

Incorporating Humor into Your Stories

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Have you ever found yourself in a funny situation that had you and the people involved rolling with laughter, but when you tried to describe the incident later to someone else, it completely fell flat? In such a situation, we usually end up saying rather lamely, “I guess you had to be there!”

We’ve all experienced this in our lives, but to experience it during a storytelling performance is mortifying. So, how can we prevent this from happening? First of all, my advice is never set out to be funny. Andrea Martin, heralded as one of the funniest women on Broadway, believes that comedy comes from a commitment to the role. In a recent interview in the New York Times she said, “To go into something thinking, How am I going to get a laugh? is really disastrous in a play.”¹

The same is true of creating personal stories. I approach all stories with the serious intent of finding the right combination of words that allows my audience to “see” clearly each scene or character I

describe. If some scenes or moments make my audience smile or even laugh, well, this is just the cherry on top of the sundae. So, let me share some “cherries” from my repertoire, which I hope will also work for you.

1. Image-by-Image or Stacking the Coconuts:

Before I write any scene, I break it down into a series of images. In my mind’s eye, I watch the scene gradually unfold. I note what people do, the expressions on their faces, and I hear what they say. I play it over repeatedly. Then, I systematically write what I have seen and heard. Such scenes often contain a miniature narrative arc: the images build to a climax followed immediately by the results of the climactic moment. Matthew Dicks, a Moth GrandSLAM champion, describes this technique as “stacking the coconuts” – a lovely term to describe how the author carefully stacks the images and then knocks them down.

To illustrate what I mean, here is an excerpt from my story “Sundays”. Let me set the scene: the leader of the conservative moral right, Mrs. Whistlebotham, wants to save my father’s soul. She does this by bringing a variety of religious leaflets to my father’s attention, timing her visits to coincide with his important Sunday rituals. On one occasion while my father takes his after dinner nap, I put his hair in pink rollers, and that is when Mrs. Whistlebotham knocks on the door.

Stacking the Coconuts: “Right oh,” said Father struggling to his feet, “I’m going to put an end to that woman’s sanctimonious interference once and for all.” He stumbled into the hallway, took hold of the doorknob, and pulled at it ferociously. Now, that door was a stubborn door and usually refused to open, but today it decided to cooperate and when Father pulled at it, it flew out of his hand and crashed into the hallway wall with a violent bang. “Arrrhhhh!” Father let out a roar of surprise and glowered down at Mrs. Whistlebotham from beneath the halo of large, pink, spiky hair rollers. The effect on Mrs. Whistlebotham couldn’t have been

more dramatic if Father had been wearing ladies' underwear!

Knocking them Down: “EEEEEEEEeeeeek!” She took an involuntary step backwards, dropped the china cup she was holding, and the bright red pages of that day's Bible texts fluttered around my father like flaming tongues of fire. Father must have thought she was ill or something of the sort, for he lunged towards her ready to catch her should she faint. The sight of a middle-aged man wearing hair rollers and lunging towards her was too much for Mrs. Whistlebotham's Christian sensibilities. She began to scream in earnest, turned on her heel, and scampered off down the garden path. Ignoring the gate completely, she leaped over the decorative hedge at the bottom of the garden, scuttled across the street, and disappeared into the safety behind the white, lace curtains.

In this scene, the dynamics of the humor work because, according to Peter McGraw in his book *The Humor Code*, the situation represents a violation (think: something is wrong: man in hair rollers); the violation is benign (non-threatening: man does not intend to shock); and both occur at the same time.²

2. Word choice:

The selection of the right word so often adds to the humor; for example, in this scene from “Sundays”, consider the religious overtones implied by the word “halo”. The word is incongruous when used to describe my father, whose soul is in jeopardy; moreover, the word “scampered” when applied to a straight-laced lady, is also incongruous. According to McGraw, incongruity is a powerful element in what makes things funny.

3. Personification:

The attribution of human characteristics to something non-human can often add to the momentum of a scene. For example, I describe the door as being a stubborn door that usually refuses to open, but I say, “today, it decided to cooperate”. This not only presents the

door as a character in the scene, but it also emphasizes how hard the door bangs into the wall, which results in my father's cry of surprise and therefore intensifies the effect on Mrs. Whistlebotham.

4. Bait-and- Switch:

One can set up an audience to expect a certain outcome and then change it at the last moment. I use this technique often when I describe a character. Here are two of my favorites:

Example One:

The Bait: “My Aunty Lily was beautiful. She was tall and elegant and always wore her long auburn hair piled high on the top of her head in a bun. She always wore designer clothes and long golden earrings that reached all the way to her shoulders.”

The Switch: “But the thing I loved best about Aunty Lily was the fact that she swore. She swore like a trooper. She even swore when she came over for tea on Sundays, and my mother, who, as a rule, could not abide bad language of any kind, never said a word!”

It's incongruous when a beautiful, elegant woman swears like a trooper – especially when the observation is narrated by a child.

Example Two:

The Bait: “Miss Turner was tall, imposing and brown. Her brown hair was cut in two perfectly straight lines: one at the front and one at the back. And what's more, it never moved. Whenever she turned her head, it moved with her like an obedient helmet . . . She wore brown sweaters, brown tweed skirts, thick brown woolen stockings, and sensible brown walking shoes.”

The Switch: “But the thing that fascinated us about Miss. Turner was her bosom. At first glance, Miss Turner appeared to be flat-chested. This was because many years since, her generous bosom

had dropped down to waist level where it was prevented from further descent by a sturdy, brown leather belt. Just as her hair stayed still so it was that her bosoms, at the slightest provocation, delighted to roll and romp around her middle like two joyful, Jell-O filled balloons.”

There is something incongruous about a teacher, whose hair refuses to move, having such a fluid, fun-loving bosom! Also, notice the use of personification implied by the bosom’s intent to drop beyond the confines of the belt.

5. The Plant:

This occurs when early in a story, I “plant” an idea in the minds of my listeners. This is probably easier to demonstrate through example. In “The Wicket Gate”, I describe a school friend in the following way: “Sylvia was a tall, pale, quiet girl who likes* to faint . . . a lot.” Thus, I have planted the idea that since Sylvia likes to faint, she probably will. Two occasions arise when Sylvia threatens to faint: her encounters with cow pies and slimy fish; however, it is only when Stephen Pringle, who is in love with her and presents her with a clay heart made in art class, does she deliver on the threat. Here’s how I end this romantic interlude: “Stephen Pringle was the son of the local butcher. It looked like a real heart with valves and ventricles and blood. When he gave it to her, Sylvia fainted in slow motion** at Stephen’s feet. He was thrilled!”

*Notice the use of the word “likes”. In this one simple word, I have transformed what is normally an involuntary action to a voluntary one, which is humorous.

**Moreover, the use of the term “in slow motion” is incongruous when used to describe someone fainting; the three words also give a satisfying rhythm to the line.

6. Metaphor and Simile:

Metaphors and similes are effective, especially when the comparison involves a concrete noun and a character. For example, I had a teacher called Miss Hackett, who because of her sharp, hooked nose, we called “the Hatchet.” I extend the idea of the hatchet’s sharp blade when I describe how she “sliced” into the room, and how on becoming angry her “eyes were slits, her nose a meat cleaver.” In another story, I describe my Aunt Ciss, who is six feet tall, as having a bosom “like twin mountain peaks.” Extending the image, I describe her five-foot tall husband, as “hardly looking the intrepid mountaineer.”

7. Pacing/Delivery:

Consider the words of Mark Twain: “The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective . . . as a rightly timed pause.” However, the question is how long should the pause be? Let’s go back to the description of Sylvia: “Sylvia was a tall, pale, quiet girl who likes to faint . . . a lot.” As a general rule, once I’ve said the word “faint”, I silently count 2,3,4, and then deliver the words “a lot.” This results in a pause, which seems to be just the right length. Try it!

By the way, it is important to rehearse – in front of people. Try your story out on friends and as many different groups of people you can persuade to listen to you and give feedback. I recently developed two stories that needed an audience. I booked a room at my church and sent out an email to all and sundry with the title: Two Stories in Search of an Audience. About sixty people showed up, and the church social committee provided wine and cheese. (Unitarians love to eat and drink!) The evening was a win-win for all concerned: the church received a generous donation and I received valuable feedback.

Another thing to remember is don’t rush. In the scene about my father and Mrs. Whistlebotham, I had a tendency to rush through

it – especially the image-stacking part. I suppose I was anxious to get to the fun part where I knock the images down. With repeated tellings, I realized the opposite is true. I needed to take my time when stacking the images, because this gave my audience time to co-create the scene with me. I can then increase the pace when I knock the images down.

One more thing about delivery is the importance of one’s facial expression. Many of my stories are told from the point of view of when I was a child. The events I describe may perplex, impress, confound, or thrill me; therefore, I must register only these emotions on my face while I am telling the story. I must leave it to my audience to respond with smiles or laughter as they see fit. In other words, I do not try consciously to angle for the laugh.

In a final note, Nivard Kinsella says, “Humor is not about laughing at things, but of understanding them. At its highest, it is a part of understanding life. It is the ability to see ourselves as we are, and to smile at the comic figure that the biggest of us cuts in strutting across life’s stage.”³

For me, Kinsella’s words capture the very essence of personal stories. In them, we share with our audience something important about our life and, by extension, something significant about life in general. Used wisely, humor is a vital component that serves this same high purpose.

¹ “Andrea Martin and Tracee Chimo, Funny Women on Broadway, Tackle ‘Noises Off’” Alexis Soloski *New York Times* 12/24/15

² Peter McGraw and Joel Warner *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny* (New York : Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014)

³ Kinsell Nivarda *Unprofitable Servants: Conferences on Humility* (Chicago, IL; Franciscan Herald Press, 1981)

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An awarding winning storyteller, Jennifer's wicked sense of humor permeates every story she tells. Her extensive repertoire includes witty, often poignant original stories that explore the triumphs and foibles of the human condition. She also tells original fairy tales for adults, traditional folk and fairy tales, myths, and legends.

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