

# Shtick

The Art of Entertaining Children



By Larry Mahan

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Published by  
SONshine Entertainment  
SONshineEnt.com

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# INTRODUCTION TO MIXING SHTICK INTO YOUR ACT



This book is about shtick. Shtick is important to entertaining kids, and all other audiences as well, at least if it is to be a comedy show. I will try to explain shtick, at least as I see it. There are various definitions of the word, but in this publication, we are talking about a fairly narrow view of the concept. At least one dictionary defines shtick in this way.

***shtick ( t k) or schtick n***

1. (Theatre) a comedian's routine; act; piece [C20: from Yiddish *shtik* piece, from Middle High German *stücke*]

*Collins English Dictionary - Complete and Unabridged © Harper- Collins Publishers 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2003*

For our purposes, I will go on to say that shtick can use props, or not. We are not, however referring to whole routines or even tricks. Shtick is the comedy that comes before and after the trick. Sometimes it happens even in the middle but it is not the trick or routine itself. If you invite a helper onto the stage for a magic trick and shake his hand in a humorous way, the handshake would be shtick! After the trick, if you were to forget the child's name and refer to him as Murgatroyd, that is shtick!

I will be mostly talking about how to use shtick in a magic show environment, but will also give some usage for balloon artists, story tellers and other children's and family entertainers.

Shtick is a highly personalized art form. Some things will fit your style, some will not. You have to figure out what you are comfortable with. Some performers are perfectly comfortable with talking about nose-picking and some think that it is gross, disgusting, and just plain wrong. Please don't ignore the teachings in this publication just because there is one gag or one-liner that you might disapprove of. Just skip over that one and read on. There is a myriad of information to peruse, so find the ones you are comfortable with and use them to the best of your ability.

There have been a number of performers that do shtick alone. They do not do a magic trick with a bit of shtick around it, or a clown skit with some shtick, they actually walk out on stage and just do one piece of shtick after another. That is not my style. It takes a lot of confidence to do just shtick, but it can be funny.

Following are just a few of the famous shtick masters of the past:

Jack Benny's character was always both stingy and a bad violin player, as well as being perpetually 39 years old. In real life, Benny was known as an expert violinist and lavish tipper, and kept celebrating his 39th birthday each year publicly because "there's nothing funny about 40."

Three of The Marx Brothers, Groucho, Chico and Harpo, all had well-honed shticks. Groucho, with his stooped walk, greasepaint mustache, lascivious eyebrow raising, and his cigar; Chico, with his fake Italian accent, and borderline moronic behavior; and Harpo, who never spoke, had bottomless pockets in his trench coat, and could play the harp. The fourth performing brother, Zeppo, didn't have a shtick and was the straight man in the movies — you could argue, however, that his plainness and "normality" was indeed his shtick.

W.C. Fields nurtured a character that was a hard drinker, as well as a shmoozing of the English language and his famous bulbous nose.

Many of the performers from Saturday Night Live had shticks that were popular enough to be developed into feature films. The earliest of these was *The Blues Brothers*, the dark-suited alter egos of Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi, which spawned two movies and several actual blues albums.

Henny Youngman's standard line "Take my wife — please" was part of his shtick. It usually consisted of several one-liners delivered in rapid-fire sequence.

Johnny Carson's many shticks include his role as "Carnac the Magnificent," an Indian fortune teller who could divine answers to questions sealed in envelopes and "kept in a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar on the front porch of Funk & Wagnalls since noon today". His signature imaginary golf swing at the end of his monologue would also qualify as his shtick.

Rodney Dangerfield's shtick was centered around his famous catchphrase, "I don't get no respect," accompanied by his characteristic facial gesture and yanking or straightening his scarlet necktie.

Bob Newhart was a favorite comedian of mine. His shtick was his long phone calls with imaginary or historical persons. Hearing only Newhart's deadpan comments, the audience is left to infer what the other person is saying.

Penn and Teller's shtick focuses mainly on which part of the duo does the talking; Penn provides the only on-stage narration and is the only public voice of the act, whereas Teller never speaks.

Larry the Cable Guy's stage persona is considered a shtick. Even though his public appearances are as a hillbilly with a Southern accent who wears only sleeveless flannel shirts and says "Git-R-Done!" The comedian, whose real name is Daniel Whitney, is a native of Nebraska.

Each of these performers have their shtick. As you can see, it is not just jokes and gags. Shtick is who you are as a performer and what makes you, you!

I cannot teach you that. It has to come from your innermost being. But I can share with you the gags, gimmicks, and jokes that will help you build your own special shtick.

## **NOTICE**

I don't claim originality for much of the information in this book. Much of it I have used for so many years I don't even know where I got it. Some I have seen performed by others, some was found in online searches, and some I have thought up myself. If I know where it came from, I gave credit, if I didn't, sorry, I just don't know. But here it is, as I perform it. So, let's get started.

Larry Mahan