

THE HOME TALENT SHOW

Comedians on the radio are always making jokes about what killed vaudeville. No matter the cause, it's gone but not forgotten. However, a variety of vaudeville still exists in the variety and amateur show to say nothing of those programs tagged "Stunt Night", "Entertainments". No matter the name, they are fundamentally the same, separate numbers presented with individual responsibility for holding the attention and interest of the audience.

A variety show, or Home Talent Show as ours will be known, as a series of short skits and novelty acts run one right after the other. Its success depends on selecting your acts so that the audience will like a majority of them. You can't hope to hit the bull's eye with every act. Remember that ever-ready hook that used to jerk the hapless performer off the stage might have been a very good incentive to give one's best! We don't suggest reviving this part of vaudeville but we do think that good planning beforehand can do away with dull spots in your show. If everyone enjoyed most of the acts, you will have put on a successful show.

An entertainment program of this sort will be popular for these reasons: each person of special talent can be given an opportunity to present what he can do best; many persons can be included in the larger numbers of dances or songs, thus enjoying the benefits of self-expression and the fun of "being in the show."

A home talent show ought to be planned so that it takes exactly one hour running time. No one act should run more than five minutes and most of them should run only three minutes. This will give you a fast moving, snappy show. If the audience doesn't like one of the acts, it will be over before they can possibly get bored with it. If they like something, it will end before they have too much of it and that will make them want more and anticipate the following act in a good frame of mind. And that, of course, is our objective.

Program Set-Up

At the outset, any Program Committee is confronted with these questions:

- What date?
- What numbers shall we give?
- What directing (coaching) will be necessary?
- Costumes?
- Stage-setting?
- Ticket selling?
- Advertising?

Selecting the Date

The significance of the season or time often determines the character of the show, St. Patrick's Day, Valentine's Day, Friday the 13th; such dates suggest certain costumes, dates and stage action.

Other important considerations in selecting the date are:

Time of week, Friday and Saturday nights in many localities are more favorable than those earlier in the week.

Certain seasons are often unfavorable, December 15th – 25th when people are busy with Christmas plans; Lent, etc.

Consider other attractions in the community such as Lectures, concerts, sports events can cause conflict.

Be sure to allow ample time for rehearsals, advertising, and ticket-selling. The number of weeks depends upon the extent of the program.

Acts for the Show

Search out all available talent, specialty numbers, comedians, clowns, dancers, and stage and property managers. Most important of all are the two key people – A Master of Ceremonies, who can meet situations as they arise and keep the show moving briskly, and a director who has a sense of humor and a recreational attitude.

In seeking acts for your home talent show, consider the following possibilities in your search for talent:

Soloists with very good voices and instrumentalists who can play very well are old stand bys: select one of the very newest songs of the day, but one which is sentimental. It is easier to handle. Any member of the Aerie with a good voice can handle this spot.

If you have a pianist, violinist or other instrumental soloist, you're in luck. The instrumental soloists should play a flashy piece that is fairly well-known to the audience. Something showy and lively will impress an audience even if it is actually performed only passably well from a musical standpoint.

Comedians can steal the show and if you have any such talent in the Aerie, make the most of it.

Your comics acts ought not to be just a group of jokes reeled off like a phonograph. Audiences like slapstick and clownish comedians. If you listen to a good comedy radio show, you will note how many gags, jokes, etc., are crammed into five minutes between songs and advertising blurbs. You can do the same with your skits.

Your comedian could do solo pantomime acts-the strong man act, a comic magician whose stuff never works out the way he plans it, and that oldie of a drunk returning home in the wee hours.

Sometimes the comedian acts as master-of-ceremonies for the entire show and announces each act with some little jokes. This is a less formal method of introducing acts than having a straight master-of-ceremonies or having signs at the wings to announce the title of the act.

Tap dancing is a hallowed vaudeville tradition.

In Aerie families there are always one or more girls and boys who are taking dancing lessons and who have learned some tap dance routines. Bring them into the act, either solo or work out a five minute routine which gives each performer a chance to do their own specialty and wind up with a team dance routine.

The "Challenge" dance, in which each dancer does a few steps, then stops and points to his partner who takes over more applause with his routine is a sure fire hit. As the title implies, the first dancer starts with an easy step and the next dancer tries to outdo that.

When trained dancers from a dancing school are lacking, there is bound to be a fair natural soft shoe and tap dance artist in your ranks. In using an untrained performer, see that he has a very interesting costume; get him to include some eccentric dance steps in an effort to get comedy laughs.

Imitations and Impersonations are o.k. if your actor has what it takes. Otherwise they won't bring out the best in audience reaction.

A routine can be worked out with a few farm jokes in it to give this performer a chance to show his skill at imitating cows, hens, and other barnyard animals.

An impersonator who mimics well-known local citizens can be a hit, too, as well as the one whose specialty is mimicking popular singers and famous people, actors, politicians, people in the news or radio personalities.

Novelty acts such as juggling, ventriloquism, magic and acrobatics make good filler material and have a regular place in big time vaudeville programs.

Novelty acts that will lend a bit of variety to the show should be eagerly brought and "signed up". They might include a magician who performs a short time so the audience can see 3 or 4 stunts with suitable "magician patter".

Juggling isn't as difficult as it appears. There must be someone in the Aerie family who can juggle three balls with both hands and two balls with one hand. A short, effective act can be worked out with this simple foundation. If he would like to have the act look more difficult, he could juggle eggs, glasses, or tin plates.

For a bit of comedy, the juggler can make elaborate preparations, place a paper bag over his head, then proceed to juggle three balls, and pick it up, even though blindfolded. When he turns his other side to the audience, they will see that they have been hoaxed, for there is a hole cut in the side of the bag through which he can see with one eye.

Ventriloquists are hard to come by though it is not too difficult a job to learn this very entertaining skill.

Acrobatics, gymnastics or even some roller skating routine are always well received.

Comedy skits with two or more players participating are a "must" item. You ought to have at least two of these acts.

The following example might give you an idea for one of these acts:

Bill it: Antonio-Dare Devil Trapeze Performer.

The "Trapeze" is a swing, with a broad board upon which Antonio performs. A trick mattress lies under the trapeze, upon which are many pillows, comfortably arranged. Antonio's manager arranges the pillows with greatest care. Antonio does obvious stunts on the board. At last, he comes down, gets off, and goes to sleep on the mattress.

Musical novelties such as harmonica players, hill-billies, yodelers, accordionists, saw players and so on always get a good hand.

When you combine music with a novel manner of presentation you have got a real show-stopper. A xylophone or accordion is a novelty instrument because audiences do not have many opportunities to see them and hear them played. A hillbilly orchestra with washboard, cow bells, harmonicas, jugs, and so forth, is a real treat when done well. Yodeling cowboys accompanied by guitar music are also very popular. A homemade xylophone of jugs and bottles filled to varying levels with water so that each container sounds a different note will also amuse people.

Group Numbers

Folk dances, quartettes, spectacles and other group numbers do not ordinarily play a great part in a home talent show or vaudeville. If used at all, they make good finale acts to wind up the show.

Program Pointers

The successful talent show will contain the following elements:

- A good start
- Climax
- Variety
- A rousing finale
- Contrast
- Smooth presentation throughout

If, as we suggested, your talent show runs for one hour, you will need about twelve acts. For a one-hour show you will not have to worry about the intermission problem. It is unlikely that your audience will need a rest during such a short show.

Base your time allotments on the quality of the act. The better the act, the more time it should be given out of the total hour.

Open with an overture of some sort of group number to create a good impression on the audience. The second act should also have several people in it.

The finale must be your best group number and it should follow your funniest skit or best comedian.

Avoid monotony. Don't run two similar acts in succession.

The last impression in show business is the strongest and remains in the minds of your audience. Place your two strongest acts at the end of the show, just before the finale and make one of them an especially funny one.

People come to a home talent show for the amusement and relaxation and they are ready to laugh if given half a chance. However, your show must not become just one comedy routine after another; there is not much variety about such a program. Four or five comedy acts out of twelve act show is more than ample.

Consider necessary scene shifts in arranging the order of the program. For example, plan a number that can be played at the front of the stage, before the curtain, and place it just preceding a number needing special properties. This is known professionally as a "Scene in one", played before a drop-curtain, with one wing open on either side of the stage. Thus a popular song chorus number, for example, can be presented before the curtain, while behind it, at the same time, the stage is being set up for a skit, etc. In this way, hitches and awkward waits may be eliminated.

Technique

Aim for the professional touch.

Do not fall victim to every enthusiastic suggestion. A good director will carefully steer the ship between the shoals of too little confidence in his group and the rocks of extravagance and over ambition that might lurk in some attractive but impracticable plan.

The limitations are present in most amateur groups: (1) Finances - costumes, publicity, etc., cannot exceed certain expenditure; (2) Talent - what the group really can do well; (3) Stage - certain effects are obviously impossible upon some stages.

Watch rehearsals until certain that the players can go through their routines without hesitation or fumbling. It is better to have simple acts which can be well done, than complicated ones poorly done.

Have each specialty man or group rehearse frequently and practice entrances and exits.

For a Saturday evening show, for example, the participants should arrive no later than 3:30 for a complete rehearsal, a dinner hour and time off before the evening performance.

Extra or unexpected specialty numbers will need special rehearsal time between six and eight in the evening.

See that your show starts promptly at the hour specified. It is a good idea to have orchestra selections (about one-half hour) as the audience gathers.

Prepare for the master of ceremonies an accurate, well typed list of performers and the titles of their specialty numbers.

Prepare a dressing room for any ladies taking part, with plenty of mirrors, good lights, hangers and place for long dresses if such are a part of the show. An iron and ironing boards are helpful. If any girls are to do specialty acts, emphasize that they are responsible for bringing their own music, properties and costumes.

Making it Pay

Start your publicity campaign early. Stick up posters in all spots which are likely to get attention from those who will come to the show.

Appoint a ticker taker and an usher to get the audience to their seats without delay or confusion. Keep the audience from congregating near the entrance or in the aisles where they will be in the way of later-comers.

If you wish to make money from your show you will, of course, charge admission. What to charge? Remember this; a full house at half price is better than a partly empty house which grosses just as much money. In other words, if you knew that you could get your theater half-full by charging \$10, but that you could fill it up by charging only \$5, it is wiser to accept the lower sum. A cast will perform much better when the audience is a large one and the audience responds better when the house is full.

Your expenses in a home talent show may be kept very low, because there are very few items which the individual acts do not personally provide for themselves. For example, a musician has his own instruments, etc. The tickets and special lighting effects are about the only things you need worry about.

The "Thank You" Touch

Everyone likes to be thanked. When an expert has cooperated be sure to mention the fact in the program. He may have given his help without any thought of personal advantage. Yet the fact remains that public acknowledgment may help him in his own work.

After the entertainment is over, write notes of thanks to all who have cooperated.

When anything has been borrowed, return it promptly and in perfect condition.