to the man. 'Are you a tiny bit riled, my friend?'

A chuckle went around the hall.

'Friend!' he cried. 'I don't make friends with losers like you.' He shouted.

'Ooooo! My goodness!' I pulled a face at the audience, 'Strong words, indeed!'

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Laughter echoed around the hall.

'Ok, clever clogs. If you not a damn loser as everyone knows you are, prove it?'

'Ah ha!' I gasped. 'A challenge eh?'

'Yeh,' he sniffed. 'Get out of that one, then. If you can.'

I turned to the audience and mimed a huge, exasperated sigh.

'You might be interested, ladies and gentlemen, to learn that this man used to call himself "Slimy Joe"'

I waited for the laughter to cease. 'He used to dress up as a slug and have himself shot out of a cannon.'

The audience laughed, and I saw a good deal of thigh slapping.

'That's the most ridiculous and slanderous lie I've ever heard,' gasped the man amid cries of laughter.

'Remember.' I smiled. 'I am a seasoned professional'

'Yeh,' he laughed, 'I'd replace the word seasoned with Rotting. That would be closer to the truth.'

This got him a good round of applause.

I nodded appreciatively. Not bad. Not bad at all, especially on the spur of the moment.

I pulled a face and raised my eyebrows to unthought-of heights. 'As you might expect ladies and gentlemen, the "flying Slug" act did not draw in the crowds he had anticipated. So now he specialises in pulling curtain ropes and insulting his superiors.'

The place filled with laughter.

'My superiors?!' cried the man. 'Who are you kidding?'

'I'm not kidding anyone.'

'Come on then,' he nodded gleefully, 'show us some of that seasoned talent then.'

I turned to the audience, nodding, 'Shall I show him, ladies and gentlemen? Or shall I not?'

'Show him. Show him,' came the enthusiastic reply.'

'Right! Now hold on to your hats, everyone.'

I quickly dredged through my memory for the worst titbit I could remember.

"Right,' I said. 'Here we go.'

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I rubbed my hands together in a most professional manner. Coughed, the swelled up my chest.'

'I stood on the bridge at Midnight.' I quoted.

'My lips were all aquiver.

'I gave a cough. My head fell off. And floated down the river.'

With mock satisfaction, I spread my arms wide, 'How about that, ladies and gentlemen? A gem. I think you'll agree.'

A vast groan went around the hall, interspersed with happy laughter.

'See,' cried the stagehand. 'Absolute tripe...'

Well, once we had got into the swing of things, we could have gone on almost indefinitely, so it was a surprise to both of us when the Stage manager rushed on and pretended to separate us in case we might start fighting.

'Come on, Lads,' he cried. 'There are other acts who'd like to use the stage. You can finish your fight in the wings.'

We turned and bowed and, amidst a thunder of applause, left the stage.

Back in the wings, we turned and gazed at each other.

'That was brilliant,' I conceded.

'Yeh,' said the man. 'That was what I call a bit of a laugh.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'A lot of a laugh, in fact.'

'Yeh.'

The stage manager rushed over, 'Great Gods lads! That was fantastic.'

'I'll be waiting for that little handover you promised.'

'Don't worry about that.'

'I do.'

'He does,' I added.

'Look,' said the manager. 'If you can manage the same thing till the end of the week. You both get double pay.'

We looked at each other.

'Well?' I said.

The man shrugged, 'Tripple pay and I'm game.'

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Well, as I've already explained, I am one of the most experienced comic actors around. So, I knew exactly how to coax the best out of this scenario.

We got together in my room the following morning and worked it all out.

The stagehand was not confident that he would be able to remember his lines, which is normal. But I reassured him that I would prompt him without anyone noticing if he forgot something.

As a result, the act got better and better as we acted out the unsaid insults we had both been bottling up for years.

The final night, Saturday, was fantastic. We had the audience rolling in the aisles, and some even shed tears of laughter.

We even had to return to acknowledge the cheers, something which hadn't happened to me for ten years.

Amazingly, we even got thrown some bouquets of flowers, which had probably been brought for some other act.

It was a nice thought all the same.

And so ended my very last night as a comic stand-up artiste.

Brilliant!

Back in my room, I cleaned off the makeup and packed my stage clothes in my little leather bag.

That bag had followed me around the country for forty years or so.

I also sometimes feared it had weathered the years somewhat better than me.

I then took out my last two bottles of Champagne, then opened the door to admit the two lovely girls, who bubbled perhaps even more than the glasses in their hands. The manager, the stagehand, and a few well-wishers were also present.

We clinked our glasses and chatted about the evening.

Then, Young John looked in, 'A gentleman for you, Miss,' he said, nodding to the dark-haired sister.

'She rubbed her hands together theatrically, 'Wish me luck, boys.'

'Check the ring finger for dents,' said her sister.

We laughed and went back to our Champagne as she skipped off.

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A few moments later, John was back. 'A gentleman for you,' he said, gazing at me, surprise written across his face.

But before we had time to think, a dark form pushed the door open, and a well-nourished, well-dressed man stepped in.

The quality of his suit, the precision of his tie knot and the shine of his hat indicated a man of means.

He held out a plump hand to me. 'Excellent, excellent.' He then extended it to the stage hand. 'Brilliant. I haven't laughed so much in years.'

'Thank you very much.' I smiled. 'That's nice to hear. My last night, too, you see.'

The man nodded. 'Last Night? Really? How odd!'

'Yep,' I said. 'Some champagne?'

'Thanks,' he smiled. 'I thought I'd pop in and have a word. I'm from the BBC, you see.'