

How the Kings of Comedy Make You Laugh

HOW two of the most famous kings of comedy, Charlie Chaplin and Al Jolson, are able to command "the laughter of the gods," and others, is here related in their own words. The first confession is that of Charlie Chaplin (taken from "The Strand Magazine"), in which he unveils a few of the professional secrets which govern his success:

"The one point of human nature that I play upon more than anything else is that it strikes people as funny when they see some one else placed in an undignified and embarrassing situation.

"It isn't the mere fact of a hat blowing off that is funny. It is the ludicrous sight presented by a man chasing up the street with his hat blowing and his coat-tails flying that makes people laugh. When a man walks quietly along a street he is not funny. Placed in an embarrassing and ridiculous situation, however, the human being provokes other humans to laughter.

"All comedy of situation is based upon this fact. Comedy moving pictures were an instant success because most of them showed policemen falling down coal holes, slipping into buckets of whitewash, falling off patrol wagons, and getting into all sorts of trouble. Here were men representing the dignity of the law, often very pompous themselves, being made ridiculous and undignified. The sight of these misfortunes at once struck the public funny-bone twice as hard as if private citizens were going through the experience.

"Even funnier than the man who has been made ridiculous, however, is the man who, having had something funny happen to him, refuses to admit that anything out of the way has happened and attempts to maintain his dignity. Perhaps the best example is the intoxicated man who, though his tongue and walk give him away, attempts in a dignified manner to convince you that he is quite sober.

"It is much funnier than the man who, ruddy bilious, is frankly drunk and doesn't care a whoop who knows it. Infatuated characters on the stage are almost always 'slightly tipsy,' with an attempt at dignity; because theatrical managers have learned that this attempt at dignity is funny.

"For that reason all my pictures are built around the idea of getting me into trouble, and so giving me the chance to be desperately serious in my attempt to appear as a normal little gentleman. That is why, no matter how desperate the predicament is, I am always very much in earnest about clutching my cane, straightening my derby hat, and fixing my tie, even though I have just landed on my head.

Contrast

"Another point about the human being that I use a great deal is the liking of the average person for contrast and surprise in

his entertainment. It is a matter of simple knowledge, of course, that the human likes to see the struggle between the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the successful and the unsuccessful. He likes to cry and he likes to laugh, all within the space of a very few moments. To the average person contrast spells interest, and because it does I am constantly making use of it in my pictures.

"If I am being chased by a policeman I always make the policeman seem heavy and clumsy, while, by crawling through his legs, I appear light and acrobatic. If I am being treated harshly it is always a big man who is doing it; so that, by the contrast between big and little, I get the sympathy of the audience, and always I try to contrast my seriousness of manner with the ridiculousness of the incident.

"It is my luck, of course, that I am short, and so am able to make these contrasts without much difficulty. Every one knows that the little fellow in trouble always gets the sympathy of the mob. Knowing that it is part of human nature to sympathize with the 'under dog,' I always accentuate my helplessness by drawing my shoulders in, drooping my lip pathetically and looking frightened. It is all part of the art of pantomime, of course. But if I were three inches taller it would be much more difficult to get the sympathy of the audience. I should then look big enough to take care of myself. As it is, the audience, even while laughing at me, is inclined to sympathize with me. As some one once said, it feels like 'mothering me.'

Surprise

"On almost a par with contrast I would put surprise.

"Figuring out what the audience expects and then doing something different is great fun to me. In one of my pictures, 'The Immigrant,' the opening scene showed me leaning far over the side of a ship. Only my back could be seen, and from the convulsive shudders of my shoulders it looked as though I was seasick. If I had been it would have been a terrible mistake to show it in the picture. What I was doing was deliberately misleading the audience. Because, when I straightened up, I pulled a fish on the end of a line into view, and the audience saw that instead of being seasick I had been leaning over the side to catch the fish. It came as a total surprise and got a roar of laughter.

"There is no mystery connected with 'making people laugh.' All I have ever done is to keep my eyes open and my brain alert for any facts or incidents that I could use in my business. I have studied human nature, because without a knowledge of it I could not do my work. A knowledge of human nature is the foundation of success."

Now Then, Jolson

And here is how Al Jolson "Gets Laughs," as related in "The American Magazine." Comparing himself to a salesman, he says:

"Just as any other man sells merchandise, I have to sell my goods to the audience. So when people say I know how to put a song across they are merely saying that, like a salesman of shoes or shirts, I know how to sell my goods.

"To bring the point down further, just as the buyer must know how to select his



Al Jolson, above, and Charlie Chaplin, on the right. The figure disporting himself in the foreground—but nobody needs to be told which of the pair this is.

goods, I have got to know how to pick my songs and jokes, for they are my stock in trade, just as shoes and shirts are the other fellow's stock in trade. Past reputation doesn't count as much as people think. If a salesman doesn't bring in the orders his reputation drops in the trade. In the same way, if I don't get my orders in the shape of laughs and applause, I drop also.

"Like most salesman, I got my selling

experience in small stores. These stores were called vaudeville, and in these places I picked up many a valuable selling point. I learned such tricks of selling as how to approach my customers, when to close the sale, and how to put my goods over. And even to-day, after about eighteen years of selling experience, I am constantly learning new ways.

"I can easily demonstrate what my selling experience in small stores did for me by telling what happened when I went to one of the biggest 'department stores' in my line that you can find in New York. I mean the Winter Garden.

"In vaudeville I had learned that the average human being loves to have people

get confidential with him and tell him inside stuff that he thinks no one else knows about.

Harder Than 24

"People often ask me how I pick my jokes. Well, take my word for it, finding good jokes is harder than working twenty-four hours a day. I get swamped with jokes from every part of the country, but I rarely find one good enough to purchase. Most of them are either too long or too risqué for me to tell. Every joke I tell has to be simple and short. People sort of cock their ears to catch every word. That is a strain. So the shorter jokes are the better.

"Also to be really funny, jokes have got to be personal. They have got to be about something people have experienced themselves, or, at least, know all about. The man who laughs is always matching up the joke from his own experience, and while he is laughing he is secretly tickled to death that while Jones's wife, for example, goes through her husband's trousers each night, his wife leaves his trousers alone. Jokes about married life go well, because the majority of people are married and know all about it.

"In this season's Winter Garden show I told a joke about a negro barber. It was one of my best, and I know why—simply because every man has had experiences of one sort or another with a barber. He has either been kept waiting an hour or his neck has been nearly cut off, or he has one barber who has shaved him for twenty years. If I tried to tell a joke about the boatmen of Venice, I might better go and drown myself in the Grand Canal. My audience wouldn't know or care anything about the boatmen in Venice!

"Songs are easier to pick than jokes, yet the selection of the right ones is very important. Any song I sing has got to have a swing to it, so that I can get the people tapping their feet, swaying their heads, or humming the tune along with me. When they do that I know they are enjoying themselves. The words have to be simple and easy to pronounce, the idea behind the song very clear, so that people can know what I am singing about, and the melody, of course, must tickle the ear. If the song is supposed to be funny, the words are all important, whereas the melody does not count. As an example of that, consider two big song hits such as 'Poor Butterfly' and 'Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go With Friday on Saturday Night?' In the first song any words could have been used because the melody was wonderful. In the second song the melody did not count because the words were very funny."

That Noise

In describing how the audience often spoils a laugh, Al Jolson says:

"I want to say a word about whispering and talking in theatres. When people cough, come in late, talk, shift the feet and do the hundred and one things that an audience does do, they are making it mighty difficult for the salesman to sell their goods. In a way, it is just as though a man whom a salesman was trying to sell was very rude and curt. That may seem far fetched, but it isn't. People have no idea how disturbing these little things are. In drama actors work through half the play to lead up to a tense situation, and then a foolish giggle or careless sneeze de-

stroys the entire interest in the play. In comedy, where the lines are so important, points are constantly being lost through noise in the audience. From my own experience I know that one man rising in a seat in the middle of a song or story can destroy the entire point. At once the eyes of the audience follow him to see where he is going. Being curious, people speculate as to why he should leave in the middle of the show, and it makes it difficult for me to hold the interest."

The Two Drinkers

By Witter Byner
From the French of Charles Vidrac

THEY have sat down together for a little drink; They are leaning with all their weight on their elbows; Their words are meeting and their eyes And their cheeks and voices and eyes are laughing Across the table. And, oh, what good ones they're telling! They are really happy, for the moment; They are really happy to be together; And yet! . . .

And yet, If to-morrow they have to hurry through a door Not wide enough for two, Where one must pass after the other, They will pause before it With an ugly change in their faces, With an ugly look at each other, And a slanting look toward the door. As dogs, with a bone between them, Growl, warning each other off. So may these two become to-morrow, or to-night.

These two who now are friends because of little drink . . .

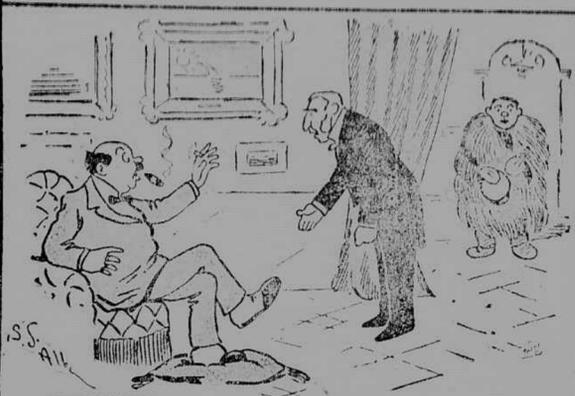
—That is true enough, and it's sad, too, But that's not the way to say it! This is the way to say it: These two men who are laughing Might be fighting for no reason; They might find a thousand reasons To be fighting; There are reasons a-plenty! They need only pick, they need only choose!

But no: Deep in that old heart of theirs, Is the secret need of union and of mirth, And in a moment of unbending, While the spite of life has left that poor old heart to itself, See how their eyes are laughing, See how they slap each other's shoulders, See how they have no doubt of each other, See how they like to offer each other drinks, And, oh, what good ones they're telling! —From Contemporary Verse.

A Little Fun From the Other Side



Victim of Accommodation Shortage (as leak in shower increases): "Hang it, I know my bill includes bed and bath, but I don't want them both together!" —London Opinion



"Monsieur, it's the new chauffeur." "Has he references?" "Oui, monsieur, thirty, and all excellent." "How long has he been a chauffeur?" "A year, monsieur." —Le Pele Mele



"No, the mistress can't go to your house to-morrow, because I'm going out myself!" —London Opinion



"I understand you are Inspector Ferret, the great sleuth-hound detective. I'll pay very handsomely for the slightest clew to any one in this neighborhood who is about to move."



Revue Actress (on tour, to theatrical landlady): "Could I have the use of the bathroom, please?" Landlady: "Well, not just now, Miss. The queen of the performing saals who is lodging here has locked up her troupe in it." —London Mail



Mother: "Would you like to come and rock the baby for a bit, Tommy?" Tommy: "Rather! but I haven't got a rock!" —London Mail



"Oh! George, have you been fighting?" "No, m'dear. I came home by Tube!" —London Opinion