

A magical debut

by Eamon
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I well remember my first chance to hit the "big-time". The occasion was a "gala concert" to raise funds for St. John's parish, and the venue was the spacious St. John's Pavilion in Mulgrave Street.

As I stood in a corner of the wings listening to the other acts and to the applause and laughter of the audience, my stomach muscles tensed ... Protectively I guarded the card table that served to hold all my precious magic props.

Again, I counted them ... the pack of cards with the three cards I wanted to force on top ... four billiard balls which, hopefully, would appear magically at my finger-tips ... I hope I won't get too nervous and drop one, oh God, not drop my billiard balls, not that, please ...

I continued to check my list of tricks, enough there for a good fifteen minute act. I looked anxiously at the clock and at the singers, dancers, and musicians yet to go on ... Get the pencil ... I'll never get fifteen minutes ... knock out the production box trick ... not enough time to practise that one anyway ... and maybe ... yes ... out goes the colour-changing silk routine ... ah, that's better, a nice tidy ten minute act.

More applause, another singer on. I take a peek through the curtain. God! What a crowd! They are even taking vantage points on the scaffolding at the bottom of the hall where repairs are in progress. Never saw St. John's Pavilion so packed.

Why, oh why the hell did I have to volunteer for this concert? My big mouth of course. Who the hell did I think I was anyway - Bamboozalem? What an act he had! He did the whole show himself, a full two and a half hours of magic. Yeah, that's what I wanted to be, Limerick's Bamboozalem.

And here I was, making my break into show business at the age of thirteen ...

My interest in magic had started some three years earlier, when in answer to an advertisement in the **Wizard** comic, I had joined the Boy's Magic Club of Prestatyn, North Wales.

My first trick purchased from the boy magician's brochure was the sensational turning the water into wine act. This cost me sixpence, which was two weeks pocket-money.

Slowly over the three years, I added trick to trick until now, I was ready for it - my big break.

I sneaked another peep out at the huge crowd; there must have been almost a thousand people there but the

number seemed like ten thousand to my youthful eyes.

It was not long after World War Two had ended, and people were beginning to raise their horizons again, although in Limerick at the time the cinemas could not open or show their fare on Sundays. There was no Bingo, so the Sunday concert was a big occasion, and the only competition came from Joe Linnane's popular Question Time. Families would gather round the radio, and father would gravely answer most of the questions asked by the genial Joe ...

I lived in Upper William Street, only a stone's throw away from St. John's Pavilion. On many a Sunday night, I wormed my way into the weekly concert, and made for my favourite position on top of one of the big window ledges down the side of the wall, a veritable grand-stand and Royal Box to me. It was there that the ambition to one day make people laugh, or maybe mystify them, was born.

My favourite artist was Tommy O'Brien, not the Clonmel record man but Tommy the very first ventriloquist I'd seen "live". I was an ardent listener to Peter Brough with his dummy "Educating Archie" on the B.B.C., but it was Tommy who brought me under the spell of ventriloquism and I was determined after watching the impeccable technique of this Edward Street man, to one day become a ventriloquist, but

that's another story. If Tommy was on the bill, my night was made, and I well remember the thrill I got when the curtain went back and there sat the amiable Tommy with his "cheeky boy" Charlie sitting on his lap. Tommy pulled the house down when, with the doll, he sang, "And where, oh where was I? Up a tree, twiddle ... twiddle ... twiddle ... le ... dee ...".

Years after, when I finally decided to put my shyness to one side, (Yes, I **was** shy at one period of my life!) I went to Tommy O'Brien at his house, off Edward Street, introduced myself, and told him of my interest in ventriloquism, and asked him if he had a doll for sale. Tommy took me in, and explained the technique, and I returned home with my first ventriloquist doll, a cheeky boy just like Tommy's, and he would not take a penny for it. Tommy gave pleasure to thousands throughout the years and, hopefully, his kind gesture to me long ago has also given some pleasure to a different generation.

A sudden round of applause jolted me out of my reverie. Those two popular comedians, Paddy O'Halloran and Mick Brinn were doing one of their favourite comedy numbers, "Are You There Mor-i-ar-i-ty?" Dressed in civic guard uniforms, the two boys put over the number with verve and panache. My tummy gave a jump ... What an infernal cheek I had. How was I going to face that vast throng? ... I could sneak away now, pack my tricks into the bag, and nobody would be the wiser ... No ... I must go through with it ... for better or ... I wonder when are they going to announce me ... Do they even know I'm here ...?



It was getting late. Even then I knew that audiences get tired, and I knew that if I did not get on soon I'd be in real trouble. I looked around for the compere ... There he was, with a sheaf of papers in his hand ... looking worried ... People were all the time coming up to him and whispering hurried remarks ... I was getting more nervous by the minute ... I thought: Here goes ... "Excuse me, Mr Penny". He looked around and then down ... "Yes" ... "Excuse me, Sir, but when am I on?"

He looked from me to the papers in his hand, and back to me ...

"And who might you be then?"

Summoning up all the dignity a trembling thirteen-year-old could muster, I replied: "I'm Marvo the Magician".

He looked down at his papers to hide his confusion. "I've nothing here about you. Who asked you to perform?"

"Mr. O'Halloran, Sir, my scout-master. I'm all ready, my table is over there".

He looked from me to the table and suddenly capitulated.

"Alright, Marvo, I'll give you five minutes, 'tis nearly twelve o'clock and we have dozens more to go on. Be ready in ten minutes".

The die was cast. I went back to my table, and checked the contents for the hundredth time ... Balls ... silks ... No, I'm not doing them ... God, I'll have to scrub another two tricks with only five minutes, maybe I could sneak an extra minute ...

I rushed back to the stage peep-hole to re-assure myself that the audience was still there. Wouldn't it be terrible if they all got up and walked out during my debut ...

I looked down to my favourite window seat down the hall, What wouldn't I give to be back safely in it. I recalled some of the acts I saw from time to time. The most extraordinary theatrical event I ever witnessed in St. John's Pavilion was the invisible singer. It came about like this. Lent was a bonanza time for concert and show promoters in Limerick when public dancing was banned for the seven weeks of Lent. One Friday night, I secured my usual position on the window ledge of St. John's Pavilion. The entertainment was first class, Tommy O'Brien with Charlie was in peak form, and another favourite of mine, now long since passed away, Mr Healy, had the audience in tears of laughter in a political sketch. The compere came on. I found out later that Mr Penny was the senior member of the famous Limerick family which included that great tenor, Jimmy Penny, and Celine Penny who leads the well known dancing school.

Mr. Penny announced that the next act would be a singer, and said that because the performer (I never found

out the man's name) was of a shy nature, he was going to sing from the wings, and his voice through the magic of amplification would be brought to us via the loud-speakers.

We all looked at each other in disbelief as the compere left the stage, and from the wings came a tenor's voice singing "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen", and for the next three minutes the disembodied voice came to us as we looked at the empty but fully lighted stage.

At the time, there was more camaraderie among those attending shows and concerts than at the present time. You could liken an audience then to those at a sporting match today. The people were not averse to letting you know what they thought of you in no uncertain terms, and usually they came to the show in groups and parties and each gathering had its own "comedian" to shout up the odd remark.

The remarks and witticisms on this occasion were absolutely hilarious, as of course the patrons could see the ridiculous aspect of the whole affair. The whole audience got into the spirit of the occasion and the theatre resounded to the chorus of "Kathleen". When the song finished the applause was deafening. I have never heard since that night such prolonged applause and laughter as on that occasion. They would not allow the compere, Mr. Penny, to continue and insisted on encore after encore, and still the singer would not show himself to the audience. Despite the most persuasive entreats of the compere to the very end, the invisible singer preferred to stay that way, and to this day I never found out the identity of the man with the lovely voice and the shy disposition.

In later years, I often thought about that night, and whether the idea of an invisible singer would be a good gimmick to-day ... it has the sort of mystery that modern audiences find so fascinating.

A hand on my shoulder brought me back to reality. "You're on".

"Oh, my God". I rushed over to the table, checked again, grabbed the table, being careful because the leg of the production stand was wobbly and my carpentry work was not the best. As I moved towards the stage one of the other performers said: "Make way for Marvo the Magician!" But I had no time to bask in my grandiose title. The rush of the compere's words hit me: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment, we give you Marvo the Magician!"

Smile at all costs as you walk on ... Show your teeth to stop them from chattering. Rest the table at centre of the stage ... that leg is very giddy ... A few titters from the audience ... Do your best ... Show them that you can do it.

I had a patter act of sorts ready ... "Now for my first illusion. (First rule: Never call your magic "tricks" - it cheapens the act!) I am going to turn this water into any drink you wish to name ..." "Lemonade ..."

Pour the water into glass and as the liquid hits the beaker, hey presto! lemonade ... or was it? Raspberry. (No-one had asked for raspberry, but I had a little pellet of raspberry in the glass prepared, and raspberry it was going to be! I climaxed this trick with the production of a lime drink and a Coca-Cola, and took my bow.

A spatter of applause ... Now for the big one, my billiard ball production routine. "Hands empty, sleeves rolled up, nothing in this hand, nothing in this hand, hey presto! a billiard ball ..." A stir in the audience; they were getting interested. Another flick of the wrist, and another ball, until I had four balls between my fingers. Now to make them disappear maybe a little humour would go down well here ... "Ehmm ... This was invented by a Chinese by the name of Hung Wan ... His brother was Hung Too ... a titter wells up from the floor ... There you are, the four balls have disappeared" ... Take your bow ... Hope ... Yes, they are applauding ... Sweet music ... this entertainment game is worth all the hard work and practice after all.

Now, to wow them with my grand finale, the production of silks, streamers from an empty Chinese pagoda, which in reality was a wobbly converted table-lamp.

"It's started to wobble again". The audience loved it. A spontaneous cry "Oh ... oh ..." breaks out as the table lamp pagoda starts to lean precariously one way, rights itself and then goes off frighteningly the other way ... Summoning all my apprentice dignity and composure, I ignored their obvious enjoyment of my dilemma, and continued to show the four sides of the empty pagoda ... The audience was having a whale of time, and one wag with an amplified larynx shouted up ... "Jeez, look at the leaning tower of Pisa" ... I sneaked a look to the wings. The entire cast were looking on from the wings in rapt silence. Their support made me more determined, and I prayed that the apparatus would not disintegrate before I did.

"Empty pagoda", then came the magic words, "Abracadabra", and silks, streamers and paper flowers gushed out, and the audience - fair play to them - gave a rallying round of applause.

With the perspiration rolling I staggered into the wings with my card-table. No-one rushed up to sign me on, no contract was offered, but as I carefully packed my props into my case, I told myself over and over, You've made it ... You've made the BIG-TIME.