

On Writing: To write funny, be yourself

The Logger talks about how he finds humor in life, and offers his tips for performing that work for writing as well

By Rusty DeWees

When folks ask me how I come up with the story ideas, situations and characters I use in my show, I tell them about one of my favorites characters, Craig.

While driving along one day, a buddy of mine and I saw a three-legged dog running along the side of the road. My buddy said, "Hey, look at that one-legged dog."

He meant three-legged dog of course, but his Freudian slip made me think, a one-legged dog, hmmm. I thought about how interesting and unusual a one-legged dog's life would be. I imagined a one-legged dog doing dog things like playing fetch, chasing cars and even sitting the way dogs do, propped up by their front legs. I thought if a dog's remaining leg was one of it's front legs, and you did that "shake-your-paw" thing, the dog would fall forward on its face.

My friend's Freudian slip was plenty enough seed for me to build an entire story, and in doing so I created Craig, the one-legged dog, and his owner, Liddle:

"I got a friend named Liddle. We call him Liddle, cause he's liddle, and he says very liddle, n' he's got liddle eye's, liddle teeth, a liddle bit a hair up on top of his head sticks up a liddle. But mostly the reason I call him Liddle, is cause don't know matter what's goin' on around him, he's always got a liddle smile goin'."

Liddle is an amalgamation of two guys I used to work with. I borrowed the physicality from one of the guys, the mannerisms from the other.

To memorize Liddle's description and characteristics for performance, I add a healthy dose of my own rhythm. When we hear a good impressionist, it's the rhythm of the subject that our ear first recognizes and tells us, "Yes, I recognize that voice." So when I write, especially for comedy, I write keeping rhythm and cadence in mind as much as I can.

Then I got Craig and Liddle down on paper. (Never fail to write down good lines and ideas, straight or funny, as soon as they come to you, because they may never come to you in the exact form they came to you initially.)

The story, as they say, wrote itself.

(No it didn't, that's just something people say about something they write that happened to come to them easily; The story didn't write itself, I wrote it, but keep

in mind, if you're writing, and there's a steady stream of thoughts and ideas flowing, DO NOT STOP).

The best thing about the story, which ultimately is about forgiveness, is that although there was an unlimited amount of comedy material available there, I was able to fold in several serious themes that helped carry the story beyond what folks listening might expect. In fact, the serious notes helped to raise the humor level well beyond what I could have expected.

One of the most refreshing aspects of writing comedic stories for performance is that it's impossible to do wrong. Whatever you write is right. There are no rules. The same goes with performing stories you've written. How you perform your stories is specific to you. It is what it is.

The moment you walk on stage, or up to a microphone, is the moment your story starts, and it's also the moment you become interesting to your audience. Every breath you take is specific to you; every breath you take is interesting.

In performing, don't be afraid to fail. If as you walk across stage you unintentionally trip and fall, commit to it. Trip and fall better than you've ever tripped and fallen before. Try to make your trip and fall so memorable, the audience will leave the theater exclaiming, "Yes the singers were great, but did you see that story teller guy trip and fall? I've never seen a better trip or fall. He must have studied."

When on stage, breathe, relax and be yourself 100 percent. If you put barriers up, and most of us do when we're in front of an audience, you become something other than your true self, and you become less interesting.

The reason people say you should never work with kids and animals is because kids and animals are always true to the moment, and therefore, always interesting. If a dog is frightened, he's frightened. If a director tells a frightened dog to act happy, the dog won't be able to do it. The same goes with little kids. So I guess as performers we should try to emulate dogs and little kids, and just do what comes naturally.

Now all that holds true about writing and writing comedy if you think about it.

Write what comes naturally. If you think something is funny, there's a 90 percent chance others will too, so write in down. Write comedy from the tiny compartments of your imagination that you rarely use, and don't be safe, because a lot of good comedy is stuff that people wouldn't say themselves, but they love hearing it.

Write with discipline and write regularly. Write for yourself, because you'll be your toughest critic.

If you do those few things, will your material be interesting? Yes.

Will it be entertaining?

Well, that's a whole other sack a wax.



Rusty DeWees, "The Logger"

Photo by Paul Rogers, Stowe, Vt.

Liddle and Craig

(The ending...)

This segment follows The Logger's intro explaining that Liddle ran over his dog, Craig, with a lawn mower. Craig was left with one leg and gets hauled around on a coasting saucer. Spelling is as The Logger speaks it. For audio of this story, go to www.youngwritersproject.org

Craig's favorite time is the fall of the year. That's when Liddle takes him for long afternoon drags through the woods. Craig likes that.

Liddle set's him down onto his old flyin' saucer, the same one he used to go snow sliding when he was a boy.

Craig likes that.

They go up the same long steep winding loggin' road every time.

Craig likes that.

Craig stays alert all the way up, smellin' of the fall air and fallin' leaves, and of Liddle's old gray tattered Johnson Woolen Mills huntin' coat that he'd just barely gotten out from the camphor wood chest the night before. That's the same chest that Craig oft takes catnaps atop.

The smells of the fall drags; Craig likes that.

And when they get to the top of the loggin' road, and Liddle gathers Craig up an' into his arms cause it's too hard to control the saucer on the way-down-through.

Craig likes that.

And it's the *kathwamp, kathwamp, kathwampin'* of Liddle's footsteps, as he bucks inertia headed down the hill with the load, combined with the warm afternoon sunbeams streakin' through the tall spruces and the now half-foliat-

The author

Rusty DeWees, "The Logger," is a performing artist and writer living in Elmore. He grew up in Stowe, played basketball at Champlain College and lived in New York City for 11 years where he worked at an auction house and acted as much as he could in theater, movies and television.

He wrote "The Logger" while he was on the set of Patrick Swayze's feature film, "Black Dog," and has been doing his one-man shows for seven years throughout New England. He also participates in more than 50 benefits a year for a variety of charities.

He handles all the tasks of his business — distribution, marketing, producing, etc. His third DVD, "The Logger #3" will be released this spring. For more, go to www.thelogger.com

ed hard woods, n' down and onta Craig's soft, shiny, button buck brown fur, that put's Craig ta sleep, in Liddle's arms. Craig likes that.

And when they get back home and Liddle sets Craig n' down an' into his dog bed, and goes and gets his favorite dog toy, and set's in between his remaining leg and floppy ear and pats him on the head three times and leaves the room while Craig lies asleep, just enough to be enjoyin' the rest, and just enough to be enjoyin' the tender loving care that Liddle has given to him.

Craig likes that.

But he didn't like it when he got run over by the gol darn lawn mower.



Life is a gas

Rusty DeWees, aka The Logger, knows humor and knows how to find it in everyday life — and a slip of the tongue.

Today Rusty writes about humor, both performing it and writing it. His advice? Be yourself and take a chance. In The Young Writers Project on Page 3C, Rusty reveals the secret behind how he thought up one of his more famous bits: The one-legged dog.

And a few students know humor as well: Today's page in-

cludes a few jokes and a wonderful yarn about trying — but failing — to pass the dreaded driving test from a Mount Abraham High School student. For additional student work — and audio of Rusty's story — go to www.youngwritersproject.org.

Meanwhile, the deadline for this week's prompts — "scared" and "I ran through the woods ..." falls on Wednesday. Get your entries in by going to www.youngwritersproject.org.

