



July 2019
Volume 109 Number 2

The Society of American Magicians

MUM
MAGIC UNITY MIGHT



**S.A.M. PRESIDENT
2019 - 2020
Steven A. Spence**





Guest Editorial

By Al Callus

LEARNING STAND-UP COMEDY AT 85

It was the final item on my bucket list: to become a stand-up comedian by my 85th birthday. I've since discovered that it's like golf — highly addictive!

Ever since I saw Milton Berle on television when I was a kid, I've loved comedians. Now, since I took a comedy course in Boca Raton, Florida, I've been having the time of my life, going onstage and talking about my family, my dog, the Dollar Store, the ancient pyramids, and becoming a comedian. I play off of my age, claiming to have been at the last supper, and to be in da Vinci's painting. (The food was great; a huge buffet, although it wasn't a supper at all — really a late brunch, but they didn't want to call it "the last late brunch." Didn't have a ring to it.)

I was an ad agency executive, and when I retired at age 62 I went back to my first love: magic. I performed on cruise ships, at country clubs, and lectured to magicians. Previously, I served as a magician in the army when drafted, and entertained our troops both in the US and overseas. But I found comedy to be a horse of another color.

My magic friends can't believe I'm doing this. We all fear being onstage without our props and there are huge differences in style and technique. Although Berle was notorious for it, comedians are strongly discouraged from using another's material. Magicians, on the other hand, attend lectures and watch videos of routines right down to every word of patter and, although encouraged to develop their own style, are allowed to copy every move and word. Comedians must write their own material, and that is a huge barrier to success for many. As for myself, I create at night while half asleep.

While pauses or dead time can kill the momentum of a magic performance, comedians are taught to pause.

Set-up, punch line, pause — the mantra of comedy. They should accept the laughter, let it linger, stop talking, wait for it to subside.

Magicians should never use self-deprecating humor, but comedians revel in it. Magicians are taught to dress at least as well as, if not better than, their audience. Most comedians dress as if they slept in the gutter. I couldn't figure out how to dress. First, I bought a pair of sneakers (the symbol of funny), then a T-shirt, then I looked in the back of my closet where I dump clothes that are not worth washing anymore. When I looked as if I, too, slept in the gutter, I knew I was ready — but I just couldn't do it. I couldn't dress like that. I now vary the look, from a collared shirt with a sweater to a sports jacket, but the sneakers remain.

As a magician, I have the opportunity to perform a lot — at parties, golf outings, for the guys in the card room, and at magic meetings. Comedians are starved for stage time and leap at the opportunity to go to open mic nights or comedy contests, but that is something I just won't do. I like a real audience; lots of people who have come to a club to laugh. I was fortunate to have had my first performance at the Mizner Park Comedy Club in Boca Raton in front of a sold-out crowd of 200.

The rewards of doing comedy are fantastic: people applauding, hysterical, acknowledging that you are funny, that they like you and your material. I've been corrupted and lured to the funny side of the microphone. I'm like my wife: I don't want much — just *more!*

Many older people don't think they are valuable anymore. I'm trying to prove that no matter how old we are, we have a bright and full future.

I've made many new friends during my comedy inauguration, from young beginning comics to seasoned comedy

headliners. They are the friendliest group, even more so than magicians. I admire their creativity and their skill and aspire to be like them, sans the cruddy wardrobe.

Somehow, I don't get heckled — never did in the 75 years that I have been performing magic and not even in the five months or so that I have been doing comedy. I suppose it will happen and I have to be prepared. A woman once told me the card I produced was not hers, but the audience knew she was lying because I had her show it to them in the beginning as a precaution, and even had her sign it.

Comedians die at times; nobody laughs, and I suppose it will happen to me. I have had a few bad experiences. Once when there was no audience, only a few comics in the room; another time there were about 45 mostly drunk people at a party that was being held in the same room, at the same time, as the comedy show. But I've been lucky so far. Then again, I work hard at this and am well prepared when I set foot on the stage. I go over my comedy sets before I go to sleep at night, if I wake up in the middle of the night, before I get out of bed, when I walk my dog in the morning, and when my wife leaves the house. It's not easy; it takes a ton of work.

It's been a long road, from doing street magic in Times Square, to owning an ad agency, to the golf course in retirement, and now to the laughter-filled rooms of comedy clubs. My journey continues. I'm not looking forward to the final destination, but am immensely enjoying the journey. ♣

A resident of Montville, New Jersey, Al Callus spends the winter in a golf community in Boynton Beach, Florida. You can see a few minutes of his comedy club set at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fDg61NRYoQ.