

The Rhythm, Style, and Meaning of Jokes

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I want to tell you how I happen to be here today. Fellow Carole Brandt called me up and said, “Ralph, do you believe in free speech?” I said, “Of course I do.” She said, “Well, come down to Washington and give one.”

As I slip into senescence my memory fades, so maybe it didn’t happen exactly like that, and in fact, of course, I am very honored to be giving the First Annual Roger L. Stevens Address because I spent the better part of four years working for Roger in this very building. I have known any number of famous men and women, but I have known only one great man, and that great man of course was Roger.

On Christopher Wren’s tomb in St. Paul’s Cathedral is a Latin sentence that can be translated as follows, “If you want to see his monument, look around you.” That phrase should be etched into the marble of this building after Roger’s name.

He was a great man, but bewildering. And since this is a lecture about jokes I can’t resist telling you about the frightful time that I had to tell Roger jokes for forty minutes. The producer of my second Broadway play, which failed of course, unfortunately was looking for money for a workshop of the property, and Roger, a potential backer, invited me to read the script to him. Like *Sugar Babies*, this show was joke driven. Roger’s sense of humor was of the very quiet variety. It’s one thing to listen to jokes from a dead pan comedian, and another thing to tell jokes to a dead pan audience. For forty minutes Roger never cracked a smile. As I became louder and more desperate, Roger became more somnolent. In fact he may have fallen asleep, his eyes were closed. I sweated profusely, and was convinced that the search for workshop money must find another backer.

When I finished, however, he woke up and got out his checkbook and wrote a check for thirty thousand dollars. I don’t know what he would have given us had he enjoyed the show!

A remarkable man and I am very happy to speak in his name.

Nobody takes jokes seriously anymore. Certainly not contemporary comedians who think of themselves as sophisticated wits and social satirists.

Jokes have always lived in the low-rent district of humor. Philosophers and critics from Aristotle to Bergson have written about laughter and its causes, but few of them take any notice of those short pungent anecdotal pieces of folk wit which are the most popular form of comedy. Admittedly, Freud wrote a famous essay on jokes, but his analysis is flawed because clearly he didn’t understand the punch lines.

Of course, Freud had an excuse. He was writing about German jokes, and Teutonic humor is something of an oxymoron. Jokes, in any case, are mostly untranslatable, since they depend on puns and word play.

Americans are very fond of jokes. We tell them at parties, we share them with each other on the internet, but we have a somewhat patronizing attitude toward them. Only comedians of the Keith-Albee generation hoarded and cherished them for their professional use.

Milton Berle, for example, was reported to have a file of more than fifty-thousand of them. Many of his jokes were probably in Bob Hope’s file, or Henny Youngman’s, since theft of material is one of the time-honored traditions of the profession.

Berle and company not only maintained files, they also employed joke writers. Not that anyone really writes jokes. A joke writer is a man with an eidetic memory and certain editorial skills. It also helps if he has a sense of rhythm and timing.

Suppose you need an oyster joke. He can give you four, starting with the mildest and working up.

“Waiter, are raw oysters healthy?”

“I never heard any complain.”

My wife wanted a pearl necklace, so I gave her a bushel of oysters and wished her luck.

I had a dozen oysters last night and only one of them worked.

“What’s the difference between crabs and oysters?”
“I don’t know. I never had the oysters.”

Burlesque comedians could even create a short sketch (what is know in the trade as a blackout) out of a string of stock jokes. Take a few standard doctor gags, for example:

DOCTOR (on the telephone)

Yes, this is Dr. Slicem’s office. Speaking. You say you’re having trouble breathing? Well, I can stop that. You want an appointment?

(Consults book)

I can give you an appointment in two weeks from Tuesday. You might be dead by then? Well, you can always cancel.

(Beautiful FEMALE PATIENT enters)

FEMALE PATIENT

Doctor, I’m here for my appointment. I want a complete physical examination.

DOCTOR

Certainly, Miss Prescott, Please take off all your clothes.

FEMALE PATIENT

Oh, Doctor. I’m too shy. I couldn’t possible undress in front of you.

DOCTOR

Well, that’s perfectly understandable. I tell you what we’ll do. I’ll turn off all the lights; you take off your clothes and tell me when you’re finished.

FEMALE PATIENT

Thank you, doctor.

(HE turns off the lights. We hear the rustle of clothes in the dark
Finally the FEMALE PATIENT speaks)

Well, doctor, I’ve take off all my clothes. Where should I put them?

DOCTOR (still in darkness)

Right over here on top of mine.

As this blackout indicates, vaudeville sketches and burlesque scenes were nothing more than a succession of dramatized jokes. When I began *Sugar Babies*, my tribute to the glory days of burlesque, I adapted traditional scenes and was undaunted when a Broadway intellectual (now there’s another oxymoron) told me, “Nobody wants those old jokes anymore. Humor has become more sophisticated.”

Don’t you believe it. Basic low comedy is never dated. After all, not as many people know the old punch lines as pretend to know them. Besides, there’s a whole generation of young people who have never heard the jokes

at all. And even if some of the gags are familiar or predictable, the time-worn lines will elicit an affectionate response from the audience. We love the jokes we know. They reassure us, and the earth does not yawn at our feet.

Here is my version (from *Sugar Babies*) of a standard burlesque hotel scene. There were at least ten stock hotel sketches that the comics used. All of them had titles - "The Four Door Hotel," "The Hit and Run Hotel," "A Buck Thirty-Five," and "Up to Be Cleaned" among them. Veteran performers could play these bits (as they were called) without a rehearsal. My version was not based on any one of them, but captured the style of them all.

Some of the punch lines are shamelessly old, but the "old" is in the ear of the auditor. The lines are either classic or corny depending on the degree of your enthusiasm.

THE BROKEN ARMS HOTEL

(From *Sugar Babies* - reprinted by permission, performance rights reserved)

In darkness a phone rings. Lights up to reveal a shabby hotel lobby. A desk center with two upright phones on it. CLERK is discovered behind the desk.

CLERK (into phone)

Hello, is this room 202? It is. Are you the lady that left a wake-up call for ten o'clock? You are? Well, it's six o'clock. You've got four more hours to sleep.

(Phone rings again. CLERK picks it up.)

Broken Arms, front desk. What's that? You say you've gotta leak in your bathtub? Well, go ahead; you paid for the room.

(Enter the COMIC, very disheveled, dragging an old suitcase.)

COMIC

What kind of hotel is this?

CLERK

What's the matter, sir?

COMIC

You gave us a suite with a connecting transom. And there must be a candy lover in the next room

CLERK

A candy lover?

COMIC

Yes. All night long she kept hollering, "Oh, Henry, Oh, Henry." So I said to my wife, "take a look and see what's happening." My wife climbed up on a chair and looked. There was a man lying on the bed naked as a pasha. And a woman was standing on the other side of the room, throwing doughnuts at him. And ringing them, too. So I said to my wife, "What's happening?" And she said, "I can't tell you. But next time you pass the newsstand, get a package of Lifesavers, and I'll show you."

CLERK

Dear, dear...

COMIC

And that's not all. There's a terrible racket in the room above my head.

CLERK

Oh, I forgot to tell you, sir. They're holding an Elk's ball up there.

(A look of sympathetic pain crosses COMIC's face.)

COMIC

Well, tell them to let go so we can get some sleep. Hey, listen, I'm checking out. I'll get my car, and I'll be right back.

(HE exits as an OLD MAN and YOUNG BRIDE enter. They are evidently newly weds. HE is wearing morning clothes, and SHE, an abbreviated bridal costume. HE carries a suitcase, and every step is an effort,. SHE is lively and in the full exuberance of youth.)

OLD MAN

Come on, darlin'.

(To CLERK.)

I beg your pardon. Can we get a room for the night? I'd like the bridal suite. We just got married.

CLERK

Oh, honeymooners. You can have the bridal suite right over there.

(HE indicates the room just vacated by COMIC.)

Did you come a long way?

YOUNG BRIDE

Yes, and now I'm ready to go a lot further.

(Rushing in front of room.)

Hurry up, dear. I can hardly wait.

(SHE is jiggling nervously.)

I can hardly wait.

(SHE exits into the room.)

OLD MAN (touching his heart)

Keep pumping, pal.

(HE starts for the room. CLERK stops him.)

CLERK

Oh, sir, that's a very energetic young wife you have there. But there's such a difference in your ages. Couldn't a honeymoon like this prove fatal?

OLD MAN

Hey, listen. If she dies, she dies.

(HE exits. Enter COMIC. HE runs toward the room into which the BRIDE and OLD MAN have disappeared.)

COMIC

(Yelling to someone off-stage as HE makes for room)

Keep the motor running. I'll be right back. I left something in the room

CLERK

I'm sorry, sir. You can't go in there. I just rented that room to a newly-married couple.

COMIC

I told you I left something in that room, and I'm going to get it.

(As HE arrives at the door, we hear the voices of the OLD MAN and the BRIDE from inside the room.)

OLD MAN (offstage)

Who's ruby red lips are those, darlin?

YOUNG BRIDE (offstage)

They're yours, daddy.

OLD MAN (off)

And whose lily-white shoulders are those?

YOUNG BRIDE (off)

They're yours, daddy.

OLD MAN (off)

And whose little pink tummy is that?

YOUNG BRIDE (off)

That's yours, daddy.

COMIC (shouting at the door)

When you get to the hairbrush, that's mine. (To CLERK)

Hey, listen, they're busy. When you find it, wrap it up and send it to me by the slingshot.

(HE starts to exit)

CLERK

Wait a minute, sir. You forgot your bill.

COMIC

My bill?

CLERK (presenting it)

Yes, that will be two hundred dollars.

COMIC

Two hundred dollars? This must be Washington.*

(*the name of the city where the show is playing)

CLERK

That's fifty dollars for the room. And a hundred and fifty dollars for the food your wife ordered.

COMIC (outraged)

My wife didn't order any food.

CLERK

It was there if you wanted it.

COMIC (taking money from pocket)

Listen, pal. Here's fifty dollars, and I'm charging you a hundred and fifty for fooling around with my wife.

CLERK (indignantly)

I didn't fool around with your wife.

COMIC

It was there if you wanted it.

The "Lifesavers" joke in this scene is one of the great many penis jokes that the old comics included in their sketches. And with good reason. Penises are funny. They work when you don't want them to work; they fail you when you need them most. Penis size is a great subject for jokes, since it touches on a lot of male insecurities.

SNAPSHOTS

(Ten bars of the wedding march. BRIDE and GROOM appear)

GROOM

Well, dear, at last we're married. But I have a confession to make. Two nights ago when we were staying at your mother's house - you in one room and I in another - I decided I wanted a little peek, a preview. Well, you told me you never wore clothes to bed, so I sneaked into your room after you had fallen asleep, lifted up the covers and took a peek.

BRIDE

Did you like what you saw!

GROOM

I said to myself I wish I had a camera.

BRIDE

What would you do?

GROOM

I'd take a picture.

BRIDE

Then what would you do?

GROOM

I'd take it to my office and look at it all day long.

BRIDE

I have a confession to make, too.

GROOM

Is that so, dear?

BRIDE

I wanted a little peek, a preview. Well, you never wear clothes to bed either. So last night after you'd fallen asleep,

I sneaked into your room, lifted up the covers and took a peek.

GROOM

Did you like what you saw?

BRIDE

I said to myself, "I wish I had a camera."

GROOM

What would you do?

BRIDE

I'd take a picture.

GROOM

Then what would you do?

BRIDE

I'd have it enlarged.

We tell jokes in order to exorcize our worries and fears, and these days it helps if the worries are male and heterosexual. In 2003 straight white men are the only group that you can make fun of without angering an audience. Homosexuals (a frequent target in the early days of burlesque) and women are very serious about themselves, and, as everyone knows, self-irony is not one of the notable characteristics of a revolutionary.

Fortunately there are one or two good themes still available. The A.A.R.P. is not as sensitive as N.O.W. or the Gay and Lesbian Alliance. So you can still laugh at the spectacle of old men in hot pursuit of attractive young women.

The hotel scene contains a famous joke of this time-honored type. The punch line of that sequence ("if she dies, she dies") is a little risky. The line is so familiar that sometimes the audience joins in when the Old Man says it. However, joke recognition is sometimes a good thing, provided that you don't overdo it. Every now and then it helps to let the audience feel superior to the actors.

There are many less familiar Old Man jokes. Some are about the inevitable decay of function:

An Old Man rings the doorbell at the brothel, and the madam answers.

"I want one of your girls," he says.

"Old man, you've had it," she says.

"I have?" he says. "Whom do I pay?"

Other jokes flatter the ancient lover.

An Old Man goes to a doctor.

"Doc," he says, "I'm only 89, and the joy has gone out of my sex life."

"When did you notice it?" asks the doctor.

And the Old Man says, "Twice last night and once again this morning."

Another eighty-nine year Old Man, goes to the same doctor. "Doc," he says, "I'm getting married tomorrow to an eighteen-year old girl. What's your advice?"

"My advice is, don't do it.," says the doctor. "You'll never be able to satisfy a girl of that age. You'd have to take in a boarder to satisfy her."

"That's a good idea," says the Old Man.

A year later the doctor meets the Old Man on the street and is surprised to find he's still alive.

"How's your marriage going?" the doctor asks.

“Fine,” says the Old Man. “My wife’s pregnant.”
“Aha,” says the doctor, “and how’s the boarder?”
“Fine,” says the Old Man. “In fact, she’s pregnant, too.”

All these May-December jokes have a noble lineage - one that can be traced back to Roman times or earlier. In Plautus and Terence, one of the most amusing of the stock characters was the Senex - a lecherous old man hotly pursuing a toothsome young woman. And in the Italian Renaissance, Senex becomes Pantalone, the Venetian merchant of the commedia dell’arte, whose mask of gravity hides a foolish love-sick heart.

There’s no historical connection between Pantalone and a baggy-pants burlesque comedian. But it’s interesting to note that, stripped of their specious topicality, the same situations stay funny over the centuries. Sex, political corruption, greed - these are the universal subjects of low comedy, and it doesn’t matter whether Bill Clinton is president or George W. Bush.

Of course, jokes are often localized by skillful raconteurs. In the hotel scene from *Sugar Babies*, for example, when the expensive bill is presented, the comedian says, “I must be in Chicago or Toledo or Detroit or London,” or wherever the show is playing. But the local name is decoration and not part of the basic structure of the joke. The core of the humor is general and applies equally to everyone and everywhere and every time, even if the comedian, like the poet of Theseus, gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

Notice, moreover, that the situations in these generalized jokes nearly always are sexual or scatological. Such has always been the case from Aristophanes to Swift to Eddie Murphy. Why? Certainly not because sexual humor is stimulating, since, as every fumbling lover knows, laughter is the enemy of desire. No, the reason goes to the very heart of the comic experience. Of the two ancient forms of drama, comedy is the more pessimistic. Tragedy deals with human possibilities, often showing us a hero, who, in Marlowe’s words, “would be a democrat with the gods.” Comedy deals with human limitations and with a hero who is a little higher than the beasts. Comedy depends on the difference between our flattering vision of ourselves as free and rational creatures capable of independent action and thought, and the unflattering fact that we are prisoners of irresistible impulse - slaves of stimulus and response. In what situations is that difference more tellingly dramatized than when we are in the grip of irrational passion or when we are performing some necessary bodily function?

Of course, there are different tones in comedy. Sometimes, we are affectionate about our limitations, sometimes angry, even bitter. The same author, after all, wrote *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Sometimes you can take the sting out of the inherent pessimism of a joke by using an anthropomorphic animal as a stand-in for an obsessed human being.

AN EXHAUSTING NIGHT

Two pals from college, a mouse and a lion, are attending an Animal Rights Convention in Chicago. To save money, they decide to share a room together.

After a hard day of meetings, the two friends are sitting in the hotel bar when a beautiful giraffe walks in. “I’m going to make that girl,” says the mouse, eyeing the giraffe with ill-concealed lust.

The lion roars in disbelief, but, sure enough, the mouse takes his drink to the other side of the bar, and the lion sees his little friend in whispered conversation with the tall beauty. Soon the mouse and giraffe leave the bar arm in arm, and the lion, being less fortunate, returns alone to their room.

Midnight comes and no little mouse. One o’clock, two o’clock ...three o’clock... The lion is just about to call the police, since Chicago is a dangerous town for a mouse.

Suddenly, his friend arrives. The lion has never seen such a battered little rodent in his life. His eyes are rimmed with red, his tie is askew, the mouse barely has enough energy to crawl up into his bed, where he collapses.

“What happened to you?” says the lion.

“I had the night of nights,” says the mouse. “First I kissed her, then I screwed her, then I kissed her, then I screwed her, then I kissed her ...I must have run a thousand miles.”

The adventures of the compulsive protagonist of this little tale gently mock our pretensions to freedom. So does the pain suffered by the hero of the following scatological story.

A PROFESSIONAL DIAGNOSIS

A man is afflicted with a proctological complaint. He is about to put his sufferings into the hands, so to speak, of an expensive specialist.

His mother dissuades him. "When I was growing up in Ohio," she says, "the native Indians, the Cleveland Indians, had a folk remedy for your problem. You just make an internal application of tea leaves. The tannic acid kills the pain. It gives you instant relief, and you haven't wasted any money on a doctor.

"Is that so?" says our hero. He shoves some tea leaves up there, but instead of bringing relief, they cause the most intense agony he's ever felt in his life.

Now he has to go to the proctologist, who takes a look at the afflicted area through a protoscope.

"What do you see?" asks the anxious patient.

"Well," says the doctor, "you're going to take a long trip. You're going to meet a tall dark stranger ..."

The two jokes I've quoted could not be dramatized. They are anecdotal, suitable only for telling to friends at a party. Moreover, they do not have the traditional rhythm of vaudeville or burlesque gags.

Rhythm is not to be confused with timing. Timing is an aspect of performance not a quality inherent in the structure of the joke. All comedians need a sense of timing - a sense of when to say a line, how to judge the swell of laughter, for instance, and punch in the next remark after the peak, but before the energy from the laugh has died down.

Rhythm is a different matter altogether and is concerned with creating a familiar terrain for the audience to traverse. The basic rhythm for most vaudeville jokes conforms to the "rule of three," as in the following example:

MONKEY BUSINESS

POLICEMAN and a BEAUTIFUL WOMAN are standing next to an open window. SHE is wearing the policeman's jacket and apparently nothing else.

(HE is taking notes.)

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Thank you, officer, for lending me your jacket. It was getting very drafty up here..

POLICEMAN

You're welcome, miss. Now, can you tell me just what happened?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Well, my boss, Mr. Gilmore, just jumped out of the window, and it's twenty stories down.

POLICEMAN

Who are you?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Well, I'm his private secretary.

POLICEMAN

Was there anything odd about Mr. Gilmore's behavior?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Well, he always was a bit peculiar. I had only been working here three days when he burst into the office one morning in a terrible state. "Miss Jones," he said, "you're the most beautiful creature I've ever seen in my life. If I give you a hundred dollars, will you stand before me in your slip? I promise you, there'll be no monkey business." Well, officer, to a working girl a hundred dollars is a lot of money.

POLICEMAN

Of course, it is.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

So, I took the money and stood before him in my slip.

POLICEMAN (interrupting her)

Was he as good as his word?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Yes, there was no monkey business.

POLICEMAN

Did that satisfy him?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

It did until a week ago.

POLICEMAN

What happened then?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

He burst into the office again. And he was a sorry sight. "Miss Jones," he said "I can't get your face out of my mind. If I give you two hundred dollars, will you stand before me in your panties and your brassiere? I promise there'll be no monkey business." Well, officer, to a working girl, two hundred dollars is a lot of money.

POLICEMAN

Of course, it is.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

So I took the money and stood before him in my panties and brassiere.

POLICEMAN (interrupting her)

Was he as good as his word?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Yes. There was no monkey business.

POLICEMAN

Did that satisfy him?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Until twenty minutes ago.

POLICEMAN

What happened then?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

Oh, he pushed open the door, and he looked just awful. "Miss Jones," he said, "I'm spending sleepless night because of you. If I pay you five hundred dollars, will you stand before me in the nude? I promise there'll be no monkey business." Well, officer, to a working girl, five hundred dollars is a lot of money.

POLICEMAN

Of course, it is.

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

So, I removed my clothes and stood before him in the nude. "Miss Jones," he said, "I can't stand it any more. How much, how much is the monkey business?"

POLICEMAN

Yes?

BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

And when I told him my regular price was ten dollars, he jumped out the window.

"Monkey Business" uses ritual repetition to make its effect. Phrases like "I promise there'll be no monkey business" and "to a working girl a hundred dollars is a lot of money" and "of course, it is" and "was he as good as his word?" must be repeated exactly in order to create the inexorable and classic rhythm that the story demands - two set-ups and a final punch - the so-called "rule of three." The audience senses instinctively when the variation (a laugh line) will occur, and the expectation helps trigger the response. Here is a shorter example:

BAIT

COMIC discovered, Center, fishing. HE casts without success

COMIC

I've spent all day fishing on this pier, and I haven't had a bite. Maybe I'm using the wrong bait.

(Enter 1st FISHERMAN. HE has a pole and six fish on a string. COMIC stops him.)

COMIC

Pardon me, bud. Did you catch all those fish on this pier?

1st FISHERMAN

Sure did.

COMIC

What did you use for bait?

1st FISHERMAN

Well, I happen to be a doctor. This morning I performed a tonsillectomy. I cut up the tonsils into little pieces, and I used them for bait.

COMIC (As 1ST FISHERMAN exits)

Thank you, doctor. Well, I don't know where I'm going to get any tonsils.

(Enter 2nd FISHERMAN, with rod and eight fish on a string.)

COMIC (stops him.)

Hey, bud. Did you catch all those fish on this pier?

2nd FISHERMAN

Bet your life I did.

COMIC

What did you use for bait?

2nd FISHERMAN

Well, you see, I happen to be a doctor. This morning I performed an appendectomy. I cut up the appendix into little

pieces and used that for bait.

(2nd FISHERMAN exits)

COMIC

Much obliged.

(To HIMSELF)

Tonsils, appendixes,. Well, they're all catching fish.

(3rd FISHERMAN enters with more than a dozen fish on his string. As HE crosses, COMIC stops him.)

Oh, pardon me, doctor.

3rd FISHERMAN

What doctor? I'm a rabbi.

"Bait," like "Monkey Business," fulfills the rhythmic expectations of the audience - as do more than ninety-five per cent of the standard jokes.

But you can take that rhythmic expectation and surprise it, as in the; following story.

A TEST OF COURAGE

An Arctic explorer is captured by a tribe of Eskimos and sentenced to death for the crime of fishing in the Chief's ice hole.

As the men of the tribe are about to impale the explorer with their harpoons, the Chief stops them and addresses his captive in a pleasant, but menacing manner.

"Young man," he says, "you have committed a capital offense. But we Eskimos admire virility and courage. If you can pass the standard coming-of-age test which we give all the young warriors of our tribe, we may let you escape with your life.

"I'm good at tests," says the quivering explorer. "Lead me to it."

You see those three igloos over there," says the Chief. "In the first igloo, there's a quart of whiskey. Strong stuff, about 200 proof. You have eight seconds to drink that whiskey without passing out.

"In the second igloo there's a ferocious two-ton polar bear with an abscessed tooth. The beast is in terrible pain. You have ten seconds to pull that tooth and give that polar bear some relief.

In the third igloo there's a beautiful Eskimo virgin. But she hates explorers. She has a harpoon in her left hand and a blubber knife in her right. You have thirty seconds to throw her down and make a woman of her."

"On your mark," says one of the warriors, and the explorer rushes into the first igloo, where he drinks the whiskey in four seconds, breaking the tribal record.

But the drink has take its toll, and his words are slurred as he asks, "Now whersh that polar bear?"

The Eskimos shove him into the second igloo from which there soon emerge the sounds of human and animal pain - screams, roars and other noises too horrible to contemplate.

Out of the second igloo comes the explorer, scratched and battered and torn.

"Now," he says, "Where's that girl with the abscessed tooth?"

I have dramatized "A Test of Courage" twice, once for *Honky Tonk Nights* on Broadway and once for *Sugar Babies* in Australia. In both situations we got an explosive laugh, but somewhat delayed. The idea sneaks up on the audience, who expect that punch line to come on the third igloo. They are conditioned to that classic rhythm - set-up, set-up, button, so, in a sense, you're manipulating the "rule of three" to put one over on your spectators. Their surprise gives the joke an additional push.

Of course, there are many other ways of telling this story - mountain lions and Indians, tigers and African cannibals, for example. Still, the polar bear version is best, since there probably won't be any Eskimos in the audience to be offended.

There are, naturally, many basic rhythms not dependent upon the "rule of three" - for instance, double punch-line jokes, of which the following is a famous case in point:

A MATTER OF TACT

A little produce clerk is sorting cabbages in a supermarket, when a big bruiser comes up to him and says in a booming voice, "Give me a half-a-head of lettuce."

"I'm sorry sir," says the little clerk. "We don't sell half-heads of lettuce."

"You ask the manager," says the bruiser.

So the little clerk goes to the back of the store to find the manager, but he doesn't realize that the big, tough customer is following him.

"There's a big, dumb son-of-bitch out there who wants a half-a-head of lettuce," he says, and then looking up and seeing the customer, he adds, "and this gentleman wants the other half."

When the transaction is complete, the manager says to the clerk. "You showed great tact in handling that situation. There's a vacancy for a manager in one of our stores in Detroit, and I think I can get you the job."

"Detroit?" says the little clerk. "There's nothing in Detroit but prostitutes and hockey players."

"My wife's from Detroit," says the manager.

Quick as a wink the clerk says, "What team does she play for?"

Some jokes are too daring for the stage, even in this permissive age. In *Sugar Babies* I avoided jokes with religious overtones, but in the right company, the following classic story always gets a big reaction.

A MIRACULOUS BIRTH

The Archbishop of Canterbury is in the hospital for an abdominal operation. In the same hospital there is a beautiful unwed mother-to-be. As she is about to go into the delivery room she bursts into tears.

"What's the matter, dear?" says a kindly old nurse.

"Well," says her pregnant patient, "the man who's responsible for this left me. And I don't have the money to bring up this child properly. Perhaps it will fall, like me, into the depth of disgrace."

"Don't worry, dear," says the nurse. "The Archbishop of Canterbury is here for an abdominal operation. He's a kindly gentleman. We'll see that he takes care of your child."

When the Archbishop awakes from his post-operative stupor, beside him on the bed is a squalling baby boy. "What's this?" he says.

"Well, Your Grace," says the nurse. "You thought you were here for a simple abdominal operation. But, when we opened you up, we discovered that a miracle had occurred. This is your child!"

"Praise God! A miracle!" says the Archbishop. He takes the boy home, sends him to Eton, gets him into Cambridge and gives him every advantage that money and position can afford.

But as the boy is growing up, the saintly man feels guilty because he hasn't told his son the truth about his miraculous birth.

When the boy is twenty-one, the Archbishop calls him into the Episcopal study. "Young man," he says, "I've tried to be a good parent to you."

"Oh, yes, indeed you have, Your Grace," is the reply.

"But all these years," says the Archbishop, "I've had a nagging guilt at the back of my mind. All these years, I've been living a lie. All these years, you thought I was your father. That's not exactly true."

"It's not"

"No," says the old man. "I'm your mother. Your father is the Archbishop of York."

Sharing this joke with my readers breaks a rule of mine - never to use a story which vilifies a religious or national group - not because of any soft-heartedness on my part, but because such jokes are based on cliches of character that have no basis in truth.

I include "A Miraculous Birth" only because the group in question, Anglicans, are powerful and not in any sense victims of society. Moreover, the joke needs some sort of ecclesiastical setting or it loses its point.

Ah, you say, but what about the Eskimos and the three igloos. In "The Test of Courage" aren't you insulting our northern aboriginal neighbors? Well, it's true that I couldn't tell this joke in the Yukon, but even so those blood-thirsty natives are not the butt of the story. Instead, we laugh at the explorer who fails the test.

Most Americans in the lower forty-eight states have never met an Eskimo. However, Jews, Irishmen,

Germans, Italians and Blacks are another matter. Sad to say, the old vaudeville and burlesque comedians played to the prejudices of their slum public. As a result the stages of the Orpheum and Columbia circuits were filled with money-grubbing Hebrews, drunken Dubliner, stupid Dutchmen, murderous, cowardly Sicilians and lazy, shiftless Negroes, the latter played by white men in burnt cork.

At about the time of the First World War, humor based on national stereotypes began to disappear from the theatres, but for amateur joke tellers the style never went out of fashion. At parties you still hear pointless Polish jokes, stupid racial anecdotes, not to mention hundreds of dumb stories that begin, "There was a priest, a minister and a rabbi."

Occasionally, you can take one of these jokes and denature it.

RAKING IN THE SHEAVES

Three preachers are discussing among themselves how they divide up the money from the collection plate between the works of the Good Lord and their own personal expenses.

"I have a system," says the first. "I draw a line on the ground. I take the money from the collection plate and throw it up in the air. Anything that falls to the right of the line, I give to the Good Lord. Anything that falls to the left, I keep for myself."

Over at the Land of Hope and Glory," says the second, "I do almost the same thing. Only I draw a circle on the ground. I take the money from the collection plate and throw it up in the air. Anything that falls inside the circle, I give to the Good Lord. Anything that falls outside the circle, I keep for myself."

"Learn from, me brother," says the third, "learn from me..I, too, take the money from the collection plate and throw it up in the air. What the Good Lord wants, he takes. What falls to the earth, I keep for myself."

That joke was ecumenical when I first heard it. The third and most cunning speaker was, of course, a Rabbi. And the joke-teller, in Jeremy Collier's words, was "gratifying his ease and malice at once." Jews have no monopoly on greed, and the story gains from being directed not at a despised minority, but at the generality of mankind.

"Raking in the Sheaves" in its original version is an outsider's joke. The teller is trying to demonstrate his superiority to a group that worries or threatens him. The joke tells us nothing about the people being ridiculed, but only about the teller's self-doubts and crisis of confidence.

But there are inside jokes as well. Jewish "insider" jokes often celebrate the kind of adaptability that is necessary if one is to survive in a hostile world.

Here, for example, is a monologue performed in vaudeville by Julian Rose, one of the greatest of all the Jewish comedians of the variety stage. Although it might seem a little mild to a world that listens to Chris Rock and Eddie Murphy, it was a side-splitting success in 1922 when Rose first performed it. It is definitely an insider joke - celebrating the victory of a clever and pragmatic Jew over two dumb Irishmen.

MALONEY, MAHONEY, AND LEVI

Maloney, Mahoney and Levi one day
Went out for recreation
They brought enough provisions along
To spend a week's vacation.

But they got lost way out in the woods,
And the path was dark and stony.
At last their food was all of it gone,
Except for one piece of baloney.

Then Maloney said as he took out his knife,
"There ain't no use in carvin'.
For, if we share, there won't be enough
To keep us all from starvin'.

“I know what to do. Let’s all go to sleep.
And tomorrow,” said Maloney,
“The one that has the nicest dream,
He can eat the baloney.”

The following day when they woke up
At quarter after seven.
Maloney said, “I’ll tell you my dream,
I died and went to heaven.
St. Peter said as he came to the gate
A-riding on a pony.
‘Come in and sit down on the golden throne.’
I guess that wins the baloney.”

The second one said, “I, too, had a dream,
And mine was even sweeter.
I flew on up to heaven’s gate
And also met St. Peter.
He came to me with his head in his hands
And said, ‘Hey-ho, Mahoney,
I resign and give my job to you.’
I guess that wins the baloney.”

The Levi said, I’ll tell you my dream,
And there ain’t no use in lying.
I dreamt last night when you was asleep
That the both of you was dying.

And I saw you both go up to heaven.
I was sad, and that’s no phony.
And knowing you wouldn’t come back no more,
I got up and ate the baloney.”

Notice that Rose’s style is dry and ironic. As Henri Bergson observed in 1907, “Comedy has no greater foe than emotion. Its appeal is to the intelligence pure and simple.

Carried to extremes, that observation of Bergson’s became the principle around which the so-called absurdist comedies of the post World War II era were based.

The jokes that were first presented on the American variety stage are, like those absurdist plays, deliberately unsentimental.

Some of the jokes are tasteless, especially out of context, but the sexual humor of these entertainments was never designed as an aphrodisiac. There is nothing voluptuous in these stories.

The action described in jokes like “Monkey Business” and “Snapshots” is a deflation of sexual desire, and its effect is similar to the one described in Bergson in the section of his essay which deals with the interchangeability of objects and persons as a source of laughter.

Indeed, the image portrayed by most comics of the era - a cunning tramp, naive and brutal - reminds us of the more self-conscious figures in the Ubu plays of Bergson’s disciple, Jarry. Jarry’s violent comedy was conceived as an antidote to the sentimental, romantic comedies of the commercial theatre. And, indeed, the jokes of the variety stage (especially when strung together in a sketch or mini-playlets) are a corrective to the tearful smiles of *Friends* or *Seventh Heaven*.

The comparison to Jarry and Ionesco is not inappropriate. Only in the plays of Ionesco’s American imitators - such men as Albee and Kopit - do we find anything in current American drama akin to the anarchic comedy of the extended jokes of vaudeville and burlesque.

The sketches like “The Broken Arms Hotel” were never a comedy of despair. These jokes, unlike the absurdist plays, were never moralistic, never bitter, never passionately critical of human absurdity. American variety humor charts a course between the shoals of sentiment and the rocks of cynicism and despondency, where, most comedy in modern times is beached on the one or battered by the other.

These cheerful jokes, wry but not angry, are among the great achievements of American popular culture. No topical or faddish enthusiasm replaces them. They endure to mock us, but comfort us as well.