

Public Speaking Nightmares

Bad speaking situations and lessons learned.

As a speaker and entertainer with over 30 years experience, I've had my share of nightmare speaking and performing conditions. The best thing that can come from a bad situation is that we learn something which will prevent it from happening again! Let me share some of my worst memories...and what I learned.

The Nightmare: Booked to perform 30 minutes of comedy at a New Years Eve Party, I was introduced at 11 pm, one hour before the stroke of midnight. To accommodate my portion of the entertainment, they stopped the dancing. The 300 people at the party were not happy. Then I discovered that the sound system was horrible. Only the people in the first two rows could hear me well. The people in the middle could hear me a little. The people in the back couldn't hear me at all. So the ones in the back of the room started talking amongst themselves! The chatter from the back of the room resulted in the middle of the room not hearing anything I was saying, so they also started talking. You get the picture: A tsunami of indifference was sweeping toward the front of the room. Soon only the front row could hear small portions of my program. Disaster. When it was over, I didn't hang around to meet the audience. And I almost swore I'd never perform again. Almost.

The Lesson: Sometimes the main factor in an awful situation is bad timing. In this case, interrupting the dancing just before midnight was not good. A performance at 8 pm would have been better. For a speaker, a case of bad timing could be giving a speech while people are eating dinner. It's better to give your talk after the meal is completed. What if you're scheduled to speak at breakfast? Sometimes giving a talk at 7 am is a bad timing issue, especially if you're doing humor. A humor talk will normally be better received at lunch than it will be at a breakfast meeting. Also a timing issue is whether you would rather speak to a group before or after they get drunk. I prefer sober audiences. Another lesson is that I've learned to explore my options. For example, at an event such as a New Years Eve Party, is it possible to perform in a separate room where watching the program is optional? I've done this at high school graduation parties and it works like a charm. Those who want to watch the entertainment are able to enjoy it.

The Nightmare: There was the time I was booked as a middle act in a fund-raiser variety program at a high school auditorium. The stage was perfect, but the spotlight was fixed. The cord on the microphone was not long enough to reach the area of the stage which was illuminated. I couldn't be seen and heard at the same time. I made choices all the way thru my program of when it was most important to be heard and when it was most important to be seen! Funsville, not.

The Lesson: For your speech to be received and enjoyed, your audience must be able to see and hear you. Although this is a no-brainer, you need to remember to coordinate with your host or meeting planner to ensure that you are provided with good sound and lighting. Know what is essential for optimal room configuration and communicate it in

advance to the program planner. Sometimes people in charge of meetings have little experience and no understanding of the do's and don'ts of program staging. They have good intentions and want to do it right, they just need your help. You and the meeting planner must work together to create an environment that allows a good audience to actually be a good audience. And then make the commitment to arrive early, at least two hours before your program, to check out the lights, sound system and other elements of the room setup. At more recent programs I have often taken my own sound system, lights, microphone cords, projectors and a screen. Usually, I leave them in the car and only take them in only if they're needed.

The Nightmare: My next performance treat was on a riverboat. My program was staged on the upper deck, on top of the doors that covered the diesel engine. As if the noise wasn't enough, the lighting was yellow bug lights. I was performing magic where the color of the props was important to the effect. Red looked like orange. White looked like yellow. Blue looked like green. I looked like a cast member from Night of The Living Dead. And felt worse.

The Lesson: Avoid outdoor programs. At outdoor events, the audience energy evaporates right into the sky. Also, never speak on a moving vehicle. I've also been asked to speak on trains, busses and limos. No thank you! Cruise ships would be the exception.

The Nightmare: I spoke to inmates at a federal prison. Yes, a captive audience. I discovered that it was an ideal place to experience hecklers. Not just one heckler, but many. If an inmate is thinking something, he or she is more likely than your normal audience member to say it out loud. I was not expecting this, and it affected the flow of my program.

The Lesson: If you're prepared to deal with hecklers, the disruption will be minimized. For the most part, it isn't that hecklers don't like you. They are simply trying to have fun. The best thing is not to confront or challenge them but to go with the flow. Enjoy the moment. If they are extremely annoying, often the audience will help you deal with them. Also, be alert for some funny lines that you may be able to add to your next talk. I picked up a line from the prison talk that I used for many years after.

The Nightmare: The next surprise was a program for an audience of 400. I had performed for this group in previous years. A good audience. But this time, the decorating committee had unwittingly sabotaged the program. Their primary decoration was three helium balloons tied to the back of each chair with three-foot ribbons. On arrival, I went to the back of the room to check the view of the stage. Or should I say, lack of view of the stage. The decorations were the equivalent of 400 people standing in the middle of the room. When you were seated, unless you were in the front three rows, you absolutely could not see the stage. The larger problem was that since the back rows could not see anything, they started talking amongst themselves. Flashback to the New Years Eve party. And now, in addition to not seeing the stage, nobody could even hear the program because of the conversational tidal wave. Where's my crying towel?

Lesson Learned: The room decorations can have a major impact on your program. It's not just balloons on chairs, but also streamers hanging from the ceiling or tall centerpieces on the banquet tables which also can obscure the view of the performing platform. Once again, talking to the event planner in advance is a smart thing.

The Nightmare: At yet another event, I arrived early to find that the banquet tables for 500 people were set up with the first row of tables 70 feet from the stage. It's a challenge to deliver an intimate presentation with your closest audience members 70 feet away. In addition, this means that the back row was 70 feet further away than it had to be. Not good.

The Lessons: Sometimes you need to take charge. In this case, I did something I had never done before. I knew that the fix was simple and quick. It wasn't a matter of moving all 63 banquet tables closer to the stage. It was simply a matter of moving the back two rows of tables (only ten of them) to the front of the room. It was a very large room and doing this would be fairly easy. I asked if that could be done and the response was, "Yes, but there wasn't enough time to do it." I made a decision, based on two factors. First, I had a relationship with the staff from previous engagements. And second, I checked with the program chair to ensure that the 70 feet of dead space was not something that was intentionally designed to allow room for something else in the program. And then I said, "OK, I'll move the tables myself." I asked one person to assist me and we started to move the first table. Within 30 seconds we had ten staff members helping us. And in less than 5 minutes the entire table arrangement had been fixed. Because of some slightly assertive behavior, the program was much better than if we had left the room as it was. This tactic needs to be used with caution and good judgment. In some cases (based on my relationship, or lack of relationship, with the venue staff and the meeting planners) I would choose to live with the dead space and make the best of it.

The Nightmare: Then there was the time we presented an improv show for a senior citizen residential home. The room was set for 100 chairs. Twelve residents turned out for the show. They sat in the back of the room, leaving the front seats empty. We performed our opening, high-energy game which normally was received with loads of audience response, laughter, applause. But this night...nothing. Dead silence. Then we started asking for audience suggestions for the next scene. Blank stares. We ended up providing our own laughter and troupe members shouted out suggestions for the rest of the evening. I was hoping that our audience was finding the room a quiet place to rest.

Lesson Learned: Always assume that the audience is enjoying the program (unless they're throwing things at you). Avoid second-guessing your audience. Never assume that lack of laughter means they don't find your humor funny. Some of the people in this tiny senior-residence audience came up after the show to say how much they enjoyed the program. If only they hadn't kept it a secret during the show! As a speaker you can always choose to believe that an audience's silence means that they are quietly enjoying your program. If they don't applaud, assume they're sitting on their hands

because their fingers are cold. Don't let your negative assumptions and interpretations zap the energy out of your program.

Final Thoughts: You're probably wondering, "Hey John, are all your programs disasters?" The good news is that these performances were a small number of hundreds of programs and most of them were over 20 years ago. In recent years I've experienced few such unpleasant situations. The improvement in my track record is due to better judgment. The old saying is that good judgment comes from experience which is the result of bad judgment. I learned from the difficult programs.

I wish you happy performing and happy speaking. But when you do get into a bad situation, deal with it. Do your best program possible even if only one person is enjoying it (even if YOU are that one person). And when it's over, quickly pack your things. Smile while you are leaving. And know that your future programs will be better because of the experience and the lessons you learn.

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