

Ken Sonkin's Punch Line Delivered Wordlessly

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MIME is to stand-up comedy as Barry Manilow is to music: the butt of jokes, derided as a substitute for real talent. The notion of a mime's successfully headlining major comedy clubs nationwide is unthinkable. Except for Ken Sonkin, who tops the bill at high-end rooms from coast to coast, has an A & E Comedy special to his credit, and has been "assisted" onstage by celebrities ranging from Ronnie Lott to Queen Elizabeth. And all without uttering a sound.

"I wish I had a dime for every club owner who said, 'We're gonna pay to see a comedian who doesn't talk?'" But the owner of The Ice House in L.A., Bob Fisher, says Ken holds the record for the most standing ovations there.

Sonkin, of course, is not a classic white-face-and-invisible-props mime. His act is closer to vaudeville: comedy-magic set to music and delivered with gestures, body language and such constant-motion energy that words would only slow things down. What lifts it to headline status is his sheer virtuosity and mesmerizing audience control and manipulation.

Sonkin's magic illusions are punched up by his relentless physicality, by music that ranges from Bruce Springsteen to classical to the Twilight Zone theme, and his variety of stage personae: macho, vulnerable, lascivious, Sinatra...

Equally important, his illusions don't have to compete with stage patter. Other magician's maintain the flow with verbal cleverness that often upstages their tricks; Sonkin maintains it with ceaseless activity

-- posturing, cavorting, dancing -- in a kind of comedy enduro that is often acrobatic.

When he seeks volunteers, for example, he leaves the stage via soaring leaps into the audience. Sometimes he lands wrong. "I've broken so many bones," he sighs. "Feet twice, fingers twice; you think Marcel Marceau ever broke a foot? One show, I cut my hand on a railing, it was covered in blood. I wrapped it in a bandanna and finished the show. The only time I've stopped a show in 15 years was the knee."

The knee in question carries three long scars and two metal pins, souvenirs of ligaments torn at Bally's in Las Vegas. That sidelined him for four months.

Mobility is the key to his real "magic" -- a command of the audience that, given his silence, is absolutely uncanny. "I think because my act is harmless and not out to embarrass anyone, people *want* to come up on stage." But also because he bounds into the crowd and hauls people onstage before they can even react.

Once there, blushing matrons and burly bubbas, the wary and dignified and shy, find themselves donning paper hats, passing invisible joints, taking a sword through their neck, or otherwise playing along, all without verbal instructions and all timed to specific musical segments. His skill at weaving about 15 perfect strangers into each show, on schedule and on cue, is something to behold.

He scouts each crowd beforehand, eliminating the physically disabled, the intoxicated, the rowdy and those he's seen at previous shows. "It's better when it's spontaneous, when they have no preconceptions." Sometimes the surprise

is on him. There was the bearded biker who, when Sonkin pulled a toy gun, opened his jacket to reveal a *real* .44 Magnum; and the Houston man who, during the handcuffs bit, produced a badge. "He was an undercover cop." More typical was pro football star Ronnie Lott, caught flat-footed when Sonkin returned his watch he'd sneaked of Lott's wrist.

Sonkin's current Bay Area run will be his last for a while, as he returns to his other love, the theatre. He began doing his club act at age 17 in Cleveland, but then majored in acting at Ohio State and moved here in 1982 to go through the master's degree program at the American Conservatory Theatre. To get through graduate school, he continued performing at Pier 39 as a mime.

In 1986 he was voted the city's top street performer, and performed for Queen Elizabeth at the British Consulate during her visit here. In 1986, he began headlining, primarily at club owners' insistence. He then received concert bookings, opening for Red Skelton, The Drifters, Manhattan Transfer, and Howie Mandel. Sonkin now splits his time between comedy and the theatre, as an actor and director. In August, he begins six weeks in "Comedy of Errors" at the Marin Shakespeare Festival, playing twin brothers.

Whatever his goals, he's already accomplished the remarkable -- raising mime to the level of stand-up legitimacy. "I've been called a 'modern-day Harpo Marx' which is a great compliment because he is one of my heroes. I've been kinda lucky. I jump around and act silly, and it's kinda like Steve Martin's old line: "I get paid for doing *this!*"