

Stumbling Toward Applause: Misadventures in Entertainment

Book Preview Anecdotes

For one national convention, we had to design an after-dinner show about communications that transitioned from the past into the present. We had an actor who was costumed as Lord Strathcona, the man who drove the last spike to complete the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, and we had to somehow segue from him into a stage show with three female vocalists from modern times.

John, one of our producers, said, "Let's use pyro." He doubled as a masterful magician and frequently added to his shows with explosions onstage. I figured he knew his stuff.

"What do you propose?" I asked.

"Line rockets and flashpots."

By this time I'd been in show biz for ten years. I knew about these things. Line rockets were fireworks on pre-strung, almost invisible wires. They whistled and flew across a room, often no more than two or three feet above the audience's heads. They invariably scared the living stuffing out of people. Flashpots were small metal cups filled with gunpowder. Their purpose was to make a huge explosion and generate a lot of smoke. If the rockets didn't traumatize, the flashpots did. I thought for a moment. Raising the adrenalin level of the audience may just work. It sounded exciting.

"OK," I said, "how would you set them up?"

"Here's my plan. First, we have Lord Strathcona hit our spike with his mallet and that'll set off a line rocket from the base of the spike up to the satellite in the ceiling. Then three more line rockets zip down wires from there to the top of three magic doors onstage."

We had built a six-foot-tall replica golden spike and a ten-foot-tall foam mallet just for the occasion, plus a fake satellite. It was all supposed to be a symbolic transition in time. This would be impressive, I thought.

"That's cool. Safe for the audience. How do the doors work?" I'd seen them used before but was clueless about how they functioned.

"Well, you put the doors against a black stage backdrop because they have black roll-up curtains on springs, so it looks like they're really just open doorframes against the stage backdrop. You put one flashpot in front of each door. I stand beside the stage out of view and when the rockets reach the top of the doors, I use a cable release to pop the door curtains and a switch to set off the flashpots."

"So from that I assume we have to put the girls *behind* the doors before anything happens?" The girls were the three vocalists who would supposedly magically appear.

"Right, but they won't be seen because we can keep the main stage curtain closed until Lord Strathcona's ready to start." John had it all figured out. I had to give him credit. It was a brilliant idea.

I took it to my client. “What do you think?” I asked.

“It sounds good, but just make sure the girls are dressed conservatively.” She was a matronly fuss-budget. She continually fretted about her group, mostly middle-aged male executives and their spouses. There was no hint of concern about the pyro.

“Great. Thanks,” I said. “We’ll get to work.”

Lord Strathcona looked perfect. He sported a shiny top hat, long white beard, and full morning suit, a fitting ensemble for an 1880s railway executive. As he raised the giant mallet over his head, I thought for a second that he might topple over, but he recovered and brought it down squarely on the giant golden spike.

“Bang! Wheeeeeeeee ...!” The line rocket screeched to the satellite in the ceiling.

The audience gasped.

“Wheeeee ... Wheeee ... Wheeeee ...” Three more line rockets sped down toward the doors onstage.

“KABOOOOM!” A giant flame shot up from in front of each magic door and the entire stage was engulfed in a cloud of smoke.

The audience jumped in their seats. I heard one or two screams. Luckily, nobody fainted.

We waited. Where are the girls? I thought, as the backing tracks to their song “Fire” started.

Four or five seconds later I heard the faint sound of female voices struggling to sing in harmony.

Then they appeared, staggering through the dissipating smoke. The three of them were wearing *very* short, slinky silver dresses. In fact, they could have been negligees. It looked like a bomb had landed in the middle of a brothel. Maybe I should have made the dress thing a little clearer, I thought.

They regained their composure and finished the show to generous applause.

After, I went backstage.

John was apologetic. “Geez, I put way too much powder in the flashpots. Sorry about that.”

“Yeah, it was so loud we could barely hear the music. I think we lost our hearing for a couple of seconds,” Kathy shouted. She was the leader of the singers. “*And* you forgot to tell us about the rockets. We thought we were going to die when we saw them coming toward us.”

“Sorry,” I said. I gave John a reproving look.

“Shit! I *knew* I forgot something.” He looked remorseful. This was obviously part of our learning curve about pyro.

“You’re forgiven. But only ’cause it was funny, too,” she said. “It’ll be a story for us to tell.” The girls all laughed.

That wasn’t the end of my problems, though.

When I went back out front, my client was waiting. She scowled at me.

“I thought I told you to make sure the girls were dressed appropriately,” she said. “They looked like hookers.”

I repressed a smile, reminded of the bombed brothel image. I tried to look contrite. “I apologize. I should have been more emphatic with them.”

Just as I said this, a couple of male audience members walked by.
“Great show, Doug.”
“Loved the girls. They were fantastic.”
My client walked away.
I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

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Paul was a good friend who owned a recording studio and was well connected in the Vancouver music scene. We often worked together to create special songs for clients and traded new talent that we encountered. Usually we just gave each other the name and phone number of the talent. On one occasion it was different.

“Hey, Doug, I’ve got someone in the studio you should listen to.” Paul was on the phone and he sounded breathless. “Can you come down this afternoon?”

“Sure. I’ll be there in half an hour.” What’s the big deal? I wondered.

At the studio Paul introduced me to a fresh-faced kid of about nineteen accompanied by an older woman. The kid had purposely unkempt hair and a puppy dog face. He was dressed in casual slacks and a sports shirt, no jeans like most others his age. It helped him to look more mature. The woman was tall, her face stern. She reminded me of one of my stricter grade-school teachers.

We exchanged pleasantries, then Paul played back one of the kid’s demo songs that he had recorded in the studio. It was a Sinatra tune. Everyone watched for my reaction as the music enveloped us.

I sat stunned, feeling the shivers doing a jig up and down my spine, and occasionally shaking my head in disbelief. The rich, smooth baritone was *better* than Sinatra, better than most crooners I had *ever* heard. When the song was over, all I could say was, “Wow!”

“I’m sorry. What did you say your name was again?”

“It’s Michael. Michael Bubl ,” the kid answered with a confident smile.

“And I’m Michael’s manager,” said Bev, the woman accompanying him.

“Well, Michael and Bev, that’s quite a voice. I have a feeling it’s going to take you a long way, Michael,” I said.

“Michael’s just won the Canadian Youth Talent Search,” Bev said, in affirmation.

“That’s not surprising,” I said.

“Paul tells me he really values your opinion, so he asked you to come down and hear this. Michael wants to perform live and also record, but we don’t know what direction to take him.”

“Well, my expertise isn’t in recording,” I replied, “but I may be able to help him with his stage presence and in performing live. I haven’t seen him perform yet, so I don’t know how much help he might need. What we usually do is put our newer performers onstage and test out audience reaction. If it’s good we put them in bigger shows and perhaps find someone who can get them a record deal. Michael certainly has the singing chops. He probably just needs some more experience onstage.”

“Yeah, I’d like to do that,” Michael said.

I could see that Bev was not totally convinced. “He also doesn’t want to do just Sinatra and the oldies. We don’t want him labelled as an impersonator. There are enough people who do that.” She made it clear who was in charge of his career.

“So, Michael, do you have any other songs in your repertoire, like rock or country—maybe some originals?” I asked. “You know, other stuff besides Sinatra?”

“Yeah, a few. I grew up in front of the radio listening to all my grandfather’s old standards and tried to sing them, so I have them pretty much down. Also quite a few Elvis and Beatles songs.”

“What about originals?”

“I never learned to play an instrument, so nothing now. I can only sing.” Michael looked me straight in the eye. “Apart from playing hockey, I’ve only ever wanted to be a singer,” he added. The look shouted determination.

“So what do you think?” Bev asked.

“It sounds like we should get him a good backup band and someone to work up a stage show using what he has to begin with,” I said. “We have a really good guitarist named Henry who can take him under his wing and put a show together.”

“OK, it’s a start,” said Bev.

“Yeah, that’s cool. Let’s do it,” Michael agreed.

The next two or three months were spent putting a small show together, with our guitarist Henry rehearsing Michael and working on several jazz standards. He performed his first show for us for free just to try it out and test the audience reaction. It was a major fundraiser for a well-known local charity.

All the songs were note-perfect. I was impressed with Michael’s confidence onstage. He had already perfected some patently original moves, alternating a naturally casual singing style with audience banter. This was a good start.

The audience reaction, though, was non-existent, pure apathy.

The only comment came from one of the well-off VIP guests. “Who the hell is this guy? He’s got really stupid-looking hair.” I never told Michael.

I was frustrated. OK, so that didn’t work out as I had expected. Yet it was so typical of haughty wealth. I should have known; I had seen it before. Their only recognition of talent came when they had to pay half a million or more for it. Even then it was a begrudging recognition, bestowed strictly for its impact on their social network.

Maybe we should charge a lot more for him, I pondered. At least then they’d have a reason to pay attention.

Michael and Henry went back to the drawing board and continued to rehearse. Not long after, Henry called me.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he said. “Michael keeps missing rehearsals. I think he only wants to date girls.”

This was strange. Michael struck me as a determined artist.

“Are you sure? Could it be something else?”

“No, I don’t think so. He’s called me a few times with lame excuses about sleeping in. He’s gotta show more interest if I’m going to keep helping him.”

Remember that trust thing? Well, I trusted Henry implicitly. He had a good sense of what makes someone tick. As a loyal mainstay of our talent roster, he gave me no reason

to doubt him. Plus, he wasn't getting paid for helping Michael; there was only the expectation of future work.

"OK, we have no contract, so cut him loose," I said. From then on it would be up to Bev to make his career happen on her own.

I never did find out why Michael missed rehearsals.

For the next couple of years I occasionally heard from Michael and Bev. She had managed to get him a lot of work with local bandleader legend Dal Richards, and he soon formed his own quintet. He landed a long-term lounge gig at a place called Babalu's. During that time he recorded his first album. But he was still only a *local* celebrity.

One of my good clients, a travel company, had heard the news about him and asked me to book him for a destination launch event at a local hotel. I did, this time for a significant amount of money. The event was for about six hundred travel agents with the intention of giving them an incentive to sell destination tours. The food was free. So was the booze. And the show was after dinner.

By now just about everyone in Vancouver knew who Michael Bubl  was, so the audience got right into his show. Backed by his crack quintet, a nattily attired Michael was ripping through the old standards. As I watched from the side of the room, I could see that his lounge gig had improved his stage persona immeasurably. He was genuinely charismatic. However, he still had a few things to learn.

About forty-five minutes into his hour-long show, I noticed a fellow wandering through the seated audience in the direction of the stage. Michael noticed him about the same time. The guy was making mock dance moves and it looked like he was just grooving to the music. He got to the stage and said something to Michael to the effect that he wanted to get onstage. This was not right, I thought. Nothing happens unrehearsed on *my stage*. "Michael, don't do it," I yelled to myself, thinking Michael would wave him away. Too late. The guy was onstage in a flash.

Now, Michael was always a friendly performer. That was part of his charm. He didn't like to disappoint his audiences. He liked to connect. In this instance he connected too well.

Another yell to myself, "Don't give him the microphone!" Shit, he gave it to him. "Geez, you never do that, Michael. You've gotta stay in control."

A few mumbled words later, it was apparent that the guy was completely smashed. A friendly tussle ensued with Michael finally re-acquiring possession of the microphone.

"Thanks for helping me out up here, buddy," he said with a nervous smile as he began a new song. I think Michael actually believed the fellow would leave the stage. Not a chance.

I didn't know if the guy actually liked Michael or was just harassing him. Needless to say, he followed Michael around the stage trying to interact. Michael attempted to dance with him but the fellow wanted to take over. He would not leave.

Halfway through the song, I rushed over to my client and said, "We have to get him off."

"I'll find some big bruisers," she said. She found six. They got up onstage near the end of Michael's song. He stopped and let them do their thing.

The guy was small but belligerent. Nothing like a determined drunk. It took all six of them to forcibly hold him and pull him offstage, then unceremoniously dump him outside the hotel.

I could tell Michael was rattled, but he continued his set to the end, brushing off the incident with a casual comment, "I love my fans."

Looking back years later, I hoped that the incident might have been a small lesson for Michael in his meteoric rise to international stardom. Likewise, the early unpaid gig might have been a minuscule stepping stone for him. His emergence as one of the most charismatic stars in entertainment showed that he had indeed learned whatever lessons were offered to him, whether intentional or not. Although I played no part in Michael's eventual success, I was grateful Paul called me to the studio that day.