Chapter 22

THE PERFORMER AND THE STAGE

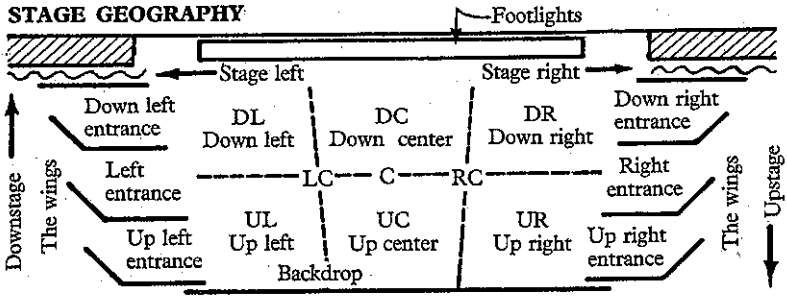
All the performing arts, except conjuring, regard a director as a necessity. A director can be as useful to the conjurer as he can to the actor, the dancer, or the musician. However, as directors who understand the technical requirements of conjuring are scarce and are not likely to be cheap, a few suggestions on how to be your own director and dramatic coach may not come amiss.

Before making them, however, let me point out that directing yourself is a poor substitute for hiring an outside director. The director views you from the same angle and distance that the audience does. You cannot see yourself in this way. A mirror will help you to practice sleights, but it is a liability during rehearsals. Rehearsing before a mirror is apt to make you self-conscious. Few mirrors are large enough to show your whole body, even when you sit still. This may explain why close-up workers rarely make broad gestures; they are afraid to let their hands move out of sight beyond the edges of the mirror! Finally, you must keep your eyes fixed on the mirror in order to watch what you are doing. That seriously restricts your movements.

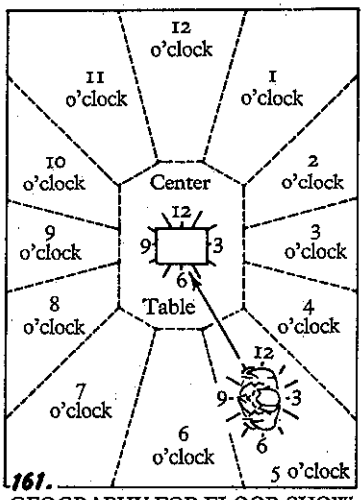
Another reason why you cannot hope to compete, even with a poor director, is that no director shares either your prejudices or your attitude toward yourself. Most performers assume that any routine, witticism, or bit of business that pleases them must also please an audience. Unfortunately, a conjurer's viewpoint differs so widely from that of his audience that even experienced performers are often blind to their own mistakes. I know one who persists in closing his fine act with a trick that cannot fool the youngest spectator. Another of my friends interrupts his clever tricks with a joke which has fallen flat every time I have heard it.

VARIETY AND THE STAGE

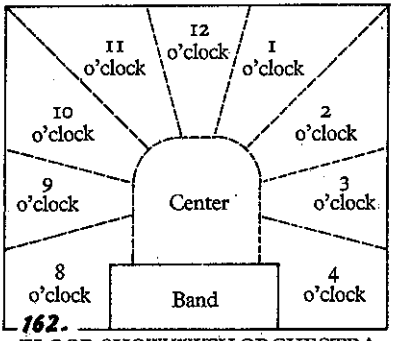
The stage is an asset which few performers have learned to exploit. This is a whole art in itself, but there are certain basic principles which you cannot afford to ignore—even when your stage is only one end of a living room.



160. GEOGRAPHY OF PLATFORM STAGE



161. GEOGRAPHY FOR FLOOR SHOW



162. FLOOR SHOW WITH ORCHESTRA

The clock system divides the stage into areas. Then, each performer and each large prop has its own clock. Thus, in Fig. 161, the man in 5 o'clock now faces 9 o'clock. He is about to cross 11 o'clock and will then stand 6 o'clock from the table, center.

Any understanding of positions and movements requires a knowledge of stage geography (Fig. 160). This is simple, but you should study it until it is as familiar as the arrangement of your own bedroom. If you work night clubs, or other places where you are more or less surrounded, you need to master the "maps" in Figs. 161 and 162.

Variety adds interest and makes it easier for you to hold attention. The easiest way to gain variety is to do each routine

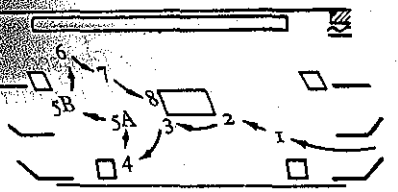
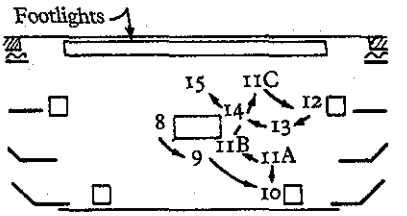


FIG. 163.

Give your act variety by performing each routine in a different part of the stage. Move two or three times during long routines. Arrange your tables and apparatus to provide motivations for these movements and make the action flow smoothly.



in a different spot. Fig. 163 shows how you can motivate the necessary movements by arranging apparatus on tables or chairs set in the corners of the stage.

Areas vary in strength. The order is up left (weakest), up right, down left, down right and up center (about equal), and down center (strongest). You can build interest by arranging your routines so that the *floor pattern* will cover the areas in roughly the order of their increasing strength. The act in Fig. 163 does this adequately but still motivates the performer's movements and lets them seem casual. Save down center for your climactic routine. You may walk through this area earlier or perform some minor bit of business there, but do not waste its value by making serious use of it until you reach your main item.

Position

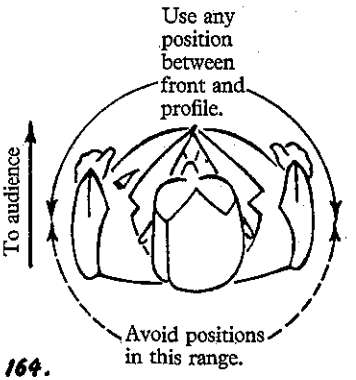
The actor's rule—*Never turn your back on an audience*—applies even more strictly to the conjurer. When you turn your back, you cannot see the spectators and they cannot see your face. Under these conditions, you are in danger of losing control. Furthermore, if you speak with your back to the audience, your words are muffled, and your lips—which are the visual source of information—are hidden.

The rule permits any position from full front to profile (Fig. 164). It does not apply to the body but merely to the head; the man in Fig. 165 is not breaking the rule. Furthermore, the rule applies only while a performer is the source of information or is displaying or describing some prop which is the source of information. When you are claiming the attention of the audience, your assistant may, and often should, turn

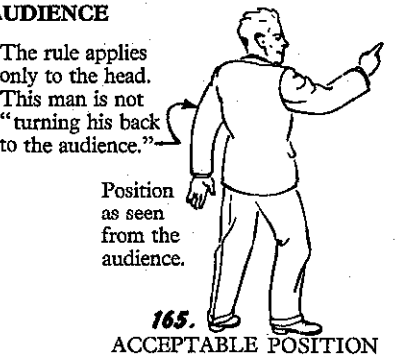
slightly away from the footlights; when attention is focused on her, you may turn away yourself. However, no performer should turn his back squarely to the audience except in the special cases where he wants to demonstrate that he cannot observe what is going on.

Although you do not break the back-to-the-audience rule by a position like that in Fig. 165, a conjurer should normally *turn out* slightly more than the mechanics of the situation require. In Fig. 166, for example, the conjurer and his assistant are talking to each other. This would ordinarily lead them to face each other directly and stand profile to the audience. Actually, they have turned their bodies 45° and their faces 20° toward the audience. This device makes them more prominent. Although it is unnatural, it does not seem so. Actors do this habitually, even in highly realistic plays.

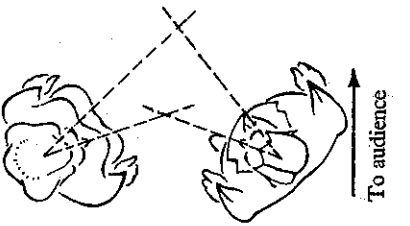
RELATION OF PERFORMER TO AUDIENCE



164. WHAT "TURNING YOUR BACK TO THE AUDIENCE" MEANS

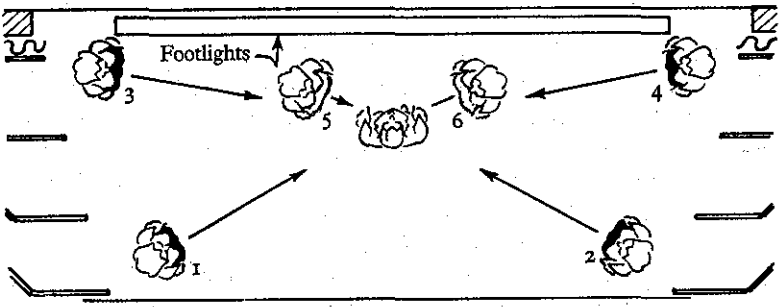


165. ACCEPTABLE POSITION



TURNING OUT ***166.*** ▷
Although the conjurer and his assistant appear to be facing each other, they are actually turned quite far toward the audience.

When you work surrounded, as you do in a night club, you have your back to some spectators all the time. Arena directors have solved this by three rules: (1) Turn frequently; never keep your back on anyone for long. (2) Never stay in the same area for more than a minute or two; arrange your floor pattern so that you will be close to each group of spectators at one time and



167. POSITIONS FOR INACTIVE ASSISTANT

These are the best positions for an assistant to take when she is not busy. The numbers indicate the order of preference, No. 1 being the least obtrusive. However, there is not a great deal of difference between them.

far from it at others. (3) Zigzag; do not merely move around the clock. These rules may seem to require unnatural movements. However, arena players soon become adept at making the necessary actions appear to be completely motivated. If they can do it, so can you.

Technique for Assistants

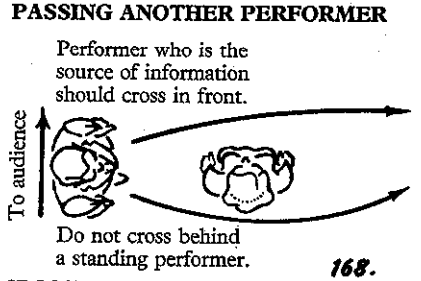
An assistant raises few problems as long as she is kept busy. However, in most acts, there are several periods when she has nothing to do and must be made as inconspicuous as possible. The ideal solution is to have her exit and return just in time for her next scene. If she continually bobs back and forth, however, the effect may be comic. Furthermore, when either an exit or an entrance requires more than three steps, the movement itself distracts attention.

When she must remain idle on stage, try to have her retire to one of the corner positions shown by the shaded figures in Fig. 167. If this involves distracting movements, let her stay near you but keep her slightly downstage (unshaded figures in Fig. 167). That turns her back slightly toward the audience and makes her less distracting.

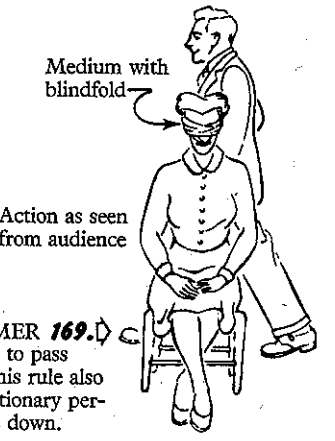
The rule against making any movement without a motivated purpose applies even more strongly to the assistant than it does to the conjurer. When she is idle, she should be erect but not rigid and should avoid making any movement whatever. Small, restless actions are especially bad.

Whether an assistant is active or inactive, *she should keep her eyes on whatever happens to be the source of information at the moment.*

Your assistant is slightly less likely to attract attention when she is on your left. However, keeping her on this side the whole time tends to make the act monotonous. Changing sides presents no problems. You may have been told that a performer should never pass between another performer and the audience. This is a false rule. The true rule depends on which performer is the source of information. When the stationary performer is the source, the moving performer will distract attention whether he crosses in front or in back (Fig. 168). *Crossing* in front is worse because it is both awkward and rude. However, there is little choice as far as distraction is concerned. On the other hand when the moving performer is the source of information, he should cross in front of the other. Crossing behind a stationary performer is always a mistake unless the latter is seated or stooping so that the moving performer's face can be seen by the audience as he passes (Fig. 169). These considerations apply equally to conjurers, assistants, and volunteers. The only distinction is that conjurers are more often the source of information. Hence they have more opportunities to cross.



168. CROSSING BEFORE AND BEHIND



PASSING SEATED PERFORMER 169. In this situation, try to pass behind as shown. This rule also applies when the stationary performer stoops or lies down.

Color, Light, Music

Manufacturers of apparatus appear to be color blind and their customers make matters worse by combining hues at random. This is one reason why women dislike conjuring. They are more sensitive to colors than men are, and they refuse

to be entertained by a performer who displays red and orange "flowers" against a maroon scarf. Buying colors by mail is as risky as marrying a mail-order wife.

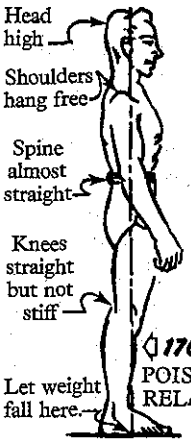
Your act will be much more acceptable to the distaff side of your audience if you have two or three women friends help you select your colors. Display all your apparatus while they are advising you. Colors can be judged only in relation to other colors. No color is ugly in itself, and no color is beautiful.

If you play a character role, see that every detail of your costume is appropriate. If you play Yourself, make sure that both you and your clothing are clean and that your suit is pressed. The better you look, the more impressive your illusions will be.

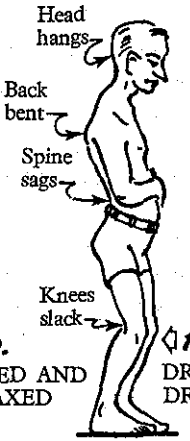
Your assistant's costume and grooming are equally important. Unless she takes a broad character role, she should be dressed as becomingly as possible and should wear high heels; women never look their best in flat heels.

Colored lights and music have great entertainment value. However, they present problems that the average performer finds insuperable. Lighting must be designed and music must be selected. Equipment must be available. Stagehands and musicians have to be secured and rehearsed. They must be skilful and reliable. They must also be able to improvise when something goes wrong. It is nearly impossible to satisfy all these requirements for an act that plays short runs in a variety of clubs, halls, and theaters. If even one is lacking, the result can be disastrous. An orchestra which plays the wrong tune, or a stagehand who misses a light cue, can make the most brilliant routine appear ridiculous. Unless conditions are exceptionally favorable, the value of an orchestra and special lighting are more than offset by the difficulties and dangers that attend any attempt to use them.

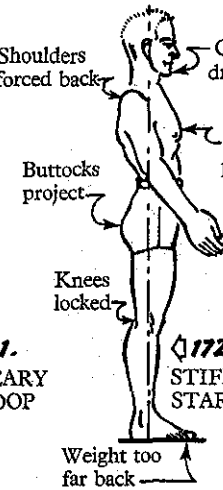
Silent acts need music, and the canned variety is the safest type to use. Unfortunately, there is a lot more to it than buying equipment and recording a tape. The equipment is expensive and cumbersome. Even when it is of high quality, it does not sound natural unless the speakers are properly placed. The correct volume varies with the size of the audience and cannot be set in advance. Finally, if the act must synchronize with the music, the least hesitation at any point will be painfully obvious and may throw the rest of the performance out of step.



170. POISED AND RELAXED



171. DREARY DROOP

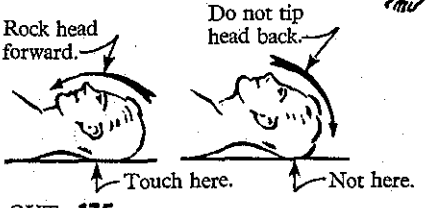


172. STIFF AND STARCHED

173. FORCE YOUR CHEST UP
This is an exercise to relax your chest muscles. Expand chest as far as possible (dotted lines). Hold for half a minute. Relax. Your muscles will bring your chest to the position shown by the solid lines. This is the ideal chest position. Do not exert any effort to force out more air, and do not let your chest sag.

174. STRETCH UP
Do this three times a day

Lie flat on your back on the floor. Stretch your arms over your head. Let your muscles relax and wait for your spine to straighten. This may take three or four minutes at first.



STRETCH OUT 175.

Poise

Poise is even more valuable to the conjurer than it is to the actor. Physical poise helps you to achieve the mental poise that you need to dominate an audience. Unfortunately, most of us suffered in our youth from attempts to teach us "correct posture" by people who were wrong on almost every point.

Physical poise comes from keeping each part of your body in balance (Fig. 170). It is easy and comfortable. You cannot acquire ease, comfort, or balance by straining to force your chin in, your shoulders back, and your chest out (Fig. 172). Walking around with a book on your head is equally harmful. You may balance the book, but the book will not balance you.

Physical poise is effortless, but attaining it may require work —especially if you have let yourself fall into a permanent slump like the man in Fig. 171. Fortunately, you will not have to work either very hard or very long at a time.

The exercises illustrated in Figs. 173–175 and described in the accompanying captions are easy to do and require only a few seconds each. By devoting five minutes a day to them, you can improve your appearance in less than a week. This is so true that if you fail to notice any improvement, you can be sure that you are not doing the exercises correctly.

It is not enough to make improvements; you must retain them; you must continue to practice the exercises throughout life, just as you practice sleights. Fortunately, once you master the exercises, you will find that all three of them take less than two minutes a day.

Footwork

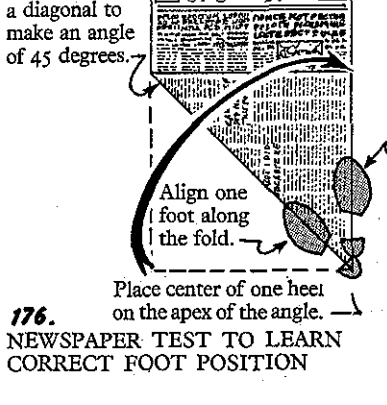
Good footwork will do wonders both for your appearance and for the smoothness of your presentation. It begins with the foot position in Fig. 176. This stance is basic. Form the habit of falling into it each time you stand still. It is even more important for your assistant than it is for you because it shows a girl's legs to the best advantage. Make sure that you both master it before going further.

When you walk, follow the simple rule: *Always take your first step with the foot nearest the goal.* Fig. 177 demonstrates that you can observe the rule no matter in which direction you move.

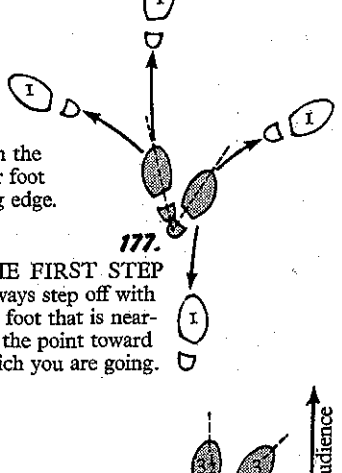
An entrance from the wings of the stage should begin with the upstage foot.

When you cross from one place to another, try to take either one step or three (Fig. 178). The extra half step needed to bring your feet together does not count in the rhythm. When you perform on a stage, this one-or-three rule will leave you turned slightly toward the audience—especially if you have

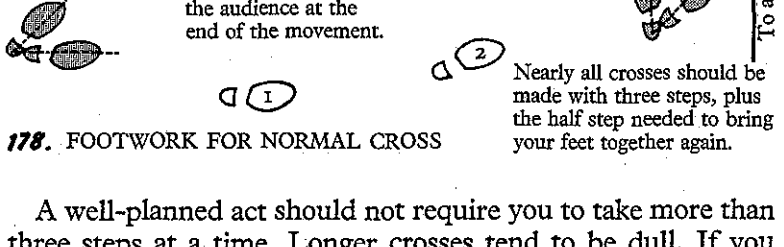
followed a gentle curve like that in Fig. 178. I have not had enough experience with arena staging to say whether or not these considerations apply when the performer works surrounded by an audience.



176. NEWSPAPER TEST TO LEARN CORRECT FOOT POSITION



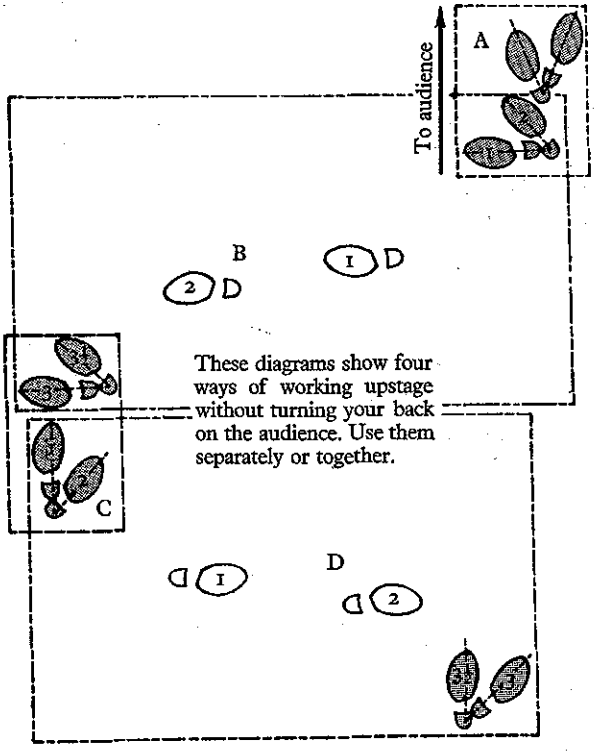
177. THE FIRST STEP
Always step off with the foot that is nearest the point toward which you are going.



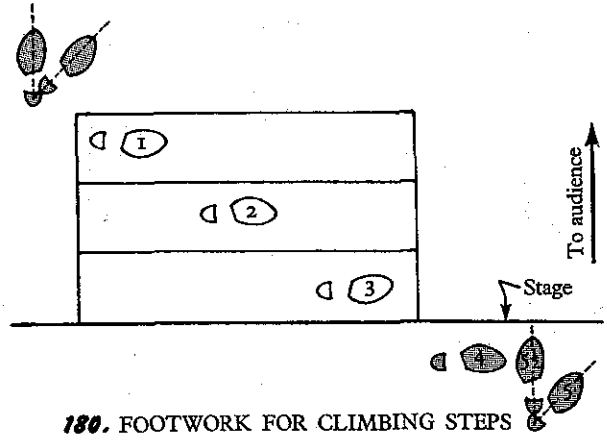
178. FOOTWORK FOR NORMAL CROSS

A well-planned act should not require you to take more than three steps at a time. Longer crosses tend to be dull. If you must make one, you can escape monotony in two ways. One is to break the rhythm by taking either short, quick steps or exaggerated strides. The second, and more useful, technique consists in doing something to add fresh interest as you take your fourth step. If, for example, you enter from the wings of a wide stage and cannot present your first number until you reach the center, you will need five or seven steps. On the fourth, turn your face toward the audience, smile, and make some gesture with your wand.

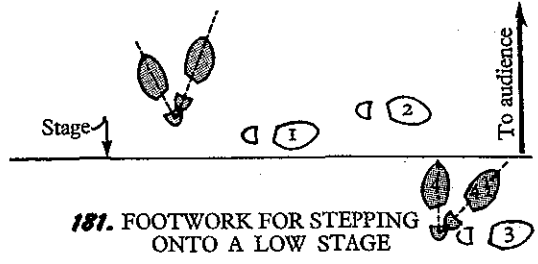
There are several techniques for moving upstage without turning your back on the audience. You cannot consider yourself a finished performer until you have mastered them.



179. FOOTWORK FOR MOVING UPSTAGE

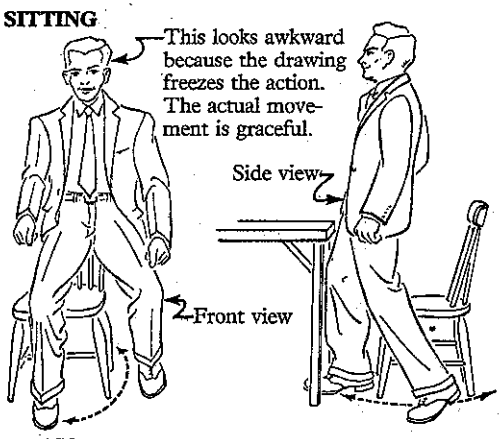


180. FOOTWORK FOR CLIMBING STEPS

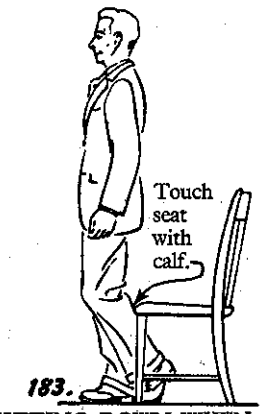


181. FOOTWORK FOR STEPPING ONTO A LOW STAGE

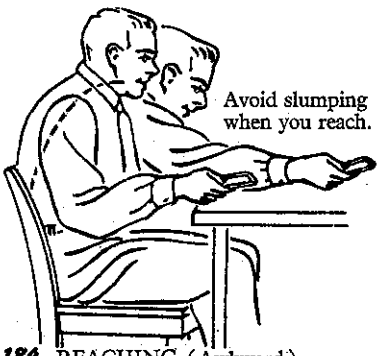
1. Take a single step backward as you make a gesture with the hand on the same side as the foot with which you step.



182. SITTING ON CHAIR AT TABLE



183. SITTING DOWN WHEN THERE IS NO TABLE



184. REACHING (Awkward)

185. REACHING (Graceful)

2. Take a backward step as you bow.

3. Have your assistant cross in front of you. Take three steps back to give her room.

4. Walk upstage at an angle of 45° using the footwork in *B* or *D*, Fig. 179 and looking at the audience over your downstage shoulder.

5. Use the same footwork without turning your head while another performer holds the attention of the audience.

6. Work upstage while turning (footwork in *A* or *C*, Fig. 179).

7. Combine techniques 4. and 6. with pauses between to work upstage along a zigzag path (whole pattern in Fig. 179).

Many conjurers turn their backs when they mount steps from the auditorium to the stage. As this usually occurs just before the climax of a routine, the performer throws away his control of the audience at the very moment when he needs it most. Fig. 180 shows how to apply the diagonal technique to stairs. Fig. 181 illustrates the method of stepping onto a low stage when there are no stairs.

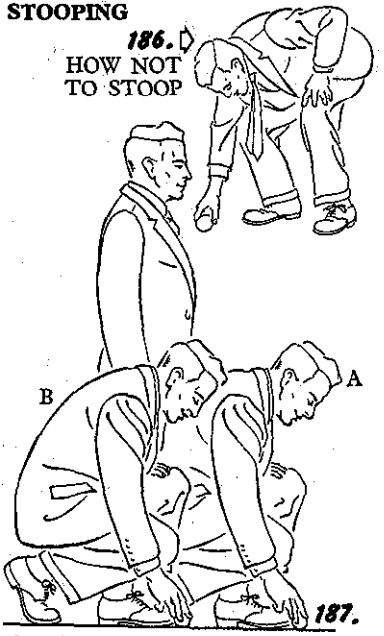
Sitting, Rising, and Stooping

The performer who works tables at a night club makes his first impression on his audience when he sits, and leaves it with the impression that he makes when he rises. Fig. 182 illustrates the proper techniques.

Other conjurers rarely need to sit. If you do, place yourself in front of your chair and move one leg slightly backward until you can feel the seat with your calf. This tells you that it is safe to sit (Fig. 183). Never glance back at your chair before sitting; audiences regard this as funny. Rise as in Fig. 182, but step forward with the foot at the side instead of backward with the foot in front.

STOOPING

186. ▷ HOW NOT TO STOOP



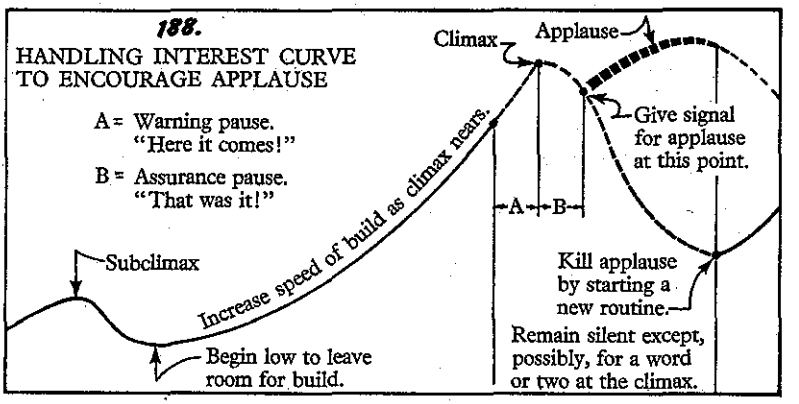
STOOP BY TAKING ONE STEP FORWARD OR BACKWARD
A forward step (*A*) is more graceful. But when you stoop to pick up a dropped object, you must normally step back (*B*). For some reason, learning to do this subconsciously requires quite a bit of practice.

When you reach for something while seated, rock forward on your hip bones (Fig. 185). Slumping creates a poor impression (Fig. 184).

Stage conjurers stoop fairly often, and most of them do it like the man in Fig. 186. The proper technique is illustrated in Fig. 187.

APPLAUSE

Conjurers throw away more applause than they get. The amount of applause that a performer receives is governed as much by his technique as it is by the quality of his act. Some techniques encourage applause, others kill it. You cannot expect an audience to express approval if you use the wrong technique at the wrong time.



Many performers feel that applause corresponds to "*A* for effort." If they devote time and energy in an attempt to entertain, the least the audience can do is to reward them by clapping. This view is unfounded. Whether the spectators pay in cash or attention, they have acquired the right to be entertained. The performer who succeeds merely balances the account; one who bores his audience puts himself more deeply in its debt.

People who have been entertained want to applaud. When they do so spontaneously, they form a higher opinion of your act. Each spectator hears the rest clapping and says to himself, "If they like it this much, it must be better than I thought."

On the other hand, when a performer begs for applause or tries to bully his audience into providing it, he lowers himself just as any other beggar or bully does. Even a spectator who has enjoyed the performance thinks, "I liked it. But if this guy has to high-pressure people into clapping, he can't be much good."

There is no need for either begging or bullying. If your act

justifies any applause at all, you can get more than it deserves by using the proper technique.

The first step is to go over your act and decide where the applause should come. At least half the men I watch are vague on this vital point. If you do not know when you want the spectators to clap, you cannot expect them to find out for themselves.

Spot your applause immediately after the climax of each major wave (points *A* in Fig. 137). You may be able to get a little applause after each quickie. But if you do, the spectators' hands will grow tired and the clapping will dribble away to a polite flurry at the end (Fig. 136).

Premature applause in the middle of a routine, or a progressive series of routines, will rob you of any chance for a real hand after the climax. If you let your audience clap after *The Haunted Conjurer* and *The Consolidated Guinea Pigs*, interest will sag instead of rising—and *The Truant Trousers* will not produce the ovation that it should when properly handled.

On the other hand, if you make people want to applaud but keep them from doing so, the desire will grow stronger and stronger. When it reaches a peak, let it come and take a well-deserved bow.

Learning when to stifle and when to encourage applause is more than half the battle. The other half consists in providing clues to which the audience can respond.

Avoid applause by indicating plainly that you have not reached a climax. When you create some minor effect, pause just long enough for the audience to appreciate it, and go immediately into your next routine. If possible, say something at the point of transition. That will make the spectators listen instead of applauding. If you must be silent, keep moving, avoid facing the audience directly and give some definite sign—such as walking toward a different table or picking up a new prop—that you are going on with your act and that it is not time to applaud.

Getting applause is no more difficult but is a trifle more complex. The technique begins with the build which immediately precedes the climax (Fig. 188). Handle this in such a way that your audience knows you are approaching a revelation of some sort. Your technique will vary with the routine and with your personality. However, if you are keenly aware of the

fact that a miracle is about to happen, you will subconsciously transmit this information to the audience. Just before reaching the climax, pause for a count of "One." The spectators will recognize this as a signal that the big moment has arrived. Present your climax. Pause for another count of "One." During this pause neither you nor your assistant should make any sound or movement. Face dead front, and give the audience a cue to applaud.

This clue can be any small action such as a flick of your wand, a slight bow, or a sudden smile. It announces that the routine is complete and that some sign of appreciation will be welcome. It also acts like the downbeat of a conductor's baton and helps all the spectators to start clapping at the same instant. Applause that begins raggedly never becomes enthusiastic.

If you need proof that this technique is important, watch your fellow conjurers. Time and again one of them will fail to indicate that his routine is over and that it is time to clap. The spectators are uncertain whether to applaud or to wait attentively for some further development. As a result, they do nothing. The performer looks disappointed and says, "I usually get a hand at that point." He intends this as a reproach, but the spectators interpret it as an apology for not being up to his usual standard.

Never let applause die out. If it does, people will tire their hands and use up their tendency to applaud. The instant the clapping begins to fade, kill it. You can do this by turning away and giving some definite sign that you are starting your next routine. Unless you do a silent act, begin to talk at this point. Do not attempt to be heard over the applause. Speak in a normal tone. The audience will quiet down to avoid missing anything. As your remark will probably be lost, it should not contain important information.

You may have trouble timing this technique at first. But once you master it, you can get a bigger hand from a weak routine than the average conjurer gets from a strong one.

Unfortunately, the technique requires a clear-cut climax. Many excellent routines lack such climaxes. In *Fan-tastic*, for example, the climax starts when the first handkerchief is "dyed." The second and third handkerchiefs round off the routine but add little or no build. I doubt if any technique will

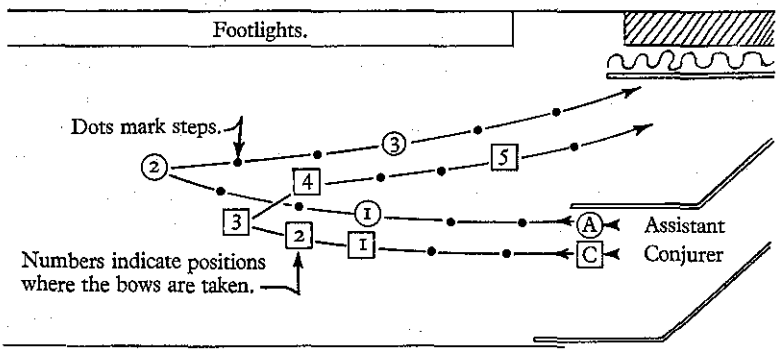
gain a real hand after an effect of this type, even though the audience may find it highly entertaining. Your best plan is to avoid applause at that point, let the tendency to clap build up, and reap the full benefit after the climax of your next routine (Fig. 137).

Taking Bows

This can be developed into a fine art, but a few words about the rudiments may not come amiss.

Face dead front for small bows. Incline your head slightly, but keep your eyes on the audience; people are more inclined to clap when they feel you are watching. If the hand warrants more than one bow, make a second nod to your left and a third to your right.

When you use the first nod to cue applause, think, "I hope I have pleased you," as you make it. This acts as a silent script and takes care of your facial expression and any subconscious bodily movements. For second and third bows, say, "Thank you. Thank you." You can say this to yourself or speak in a fairly loud tone depending on the amount of applause. Never make the mistake of saying, "Thank you" before the applause comes.



189. TAKING BOWS WITH YOUR ASSISTANT

A real hand deserves a real bow—from the waist. Keep your head up so that the audience can see your face. Bow first to the center and say, "Thank you!" If the audience continues, bow left, saying, "You're very kind," and bow right, saying, "Thank you!" again.

Even the strongest routine in the middle of an act will rarely

rate more than three bows. After that, the applause will begin to fade and should be killed. However, at the end of your act, you should take all the applause you can get without straining.

Judging by the questions that I am asked when I lecture on showmanship, many conjurers have never learned the art of taking a curtain call with an assistant. The secret lies in the footwork (Fig. 189).

Vaudeville performers developed hundreds of techniques for *milking* applause at the end of an act. Some of these were as clever as the acts themselves. An expert could double his quota of earned bows simply by his use of milking techniques. These deserve your best thought. Managers judge the quality of your act by the amount of applause that you receive at the end.

The secret behind all milking techniques consists in doing something unexpected at the precise moment when the applause begins to die. This provides what is known as a *kicker* and starts another wave of clapping. Clever "kickers" are best. However, almost any small action, such as a sudden grin or a shrug, will work if it is appropriate and perfectly timed.

Perhaps the best example of a kicker is the *walk-off*. The act is over, the audience looks for nothing more. But, then, the performer adds an extra comic touch and walks off while the audience is still laughing. This is rewarded with a curtain call.

For example, if you end a haunted-conjurer act with *The Consolidated Guinea Pigs* and *The Truant Trousers*, you could display the rabbit, boast of your triumph over The Obeah Man, put the rabbit back in the hat, count "One," and step from behind the table. Count "One" again. Bow to give a cue for applause, but not so deeply that you can see your bare legs. Instead of the ovation that you expect for consolidating the guinea pigs, you will be greeted by a burst of laughter.

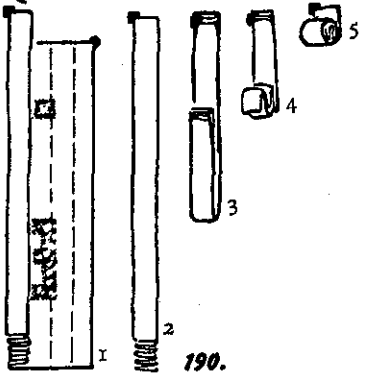
This is the point at which the walk-off technically begins. Appear puzzled and upset. Look around to see what is causing the laughter. When you can find nothing, appear indignant at such an unappreciative audience and stalk off the stage.

If you have handled this properly, the laughter will turn to applause as you exit. Come out and take a deep bow. For the first time, you notice your legs and are both embarrassed by your nudity and chagrined by The Obeah Man's triumph. Search frantically for something to do. Bow and produce a

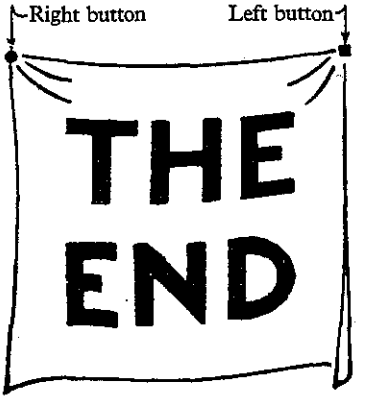
scarf bearing the words "The End" (Figs. 190–191). Wrap this around you and exit. That will certainly make the audience bring you back for another bow.

Now let me take my bow and wish you "Many happy curtain calls!"

QUICKIE FOR ENCORE



190. METHOD OF FOLDING SCARF



191. FRONT VIEW OF SCARF

1. Sew buttons on the upper corners of the scarf. They should be different shapes so that you can tell them apart by touch. Place the scarf face down. Fold it into 2-in. accordian pleats (Step 1). This creates a long, narrow strip (Step 2). Fold up one-third of this and accordian pleat it (Steps 3 and 4). Roll up the rest from the bottom (Step 5). Put a rubber band around the bundle and drop it into your pocket.
2. On your first exit, take out the scarf and remove the band. Hide the scarf in your hand and enter. Bring your hands together and grasp the buttons. When you separate your hands, the scarf will open all at once and seem to appear magically in mid-air.