

Natural and Unnatural Laughter

Basically, children will laugh at any one or combination of three situations. These are:

- i) When you make a funny face or noise, or create a funny situation.
- ii) When you tell them *to* laugh.
- iii) When you tell them *not to* laugh.

Obviously, the first example is under the heading of 'natural laughter'. And children laugh even louder when it is the magician in trouble, especially when the helper is 'one up' on the magician. This is the best kind of laughter to aim for. Pure unconditional laughter from children is the sweetest sound. The photo of **Fig 3.3** has caught the kids' reaction from a naturally funny situation.

The second instance is unnatural but will nevertheless make children laugh. The device is often used in warm-up situations at the beginning of an act; for example, "Before I show you my funny tricks I would just like to know how loudly you can laugh. We'll have a little practice. I'll count to three, and then you all laugh loudly. Ready? One, two, three!" Of course they will all laugh. Some entertainers repeat this once or twice more so that everyone is responding. It's part of unifying the audience at the beginning.

The third instance is often used to precede a naturally funny situation, for example, "You won't laugh if I show you my new socks, will you?" They respond with, "No, we won't laugh." You reply with, "You promise you won't laugh? Alright then; what do you think of these?" Of course, children will laugh. This sets them up for some really funny happenings. Forced and naturally funny situations have their place. The naturally funny entertainer is the true artist who has worked his act.

Style, Confidence and Authority

Picture this scenario. Supposing it is your very first professional performance as a children's entertainer. All you have to do is present a 45-minute act for 20 or so five-year olds. You assemble, say, six or seven tricks, practise all of them at least a couple of dozen times, and away you go. After the show, although you are quite proud of yourself, there is something missing, some indefinable element that you just can't put your finger on.

About a 1000 shows later, you look back and try to analyse that unfulfilled feeling from your first couple of dozen shows. One word that comes to mind is 'style,' see **Fig 3.4**. Style is that special something that sets you apart from the performer you used to be. You now have a greater inner confidence, not just in your practical skills, but in the way you can handle an audience. Billy McComb once said that the most successful performers exude 'authority' and 'confidence'. Exuding confidence works both ways. An audience has greater confidence and is more comfortable with a performer who is obviously 'in charge'.

The performing ingredients of confidence, style and authority, when bundled together, produce the finest entertainers (in all of the arts). These components come from experience. There is no magical way to obtain instant experience. You have to go out and perform, and build upon your successes and failures. But there is a way to fabricate quickly a great show and a new you! Take every opportunity to study other entertainers. Observe their style, confidence and authority. Try to analyse their performance a little more closely; for example, the way they link from one effect to another, the phrases they use, when they slow down or speed up their patter or the actual effect. Notice the way



Fig 3.3
Children's pure unconditional laughter from a naturally funny situation is the sweetest sound.

Structure for a Successful Show

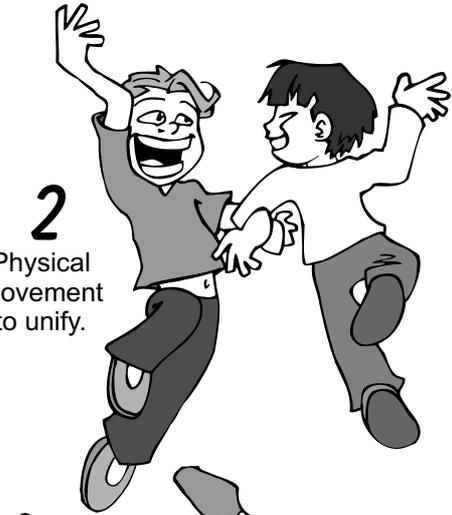
1

Music helps children get used to the hall's ambience.



2

Physical movement to unify.



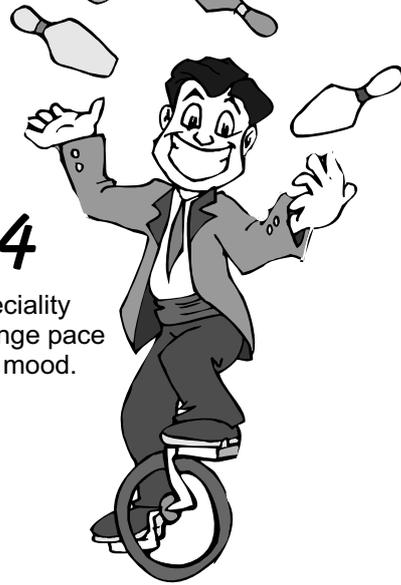
3

Funny visual tricks that involve audience.



4

Speciality to change pace and mood.



5

Clever and unexpected happenings plus involvement.



6

The Star Turn (you), which could involve the birthday child.

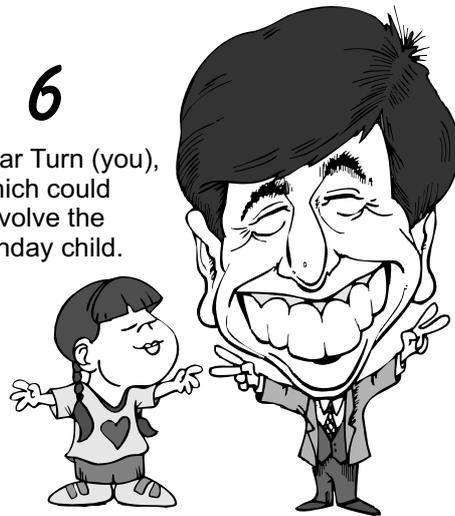


Fig 3.5
A simple structure that virtually guarantees a successful 50-minute show.

membrane of his blown eggs for his 'Egg on Fan'. But the one thing that really did stick in my mind was the importance of audience warm-ups. Harold Taylor firmly believed that there are definite stages to warm up an audience before the 'star' makes his/her entrance. He reminded me of the programme's structure in a traditional theatre. First there's the musical overture, followed by the dancing girls; then the mc or comedian, then, say, a speciality act or two... and, finally, the 'star' of the show. By the time the 'star turn' performs the audience goes wild!

But you are on your own... a one-person act. So how can you warm up an audience so that they go 'wild' when you make your star appearance? This is easy. Just structure your act exactly as Harold recalled they do in theatre. Start with music to set the atmosphere; then some dancing or physical movements; introduce yourself with crazy facial expressions and funny noises; a funny visual trick; then perform a speciality effect; and finally, top it with you as the star turn. I realise that it is 'you' all the way through the show, but think of the structure. You simply change gear at appropriate stages in your act.

- i) As the audience arrive, the musical overture acts as a bridge and gets the children used to the hall's ambience and surroundings.
- ii) Then you assemble the children and lead them into a simple four - minute dancing game. This involves lots of physical movements, which encourages the audience to 'unify'.
- iii) Follow this with some funny sight gags and noises, which trigger the children to laugh out loud. This really brings them together. The audience now know it's okay to laugh as a group, and that you are a harmless old fool!
- iv) Once again, change gear into some clever trick or two that involves spectators to assist you. Introduce a 'sucker effect'.
- v) And, by way of a change of pace, follow this with a speciality act such as ventriloquism, or a gymnastic or juggling feat.
- vi) Now go to town as the 'star' to impress, amaze and to amuse.

Fig 3.5 depicts this simple structure; a structure that virtually guarantees a successful 50-minute show. Involve your audience whenever possible by inviting up spectators to help you. In fact, continually encourage the whole audience to make the magic happen by expressing your special magic spell. Top UK entertainers such as Bruce Forsyth and Des O'Connor use a variation of this audience involvement technique throughout their stage shows. But remember, 'laughter, smiles and amazement' are what you are after – whereas an

audience of incessant 'shouting' is not entertainment!

Take a look at some of the kids' TV shows on a Saturday morning to see an example of the worst kind of children's entertainment. The producers and floor managers of these shows incite the children to scream and shout continuously, and then shout louder at anything that moves. The presenters preface every sentence with a, "Give him a big clap," followed by their extensive vocabulary of, "Fantastic. Absolutely fantastic!" It is incredible that some potential children's entertainers watch these dire TV shows and really believe that this is how an audience should react!

Trick, Effect, Routine, Act, Show

There appears to be little written about any specific definition of the magical parlance terms: Trick, Effect, Routine, Act, Show. Here is one attempt, just so that we both understand roughly what we are talking about as we go along this magical journey! The word 'trick' applies to a move or sleight used to bring about a magical effect. The 'effect' is how the audience should perceive a magical happening or experience.

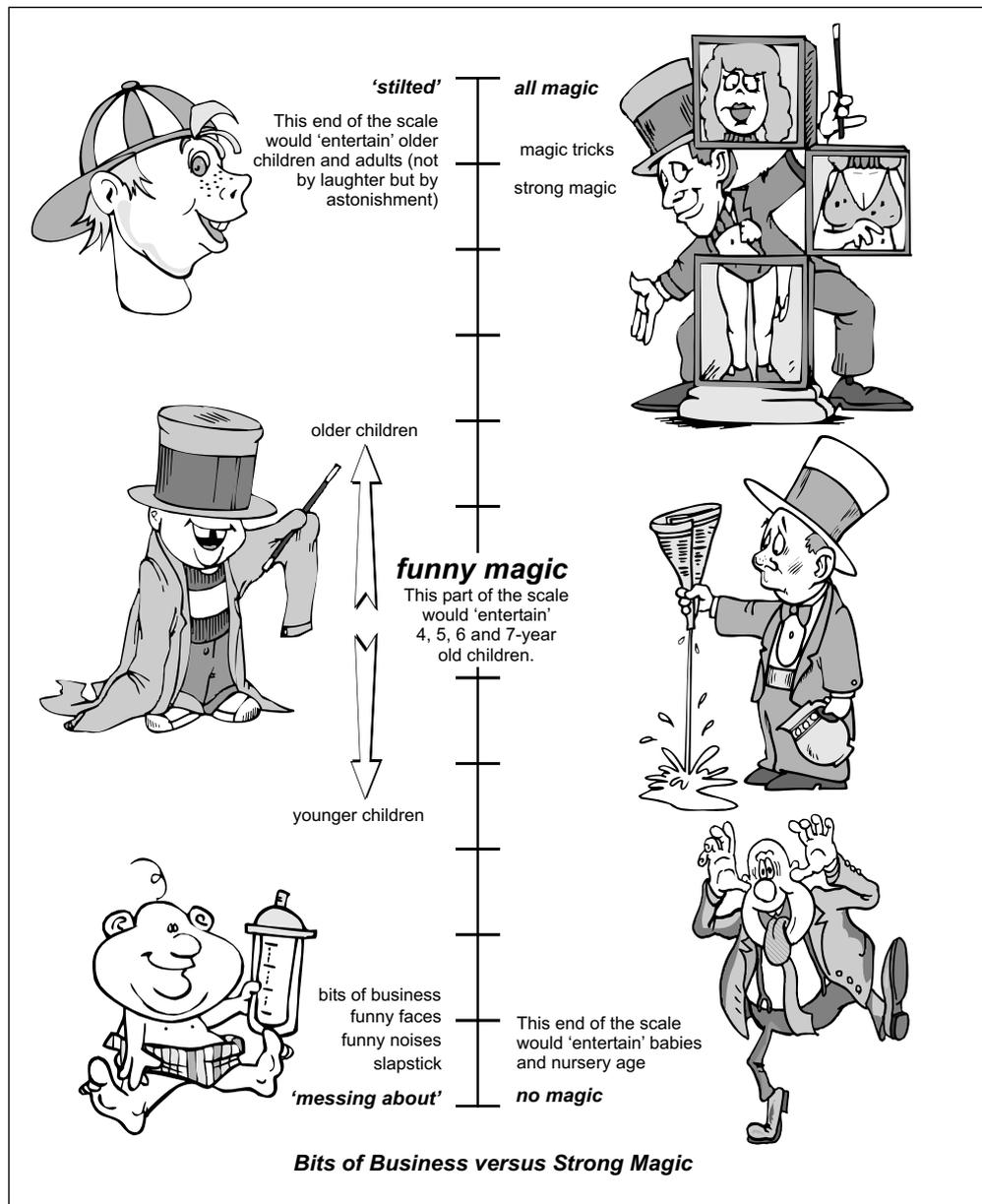
A collection of, say, three or four 'effects' becomes a 'routine'. Routines that generally flow together form an 'act' and several acts that are a continuation become a 'show'. A great show is one that includes:- a good warm-up, a terrific ending, a change of pace throughout, plenty of musical and/or sound effects and, most importantly, lots of helper participation.

Children don't need 'miracles', as they can see those any day of the week just by looking out of their window or switching on the TV or computer. They want funny, creative and interactive happenings with the crazy 'magician'. Similarly, children are unable to comprehend, and therefore appreciate, any skilful manipulation. By all means use sleight of hand but don't let the audience see it!

Themed birthday parties are becoming more popular in the UK, so it is tempting to develop several 'themed' shows. But an over-themed performance can hamper the entertainment value of a magic show. It will bore the young audience as you go from one effect to another. In a child's mind, the effects become similar and therefore tedious! In the USA, themed educational shows in libraries and schools are essential to get work. However, even these types of shows often run the risk of not being funny or entertaining – just boring.

Story-telling is another area that attracts novice entertainers. They believe their stories, combined

Fig 3.7
A sensible balance between 'bits of business' and 'magical effects' is a good framework to build a very entertaining routine for a particular age range.



approach. Surprisingly, many entertainers do not understand this simple approach to building an act that is *entertaining* for a particular age group. Their thinking is that there are nursery type tricks and older type tricks. But experienced children's entertainers often use the same set of tricks, and simply change the balance of bits of business versus the magical effect itself. The most difficult act to develop is for an audience whose ages range from 18 months to 12 years. Personally, I gauge the majority age range and then work to that part of the audience. Generally speaking, the minority will laugh along because the majority are laughing. The balance between 'bits of business' and 'magical effects' can be tricky.

Inexperienced performers often race through too many 'tricks' without nearly enough 'bits of business'. Their show appears to be rather stilted or wooden to the younger members of the audience. On the other hand, when entertainers become more experienced they put in more 'bits of business', and the overall entertainment value of the show improves. However, there is a serious danger of bits of business taking prominence over the number of magical effects. The overall impression of the children's entertainer then becomes, "someone who just messes about all the time". Beware of some entertainers who brag that they can get 30 minutes out of just one magic trick!

The Real Secret...

I have deliberately put this piece at the *end* of the chapter on audience management, yet *before* the ‘Tricks’ section. There are some would-be kids’ magicians around who believe they can get a few tricks together and be able to earn a lot of extra money with little effort. Hopefully, the following messages will influence those who believe there is an easy way to fame and fortune. After all, performing ‘kids’ magic’ is dead easy, isn’t it?

Performing a magic show for children is probably the most difficult thing you will ever do in magic.

There are no shortcuts in becoming a true children’s entertainer. If you are new to magic, don’t expect to go out and earn a living after reading one article, book or even acquiring a few self-working tricks on magic. Actual *tricks* are the least important part of a successful children’s act. Tricks are a means to entertain. In that one sentence is the real secret! The denouement is secondary. It’s the fun you have from the start of the journey that is important. Once you realise that simple truth you are well on your way to becoming a successful kids’ entertainer.

Firstly, realise what is funny to children. **Fig 3.32** depicts some simple examples of what is funny



Fig 3.32

Most adults are reserved in the way they respond to something that is amusing. Yet children naturally react to situations that are funny, and respond loudly without reservation. But a situation that is funny to a child is usually not so for adults; they just smile along for the child’s benefit.

On the other hand, there are some situations that are so magical that it entertains adults by astonishment. Yet for children who see the same miraculous effect it’s no big deal. In fact, the kids don’t even laugh as they are just bewildered!

Learn the difference!