

HOW TO BE AS FUNNY AS ART BUCHWALD

by Art Levine

How do you become a famous American humorist? To help us answer this question, we're proud to present an exclusive excerpt from the third volume of Art Levine's best-selling autobiographical trilogy, Born Funny, published in 1995.

As I sit here on the beach at Martha's Vineyard, I often pause to reflect on my life as America's most adored humorist. Though my days now are filled with delivering lectures or attending autograph parties for my latest book, *The Yuk Stops Here*, making it to the top of the humor heap was no picnic.

When I first started out as a freelance humor writer, it was hard getting published. I lived in a tiny attic room in a boarding house, and, boy, the cockroaches there were so tough they hired an exterminator to poison me. Even the rats carried guns—that's how tough the neighborhood was. I was so poor, I had to do all my window shopping at Woolworth's.

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Photo: Kathleen Koenig

But seriously, having just arrived in Washington from my hometown of Brooklyn, my head was full of big dreams about being a great humorist—just like my boyhood idols, Shecky Greene and Joey Bishop. For awhile, in fact, things looked good. I was able to sell political satires to important, mass-market publications like *The Washington Monthly* and *Foreign Affairs*. Sometimes I even got paid for them.

Yet even at my best, it was never easy coming up with gag ideas. I'd go to my local cafe and sit with other impoverished artists for hours, nursing a beer, waiting for the Muse to strike. It was a long wait: I came up with a funny idea only every three months or so. After awhile, the time between gag ideas stretched to six months and finally a year.

Nothing seemed to work—not even a visit to the little-known Department of Humor in Washington. When they told me they had no extra gags to lend me, I left the office despondent. I started panhandling. “Excuse me sir,” I would plead, “can you lend me a dollar so I can buy a used copy of Bennett Cerf’s *Treasury of America’s Favorite Jokes*?”

Then I realized there was already someone in Washington doing what I wanted to do—Art Buchwald. He’d written 20 books, 5,000 newspaper columns, and he appeared in 550 newspapers throughout the world. Three times a week, he wrote an uproariously funny column that everyone loved. I hadn’t read him regularly since Nixon resigned, but then I started looking at what he did with new appreciation. I decided to approach him for advice.

He wasn’t easy to reach. He was always coming out of some dinner party or restaurant surrounded by admirers. Finally, I caught his attention when he was leaving Jean Louis, a fancy French restaurant. Buchwald was wearing a loud plaid sports coat, smoking a cigar, and cracking jokes. I was unshaven, dressed in blue jeans, and a bit shaky from hunger.

“Mr. Buchwald, I don’t understand it,” I wailed, falling to my knees in front of him. “We’re both Jewish, we’re both funny, and we’re both named Art. Yet you’re a rich and famous humorist, and I can’t even pay my rent. What’s your secret?”

He took a long drag on his cigar. “It’s like this, kid. You’ve got to learn a few basic tricks if you want to survive as a humorist—and from the looks of things, you’d better learn them fast. Here’s what I’ll do for you—I’ll give you a free copy of my latest book, *Laid Back in Washington with Art Buchwald*. It was on *The New York*

Times bestseller list for three months. Read that, along with my recent newspaper clips, and you’ll find everything you need to know.”

“Gee, thanks, Mr. Buchwald,” I said. “I’ll never forget you for this.”

“Well, if you *don’t* like the book, remember who wrote it—Russell Baker,” he quipped.

But his columns were everything he promised, and more. The first thing I noticed was the brilliant way he conceived a premise—and telegraphed it to his readers in the first two paragraphs. Then he spent the next 600 words or so padding out the idea. But how did he think up his hilarious gag ideas? Looking over his columns I realized he either (a) exaggerated wildly or (b) stood a news event on its head. He also created funny metaphors from common figures of speech and well-worn, overused clichés. What a fool I’d been, waiting for the Muse when all the material I needed was coming to me every morning in the newspaper!!

I saw all of these techniques at work in his rib-tickling article on the economy, “A Light at the End of the Recession.” As usual, Buchwald wasted no time setting up the premise:

“All the president’s men keep saying the recession will bottom out very soon. It is an act of faith with them that, if the people would just have patience, Ronald Reagan’s economic plans will work. I was skeptical until I spoke to one of Reagan’s advisers. He was in a deep pit, and I leaned over the edge and yelled down to him, ‘What do you see?’

“‘It seems to be bottoming out,’ he yelled up.

“‘How do you know?’

“‘I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.’

“‘Where is it coming from?’

“‘The latest indicators,’ he shouted.”

As I continued to read this column, I wondered whether Buchwald would run out of clichés and obvious metaphors before it ended. I needn’t have worried. Buchwald not only paced himself brilliantly, but knew how to leave ‘em laughing. It was as if there were a drummer’s rim shot being sounded at the end of the column:

“A voice came from the dark: ‘I just hit a slight depression.’

“‘Are we in a depression?’ I screamed fearfully.

“‘No, I thought I had stepped on a place that was bottoming out and I didn’t see the hole. I’m OK now. I’m holding on to a price indicator that shows we are on very solid footing.’

“‘Thank God. No recession is worth the loss of a Republican economist.’”

Inspired by Buchwald, I began thumbing

through my Sunday paper. It was a maiden effort, but promising; with just one edition of *The Washington Post*, I created a week's worth of column ideas. I made a list, with the real headlines in one column and the column ideas in the other:

"Out of Work in Flint, Mich."	<i>The recession hits Palm Springs. Families cut back by selling their extra Rolls Royces and firing servants. One resident, Archibald Moneybags, threatens to leap from his eighth floor condominium.</i>
"Political Consultants: New Kingmakers Work Their Magic"	<i>King Arthur, worried that Sir Lancelot's popularity is rising, orders Merlin to invent the first political commercial.</i>
"Sex, Drugs Probed on Capitol Hill"	<i>Outbreak of congressional virtue stuns Washington. Secretaries and pages report they haven't been propositioned in over two months, threaten to quit.</i>
"Video Games Disrupt Schooling, Parents Say"	<i>The New York City school system announces that it's converting all schools into video arcades. "We hope to keep student interest with such games as Math-Man and Historoids," says one official, Millicent Atari.</i>

It certainly seemed easy enough to think up premises for humor columns. But producing an *entire column* based on a single gag concept was another matter. When I tried my hand at it I ran out of steam after the first few paragraphs because I couldn't come up with any more material.

Not so with Buchwald. But how did he do it? Looking closely at "The Light at the End of the Recession," it suddenly dawned on me. Buchwald peppered the economist with such questions as "How do you know?" and "Where is it coming from?" By using this question-and-answer format, Buchwald freed himself from such tasks as creating the transition sentences or imaginative scenes that I naively thought were needed.

Best of all, each piece of dialogue allowed him to start a new paragraph, bringing him ever closer to the magic 600-word mark or its equivalent in column inches. Many of these space-killing bits of dialogue have since become hardy components of my own humor factory. I still chuckle at these

classic quotations drawn from his columns:

"How do you know?"

"Explain how that works."

"How do I do that?"

"I don't understand."

His book and recent columns were filled with other equally valuable pointers. One of his favorite devices, I noticed, involved the Expert with the Funny Name. It's a great way to win extra laughs. For many years, of course, our country's greatest humorists—among them, Buddy Hackett—have used funny names to punch up their work. But Buchwald was the true master of this technique. For example, in a column on Al Haig's business prospects after leaving office, he named the literary agent who immediately telephones Haig to offer him a book deal "Fast Fingers Dundy." Buchwald often went one step further, creating an imaginary expert with a funny name and then "interviewing" him about a particular topic. (The interview format, of course, allowed him to use plenty of dialogue filler.) So in one column he interviewed "Vladimir Gluck," the purported inventor of the junk telephone call. Sometimes Buchwald topped even that by attaching the expert to an imaginary agency or business that *also* had a funny name. In a column on the student shortage, an advertising executive, Mr. Honeybee, made a presentation to the board of Desperate Tech University. I'm forever grateful to him for teaching me such handy short-cuts to laughter.

Buchwald also showed me how to use the ancient technique of metaphor to amuse readers. In a piece called "Put on Your Lifejackets," Buchwald compared the country under President Carter to a boat called Ship of State:

"The captain [Jimmy Carter] said, 'Let's drift until I talk to the crew.' The captain grabbed the speaker. 'Now hear this. This is your captain speaking. We are headed into rocky waters and I want all congressional chief petty officers topside immediately.'

"A surly band of CPOs came topside. 'Gentlemen, I need your help. I can't steer this ship alone.'

"'Where are we heading, Captain?' one of them wanted to know.

"'I'm not sure, but I'd like to stay on course.'

"'If you don't know where we're going, how can we help you stay on course?'"

It took me a few careful readings to realize that this unusual metaphor was actually a sharp satiric thrust at *Carter's vacillation and incompetence*.

By now, I'd read enough great writing to realize

that I wanted Art Buchwald to be my mentor. I hoped to write a few columns for him, learn from his critiques, and, perhaps, see my articles published, even if they ran under his by-line. I sent him pieces I thought he'd use—such as a new federal loan program to subsidize teenagers' phone bills and the Army's effort to recruit more women by giving them charge accounts at Bloomingdale's—but he kept rejecting them as not up to par.

Finally, I hit the jackpot. I took as my premise, as Buchwald always did, something that was widely publicized and an obvious target. In this case, it was President Reagan's image problems with the poor. I used all of Buchwald's techniques to write the column, and, to my delight, he ran it without any changes. Here's what was published:

The Poor's Best Friend

President Reagan is developing a reputation as someone who doesn't care about the poor. So the administration is launching a counteroffensive to spruce up the president's image.

To see how the program is going, I visited my friend I. M. Hypocrite at the Department of Human Suffering (formerly the Department of Health and Human Services). As I entered the room, I saw Ronald Reagan dressed up like Santa Claus, giving out bags of money to poor people. My friend was standing at the side filming the action with a camera.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"We're filming a public service announcement to help President Reagan's poor public image concerning the poor," Hypocrite answered me.

"But why are you showing President Reagan as Santa Claus giving out money to poor people?" I asked.

"Because we're trying to show everybody what a generous man the president is," he said. "Our motto is going to be: If you give our economic program a chance, every day will be like Christmas!"

"Do you think that will work?" I asked.

"Sure it will," Hypocrite said. "Reagan is such a great actor, he can fool anybody." He turned to the president and shouted, "Cut, Mr. President, that was great! We'll film the next spot in a few minutes."

"What other commercials do you have planned?"

"We're going to have Nancy and Ronald donate all their china and designer clothes to an orphanage."

"But how will all this actually help the poor who are being hurt by the president's economic program?"

"It will make them feel better, because they know their president cares about them."

"But what if they're still hungry and miserable?" I asked.

"Well," said Mr. Hypocrite with a grin, "we'll let them eat cake."

The rest is history. Over the years, I anonymously contributed dozens of columns. Then, when Buchwald retired in 1990, I just took over the

column. I'm proud to say that few people noticed the difference. The column is now more popular than ever, syndicated in almost every major newspaper except *The New York Times*, where Flora Lewis now holds down the "humor" beat.

Long gone are those early days when trying to be funny made me miserable. Here's my typical day:

I get up around 10 a.m. in my swank Georgetown home. In bed next to me is my sexy, blond wife, also a published author. At breakfast I glance through the newspaper for possible story ideas and tear out a few articles to stuff in my shirt pocket. After arriving at my downtown office, I pick up one of the articles I ripped from the paper that morning and knock off my column in 15 minutes. That's what I like about my job—it's indoors, and there's no heavy lifting. Then I'm off to the bank to cash my check from last night's lecture. The next stop is a glamorous French restaurant to meet my friends Ben Bradlee Jr. and Edward Bennett Williams III for lunch. We gossip about politics, real estate, and how much we miss the Redskins.

Sometimes at lunch one of the officials I've satirized comes up to say hello. Just the other day, for example, I did a column making fun of the administration's decision to ship nuclear weapons and ten prominent American Jews to Libya in exchange for a year's worth of free oil. I called the column "Let's Make a Deal," and portrayed the new secretary of state as a game-show host. At lunch the next day I was flattered when the secretary himself came over and asked me to autograph his copy. "You're my kind of Hebe," he quipped, and we all had a good laugh. Being a world-famous columnist is so much fun I sometimes can't believe that what I do is really "work."

Of course, people sometimes ask me, "Art, have you ever worried about burning out, waking up one morning unable to come up with anything more than just another funny name?" I'd be lying if I said I haven't. After all, no one, not even a comic genius like Art Buchwald, can reasonably be expected to be hilarious three times a week.

But recently I found a way to stop worrying about The Bomb—the Comedy Bomb that is. Thanks to the marvels of computer science, I can now take any news story, and by feeding it directly into my home computer come up with an uproariously funny column—every time.

I sometimes wonder what my beloved mentor would have thought about all this. But I think he'd be proud. Now the Buchwald humor column truly is an institution that will live forever. ■

Lead Astray:

HOW THE EPA LET ONE GET AWAY

BY NANCY MADLIN

The Environmental Protection Agency has been getting a lot of bad press lately, and for good reason. With Jim Watt sound-alike Anne Gorsuch at its helm, hardly a week passes without another report of EPA perfidy. Perhaps it's a "voluntary compliance" regulation allowing industries to monitor their own dangerous carcinogens, a relaxation of standards for deadly chemicals, or yet another crippling budget cut in EPA's enforcement staff.

But while I'm as upset with the EPA as the next person, what I find disturbing is the implication in all this that Gorsuch somehow has taken an agency that was once a crusading, vigilant watchdog of the public's health and safety and turned it into a compliant lap dog of industry. This view pervades most press accounts of the EPA, from lengthy *New York Times* exposes to the despondent EPA bureaucrat in "Doonesbury" who perched himself on a window ledge and threatened to jump because of Gorsuch's policies. The truth,

however, is even less comforting. As watchdogs go, this one has *always* acted as if it were half blind, lame, and afraid of its own shadow.

I speak from personal experience. During the Carter presidency—an era that now seems enshrined in the collective memory as some sort of EPA "Golden Age"—I was a public information specialist in EPA's Chicago office, where I kept busy writing press releases announcing "notices of violation," enforcement orders, and fines the agency issued to companies breaking air pollution laws. Most of us were proud, if not a bit self-righteous about our work. While other federal employees might be shuffling memos back and forth in some bureaucratic backwater, we could boast of serving a noble cause: the war against environmental degradation.

Yet I always had a vague feeling that despite all the releases I was writing, something was amiss. Were the fines threatened by the agency paid in full, or even paid at all? Were the enforcement orders effective, or were they later watered down, or simply ignored? I could never tell, because, not

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