

The Importance of the Emcee

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In most of the English-speaking world (including Canada) the emcee is usually the second most experienced comic in the show. It's an important task. It's the emcee's job to warm up the audience— talk to them, enhance their comfort at the idea of a stand-up comedy show and make them feel welcome. Because sitting in a dark room, listening to someone on stage talk to you, conversationally, when it's not really a conversation but a monologue, isn't natural. So it's important that the emcee not only be a good comic, but also be someone who feels comfortable on stage, at home talking to an audience. And not all comics, regardless of experience and talent, do well at this.

There's a reason the emcee doesn't just take the stage and start telling jokes. The audience needs to adjust to the idea. That's why a good emcee will talk to the audience (what's known as 'crowd work')— ask maybe where they're from, what they do for a living, how old their kids might be or what kind of cars they drive. Whatever. The exact topics don't matter. The idea is to get a conversation flowing, make the audience comfortable with the unequal relationship of someone on stage with stage lighting, a microphone and all the attention. The emcee should slowly, and seamlessly, segue into comedy material. And then when the audience is ready, introduce the other comics as they take the stage.

Comics are taught that it's more important for the emcee to be likable on stage than it is to be funny. Of course good emcees are supposed to be both.

In the U.S. the emcee spot is treated differently from shows elsewhere, even from English language shows in countries where they primarily speak other languages. Here in America the emcee job is typically given to the least-experienced comic; emceeing is the entry-level job. But while the emcee may have done a hundred open-mike nights and new talent shows, he or she may never have hosted a show before. And all of a sudden, it's a very different job to do. In front of a paying audience that's expecting a professional.

And here's what often happens— emceeing is a hard job to learn, especially by trial-and-error. And the 'error' part in comedy is no fun at all. So the new emcee isn't happy and becomes desperate to move up from emcee to feature act, and the way to move up is to develop one's comedy skills. NOT one's emcee skills (**especially** if he/she becomes a good emcee— then the club wants to keep him/her at the emcee level for doing a good job in a spot that's typically not done all that well). As a result, the emcee often spends more stage time trying to work on comedy material than on learning to warm up an audience to contribute to the show's success.

A good emcee's hard to find.

I've watched thousands of comedy shows and it's my belief that the quality of the emcee, probably more than any other single factor, is responsible for the success of a stand-up comedy show.

Which is why I'm very careful about who emcees my shows.

Mostly it's me. **One reason is quality control**; If I'm emceeing the show I can be sure that I'm happy with the quality of the emcee. More than anyone else in the show, the audience sees

the emcee as the representative of the person or group running the event. Especially since the emcee is the first one on stage, welcoming them to the show.

Another reason I emcee is that **I genuinely like emceeing shows** (many comics don't, especially since they see the emcee job as entry-level). When I emcee, every show's different because every audience is different. And if audience members have interesting careers, or a fun story to delve into, or even if the conversation just takes an interesting turn, that's something new and fun for me as well as for the audience. *Last month when emceeing I asked a member of the audience what he did for a living. He said he was the manager of a country club in Connecticut. I said Oh, really? I used to lifeguard at a country club in Connecticut! He asked if it were a big club. I said it was a lot smaller after a summer of having me as their lifeguard! A couple of years ago I was emceeing when an audience member from a small town claimed that going cow-tipping showed how tough they were. I said Oh, yeah? That's nothing. Here in New York we go cop-tipping.*

I also like emceeing because it's **an opportunity to develop new material**. My life's interesting and I'm very happy with it, but it doesn't change substantially from day to day. Audiences do.

And I like emceeing because, well, it's an **opportunity to show off**. I'm good at thinking on my feet— you'd think this is a necessary skill for a stand-up comic but actually it's not. Because we can spend months working on a routine before we ever try it out on an audience. It may look spontaneous but most of what we do is well-planned in advance. I'll let you in on a little secret— even crowd work that looks spontaneous may be planned. For example, if an audience member's a lawyer and the emcee has a funny comment about the practice of law? Guess what? Probably not the first lawyer to walk into a comedy club; the country's got a lot of lawyers. Same goes for teachers, doctors, students and the unemployed. A good emcee would be ready for this. If not the first time, at least eventually.

But when someone in the front row is an artillery specialist, a police officer from Internal Affairs or an expert in translating books into Portuguese, not something you see every day, and on the spot I come up with something spontaneous, specific, relevant and funny, it makes me look good. And I like that a lot.

I'm careful about who emcees Ivy Stand-up: *The Ivy League* of Comedy because **I care very much about the quality of my shows**. I don't just throw an inexperienced comic and two other comedians at an audience and hope for the best. Mostly that would probably work out okay— and even if the emcee does a bad job two good comics can work to overcome that and the show's still a lot of fun for everybody.

But: 'Okay' is not **as good as it can be**. And anyway **'mostly'** isn't good enough for me. Nor for my audiences. I expect to put together **the best possible show, every single time**.

Comedian/emcee Shaun Eli is also available to emcee your corporate, charity or private event or conference, your company/charity/school talent show, even your singles event! Call or email for details, (914) 487-3866 or Shaun@TheIvyLeagueofComedy.com.