

The Schlemiel

by Dan Senn

for Actor, El Train, and Participating Audience

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Introduction: The Schlemiel is a performance piece requiring a capable actor (amplified), stereo playback, a small lightbox, and a participating audience (or a pretend audience planted amidst the regulars). The piece has a duration of about ten minutes.

An Overview: The audience is split into two halves and handed rejection letters to be read on cue during the performance. An actor is seated up front next to a lightbox that he/she will use to cue the audience readings. The piece begins in the dark with the recorded sound of a commuter waiting for a subway train. After the first train passes through the station, the actor speaks the lines, "The schlomazel crosses the restaurant floor, trips and spills on a schlemiel." As a second train enters and leaves the station, the actor fades in his/her light (see Performance Setup) and begins reading the main body of text, paragraph one (P1). From here on, the actor reads when the train is either out of a station (see The Train Tape), or waiting for passengers to board at other stations. The audience will receive its cues to read from the actor (fading spotlights up and down) whenever the train is in motion. Toward the end of the piece (at about eight minutes), after the last paragraph has been read (the actor is once again in the dark), the actor will begin laughing (it will be quite genuine). As the laughter grows more raucous, the actor will improvise on the audience light faders (see Using the Score) while listening and responding in guffaws as the readings are faded in and out, on and off. As the taped train enters the final elevated stop, and the passenger (the person who made the original recording) disembarks, the tape will go silent, and with it the laughter of the actor. At this point, the house lights are brought up, the actor stands, wiping tears of laughter from his/her eyes, and clumsily knocks over the music stand and plate of dishes in the direction of the audience.

What happens in The Schlemiel: Many unusual things will occur. To begin with, the piece is about victims and victimizers, about victimizers becoming victims, about gradually shifting prosceniums, about lives and destinies out of control, about humor, and about self-persecution. There is also a kind of church service-ness about the piece (the readings and responses), which was not intended, but is there nonetheless.

The Rejection Letters: The enclosed 3.5" floppy disk contains forty-five rejection letters in Macintosh TEXT format (these can be printed by any Macintosh wordprocessor) which should be printed to meet the participating audience needs. Additional rejection letters (your own) may be added to these or used to replace those enclosed altogether. If others are used, be sure to change all "Dear (person)s" to "Dear Schlemiel" and all sign-offs to "The Schlomazel." It is important not to give these to the audience too early.

The Train Tape: The enclosed cassette is a recording of a El Train ride from the Jackson Street subway station in downtown Chicago to the elevated Fullerton platform at Depaul University. The tape records the sounds of commuter waiting for a train, getting on a train, traveling through several stops underground, coming from below ground to above ground, and exiting the train at an elevated platform. These natural rhythms are used to define the structural timings of the piece.

Verbal Instructions to the Audience: While handing out the rejection letters just before the performance of the piece, tell the audience (the program should inform the audience that The Schlemiel is an audience participation piece) that you are handing out rejection letters gathered over the past few years and that you would like them to read cue. Divide the audience (those in the center and main floor area of the performance space) into halves and pass an identical set of letters to each. Show them the spots in front of their half of the seating area. Go to the light mixer and fade lights in and out one at a time. Tell them that when the spots are at full brightness, that they should read as loudly as possible, and when the spots are barely visible, to whisper softly - that they should crescendo from a whisper to loud speaking as the light fades accordingly. Tell them that their corresponding spotlights will be the light needed to read their rejection letter and that they may have to shift somewhat in their seats. Do not over-explain the piece.

Using the Score: The score provides the actor's text, paragraphs P1 through P6, which should not appear to be memorized. It also serves as a camouflage for the set of dishes placed on the music stand, and gives a rough idea of when to fade the audience spotlights in and out. At the beginning of the piece, audience lights should be brought in and out gradually to brighter and brighter intensities. As the piece develops, the actor may find an especially responsive audience (or a planted audience) that will react even to sudden flashes of light. Audience participation will vary greatly with the "best" ("I'm not to be touched") often being the least responsive. It is important to think of the audience both as a homogenous group and as competing halves. As the piece progresses, this will have the effect of directing their attention away from the actor and toward one another.

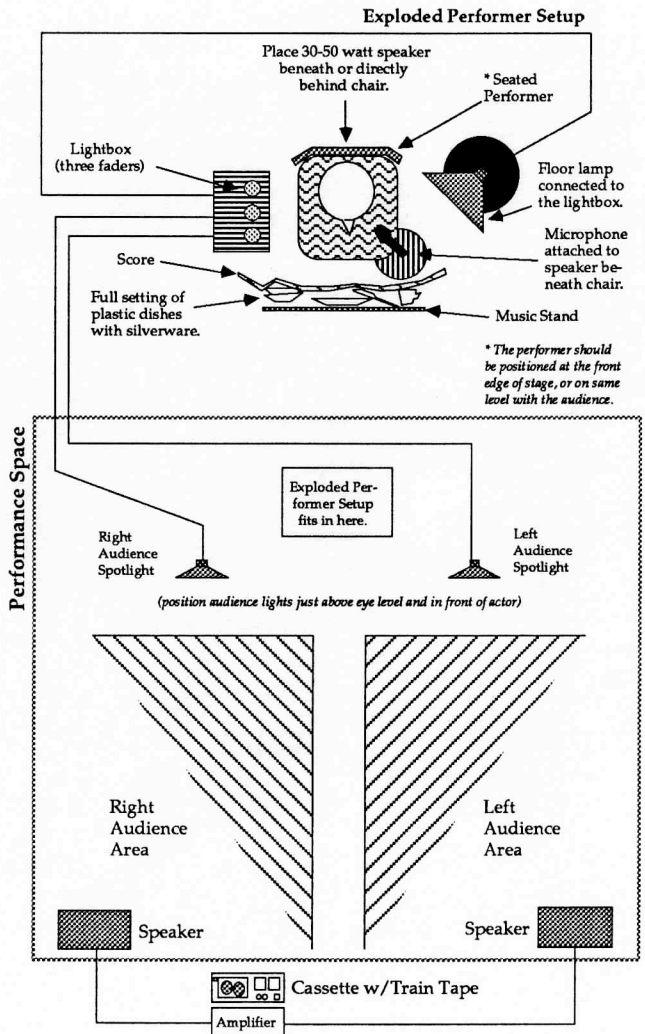
Now and again, there is not enough time to complete a reading as the door closes and the subway trip continues. This should be handled by gradually moving away from the microphone and mumbling the remaining text. Because the audience lights, and the corresponding audience readings, are "on" only while the train is in motion, this mumbling will occasionally overlap the audience readings.

Technical Notes: The lightbox may have to be built for the performance. No worries, it's not difficult, but you may still want an experienced electronics person to do the work for you. Just buy three 110 volt reostats, three wall receptacles, some 14 gauge wire, a grounded plug, and a box to put it all in.

In the Performance Setup, the speakers are positioned at the back of the performance space. This should not be changed - the train sounds will have a significant psychological effect on the audience when clearly set apart from the voice of the actor. The train tape should be set at a level that would be experienced by a passenger on board a subway train with some of its windows open.

The actor's loudspeaker should be positioned just beneath or directly behind the actor's chair. The loudness level should be set to where the actor can be clearly heard throughout the performance space - it does not need to be heard above the train tape. A lavalier microphone may replace the microphone given in the drawing.

Performance Setup



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0 Time in minutes... 1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

P1

It can be a bit stressful waiting for some guests to arrive. Most are so dependable that you can be sure that if they don't show on time something traumatic has happened. Some are just as dependable in being dependably late. And then there's the other sort. The sort that can cause an acid unease as you wait wondering whether they'll ever show; wondering who the hell roped you into inviting them in the first place; knowing full well it was stupid you all along.

P2

On the day that I left for college, when I was eighteen, my Grandfather walked me to my Dad's stationwagon waiting in front of the house. I could tell from the look on his face that I was in for something big. Something heavy. An accumulation of eighty years of living was about to be channeled into a few carefully chosen words. At the car he reached out, took my hand and said, "Don't take any wooden nickles" and turned away. I turned, got into the car not believing what I had heard. Fifty years of breakin' his bloody back in a thankless lumber yard, his grandson is about to leave home to prepare for an easier life, and he says, "DON'T TAKE ANY WOODEN NICKELS!" Why not something like "DON'T STEP ON ANY CRACKS, YOU'LL BREAK YOUR MOTHER'S BACK!" Jesus, I couldn't believe how the old man had messed up his big moment to lay something profound and everlasting on me. You know, something about mountains, quests and striving for ideals. For the entire ride to LaCrosse and then for several years after, I remained disappointed by the incident.

P3

So, I was sittin' there waitin' for those other kind of guests to arrive thinking about my dead Grandfather and those wooden nickles. I had only gone to have a drink with them a few days before, directly after the Wourinen lecture. We had enjoyed each others company so and, seeing as they were in town for only a couple of weeks, I invited them to dinner. A pretty ordinary followup when old friends get together. And they had seemed genuinely interested, even excited, at the invitation. Tim earnestly scribbled my phone number while asking directions to our house in Philo.

P4

Well, they were forty minutes late by then and my intuitions were that they wouldn't come at all.

P5

You know, Tim pulled this shit on me in Chicago. In a way anyways. When we moved there in '78, he'd been living there for a year already and I did everything possible to get hold of him. For some reason he wouldn't even return my phone calls. I once left a note for him in at the school where he taught. Nothin'. This distressed me to no end because I had thought him to be a good friend in Urbana. Indeed, I had done more than a few unselfish things on his behalf. But, for whatever reason, he stayed apart in Chicago and I harbored more than a little anger toward him for a long time. So, when I saw him at the lecture, and after so much time, I said to myself, "Here's a chance to let bygones be bygones." I reasoned that, perhaps, he was just under some excessive stress up in Chicago and just couldn't deal with some common courtesy. I saw going for a drink with him and his buddy as a chance to get a little bitterness out of my system. I'm really quite a nice guy, you know.

P6

So, there I sat. The food was ready and in spite of forswearing that I wouldn't become upset if he pulled this shit on me, I was indeed upset and my intuition told me that the sonuvabitch would never show and he didn't.

Spoken in the dark

The Schlemiel crosses the restaurant floor, trips and spills on a Schlemiel.



Readings

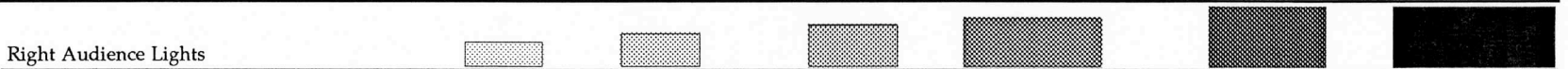


on

Spotlight on Actor

off

Left Audience Lights (intensity indicated)



Note: Fade lights gradually in and out.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10