

MICHAEL HARRISON

The Art Of Comedy Comes To Life!

Ventriloquism is a funny thing. It's one of those forms of entertainment that skates the fine line between laughable and annoying or creating an absolutely stunning illusion. Unfortunately, the large majority of these folks out there are not of the intense level it takes to truly create the illusion. Perhaps that is because it takes so long to master; try finding a professional ventriloquist (the rare weeded out exceptions to the majority rule of those poor souls out there skating on the wrong side of that quality line) that hasn't been at the art since they were just tikes.

Michael Harrison is no exception. "Yes, it's true," he says. "I started talking to myself when I was about ten years old but that wasn't how I began actually entertaining audiences. I performed for audiences first as a magician and have a long magic-geek background to spice up my ventriloquist image (laughs). I still love magic and love watching magic myself; I really love variety acts in general. I will go watch anything in that genre."

Michael performed magic for years and still does some if performing for a family audience. A unique skill he brings into his ventriloquism as well, Michael's magic creates a mystifying and amusing amalgam of these two genres. "I never do a full magic show; I haven't done that in years and I used to incorporate a lot more magic into the ventriloquism routine and could again if there were a specific request from a client."

Michael describes a family routine he once did with a mind reading puppet. "It was kind of funny, because the kids don't catch on, but the adults do and they enjoy watching the kids being fooled by this blindfolded puppet."



STORY BY IAN KIRBY

Michael has a vast breadth of experience performing, most of his real tempering done in the cruise line market. Because audiences of all different types attend shows on the cruise lines, it was an excellent primer for Michael's later transition into the corporate market. "I definitely have two shows. While the routines may be similar in the props or puppets, the dialog and jokes change. I am still far from X-rated even when doing my adult show; I like to tell people it's Disney dirty. I have been around long enough to know now that if you are offensive or continually cross the line, audiences will be alienated (and bookers as well). I like to play it safe and not have to worry about getting into the politics of what's okay and what's not."

Ventriloquists have to have some sort of unique brains. Call it controlled schizophrenia, but the guys are on stage talk-

ing to themselves, sometimes even insulting themselves (paging Dr. Freud). Just how the heck do you have a conversation from both sides of the table simultaneously? "I would say for the first four or five years doing ventriloquism, it can be an intense challenge in exercising concentration and dividing the two personalities on stage. Over time it is a skill you acquire with practice like any other and the longer you do it the less of a challenge it is to do it. It's like riding a bike now, I just hop on and go. I don't really concentrate, it just kind of flows."

Michael says fortunately for his sanity (and that of his family), once he is off stage, the act is over. "I don't go to the extent of talking to myself in the car or anything — once the puppets are in the case, they stop talking," he laughs. And, I don't speak about myself in the plural, as in "What time are we booking in?"

There are some vents that go that far, believe it or not."

Most parents wouldn't be thrilled if their little Johnny professed to want to play with puppets as a long term career, but fortunately Michael's saw it as a fairly innocent way to pass the time. "I think for a long time, they thought it was an interesting hobby I had that happened to be paying quite well. It helped me get by and they backed me and were very supportive. There are six kids in my family and we all have different careers, so I think they were excited that I was doing something not run-of-the-mill. They knew I had a unique personality, not one well suited to sitting behind a computer all day."

Michael came out of high school with a very different and marketable set of skills as well as a steady income. With an initial plan of going into school for radio or television broadcasting, his intentions quickly shifted. "I applied three times to the school I wanted and was denied all three times. That's when I decided to give the entertainment thing a go full time and put all of my effort into it."

A native of our friendly neighbor to the North, Michael initially began the process of building a name for himself in the comedy clubs across the snowy realm. "That was many smoky bars and long drives. I almost quit once a week then and starting in Canada, the commute from one city to the next could easily be eight or nine hours. Then, after the drive, I had to get up on stage and do a 75 minute show and repeat the next day. That was very taxing and almost made me look for another career."

In his mid-20's and perhaps five years into his profession, it dawned on Michael that, considering his chops, his life could

be significantly easier in the U.S. "I realized there was more out there and I wanted to see how far I could take it, so I started promoting to the U.S. market and cruise ships. I went strong in the cruise ship market for the next ten years."

While one might think ten years performing on various cruise ships would be like one long vacation, the reality is that performers call it "work" too and there are some drawbacks to this seemingly exotic lifestyle. "The first couple of years were obviously the best, because you are seeing exotic locales and eating great food. But after that it just sort of becomes a job. You can feel trapped as big as these ships are."

The old adage often credited to that master of show business, P.T. Barnum "Always leave them wanting more" is an apt one for the performer. Unfortunately when you are on a floating world with a relatively limited population, sometimes the confines of the ship leave an entertainer little peace. "You can't get away from the job, the audience or anything. You are at work every day and can't leave. It's fine before the first show, but after that the passengers know who you are, you might as well be the captain walking around the ship. Everyone wants to stop and ask questions and I don't fault them for that, it's perfectly natural when people are interested and they might be sitting down eating right next to you in the restaurant. They always come over and ask the same questions. When did you start? How do you do it?, etc. They are always very curious about the crew areas of the ship. 'How big is your cabin? How many Filipino's do you share it with? What's the food like in the crew mess? Do they ever let you off the ship? Do you commute to work?' (Laughs)

Sometimes they are very entertaining, but it can get tiring."

The ray of light that would be the corporate entertainment market didn't just suddenly strike Michael in the eyes one day. He knew of the market, but didn't feel like the fit was there just yet. "It was always sort of there, but I never really thought my act was quite right for the market. Honestly, I think this was because I hadn't done much homework and didn't really know what the market was all about. Finally after more thought, I realized that the show I did on cruise ships didn't have to be changed all that much to fit in the corporate world. I think you need a good quality act, to be personable on stage and have quality routines that have been proven repeatedly. Most audiences are not that different from each other. There are always things that need to change and adapt to any new audience."

Changing, adapting and doing his homework are concepts Michael is completely familiar with now. "I do that adaptation doing every show anyway. In the same way every ship audience is different, so is every corporate audience. I go into corporate shows now with a knowledge of who I am performing for and what their needs are. After that it is about on the spot tweaking. It is a constant process of adjustment; no two shows are ever the same."

Michael says the transitions from cruises to corporates has been perfectly natural as his personality is suited well for these audiences. It was much more awkward for him to find his niche in the previous world of comedy clubs. "Whereas the cruise show converted to corporate without much problem, with the comedy club show, not so much. That was a bigger adjustment. With comedy clubs for some reason, I don't know if it is because people are drinking or just because they are accustomed to it, but they want dirty material that pushes the envelope. I have never really worked that dirty, I have always been clean, so I found myself kind of stooping to that level where you have to drop the f-bomb for the shock factor just to keep their attention. I much prefer the sensibility of the corporate market."

Despite his avoiding the foul and dirty for this market, sometimes there is an innocent charm in seeing a puppet talk about adult oriented topics. It's almost like hearing a



child speak to a wildly over-their-head or mature topic. It can't be perceived as dirty; it's just too damn cute. "It's interesting, because I have different little odd puppets in the show and they seem to be able to get away with a lot more than I can. Something subtle for them, not even on the level of the F-bomb, but maybe the S-bomb (laughs) and subtler offensive words seem worse out of a puppet. They are so soft and innocent and childlike that people become endeared to them. It's funny the way your mind works when you are watching ventriloquist. It doesn't take long for your brain to sort of split the two and you say to yourself 'There's the ventriloquist, there's the puppet,' They both have distinct personalities and you get to know them both; people generally just like the puppets more than me and give them more leeway anyway (laughs)."

Closing with a hilarious thought, Michael proves that the illusion of separation between puppet and master on stage is complete. "I love it when someone starts arguing with one of my puppets. That is the funniest thing. I just let the puppet go. The

person will literally have a debate with a glorified sock. Eventually, once the person is wrapped up in their 'conversation,' I have the puppet just stop. I give the guy a hard time about arguing with my hand and have fun with the audience with it. The funniest part is when I stop the conversation and the person realizes just what it is they are doing and by the time its all over they are laughing harder than anyone."

Michael Harrison is available for a wide variety of corporate events and has the skills to accommodate and customize nearly any program a client desires. With clean, witty humor, top tier ventriloquism skills, audience participation and true professionalism, Michael is a great and unique choice for your next event.

BOOK IT! For more information on bringing Michael Harrison to your event, contact Craig Neier at Craig Neier Associates at (973) 227-8787. For information and live online media in our interactive 3D digital magazine including clips of Michael's show, log on to americanentertainmentmagazine.com

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