

Feature



Mastering the Art of Ceremony

Kevin Roche*

Observations on being an effective host for Masquerades and similar olio offerings.

Introduction

When I was invited to be Master of Ceremonies for the Masquerade at the 73rd World Science Fiction Convention (Sasquan) it was an opportunity I could not refuse. For thirty-odd years, from all sides of the stage and competition, I have watched many people perform as the host to our peculiar artform. Some were famous, some less so, but all of them that I count among the best MCs take (or took) the role seriously. I'm proud to count many of them (Phil and Kaja Foglio, Susan de Guardiola, Marty Gear, and others) among the people I call friends. I was thrilled to have the chance.

And terrified. A good MC is appreciated; a bad one can live forever in infamy.

The invitation did not come out of thin air. In addition to masquerade, my resume as a performer has included living history events, a bit of drag, and lots of appearances at bars in local queer community events.

Along the way I learned that I'm not a very good actor, but that I can be a good live entertainer. I also found myself the host at a significant number of those little shows in bars. I'd MCed a number of masquerades at local or regional conventions, but Worldcon had become the stage I aspired to. I leapt at the chance to host in Spokane, and I hope to be invited back to the podium in the future.



Sasquan 2015 masquerade MC Kevin Roche announces entries.
Photo: [John O'Halloran](#).

Philosophy

Many of the community and "open" drag shows are much like a masquerade -- you never know quite what's going to turn up on stage that week, and if you are the host, somehow you have to keep things moving along so the audience stays engaged, the performers get their moment in the limelight, and nobody dies.

Framework & Glue: the MC Provides Continuity

All these shows are are a sort of olio -- the vaudeville term for a show comprised of a variety of acts that aren't connected to each other in any way except for temporal propinquity. The master of ceremonies (or host, which is far easier to type and a term I will probably use interchangeably with MC) provides both the framework in which those acts occur and the glue that ties them together. For the audience, the host provides the continuity for the entire show. I find that approaching the role from that point of view gives one a good handle from which to grasp the entire job.

It's Not About You -- But It's All on You

This is one of the most important balances to strike as a host. *The audience is at the masquerade to see the costumes and*

their presentations; they are not there to see you. You are not there to be a stand-up comedian (although you may need quick wits and a ready joke), you are there to help the entrants shine on stage. Have you ever been at a show where the MC had to make a smart-aleck remark about every entry that crossed the stage, just to prove how clever they were? They missed the point of what they were doing. Help the performers show their best and you will be appreciated.

One needn't be bland and boring (my zebra mohawk certainly isn't, nor was Marty Gear's "Uncle Vlad," nor the rollicking jocularly that is my eternal impression of the Foglios) but one does need to cultivate



Marty Gear, legendary masquerade MC, as "Uncle Vlad." at 2009 Arisia.
Photo: [Daniel P. Noé](#).

the art of self-effacement when someone else's performance should have the focus. The MC isn't lacking for the spotlight after all; it comes back to you between every act!

Preparing for the Show

Before Starting -- Ask Questions and Be Informed!

I have found one key to being a good MC involves homework long before the show ("long" is a relative term, of course, if you find yourself an emergency replacement on the day of the event.). This needn't be onerous nor take a long time, but it can make things easier for you and on the show director, the performers and the audience.

Talk to the show director about the feeling and traditions of the event. Is it generally wise-cracking, or more serious? Is this a strongly-themed competition? What's the age range of the audience, and the general rating of the show? (I have MCed R and X-rated shows; the audience does expect a different attitude and vocabulary from the host then.) Was there a particularly good or particularly bad experience with an MC in recent years -- and for the latter, what went wrong? (If the last MC resorted to "dead baby"

jokes every time they needed to stretch and grossed out everyone, one might change one's approach to using a running gag as filler, for instance.)

Knowing all these things can help you keep the audience engaged, or more importantly, realize that perhaps you should decline the invitation to host and suggest someone else.

Being a good MC involves homework long before the show.

Rules and Standard Presentations

Similarly, for a competition, get your hands on the rules and study them. Find out if interaction with the MC is expected/allowed/forbidden and be prepared as appropriate. If you are terrible at improvisation but will be expected to interact, this will give you the chance to prepare appropriate lines in advance.

Find out what a "standard presentation" will be like for this contest (entrance, exit, etc). If someone freezes on stage or gets lost you can be prepared to help them get unstuck or guided offstage. If you haven't thought about it you won't be prepared for it. If you can find out what the stage layout and contestant traffic pattern will be like, that will also give you a feel for the amount of filler material you might need to prepare.

Forms

If you can have a say in the designs of the forms you will be looking at, hurrah! Every person I know who hosts has their own particular way of looking at a script, but I've found a few things in common that make things flow better in a masquerade.

First, a separate page for each entry. That might seem obvious, but I've once or twice been handed printed-out scripts that compiled all the acts' information into a reflowed continuous document. That makes it difficult to rearrange things.

Second, just enough information -- the things you are supposed to say, that the audience wants to hear, without extraneous information.

Some contests use a multi-copy form, so judges, tech, MC, all get their copy of the same thing. In that case, highlighters and permanent markers are your best friend.

If I am offered a hand in designing the form, I like to see:

- Entry number
- Entry class (division, age group, etc., as appropriate to the competition)
- Entry Title with a giant indicator whether it is to be read as part of the introduction
- Intro text
- On-stage text (with space to note cues)
- Exit text
- Credits

The image shows a registration form titled "BayCon 2009 Masquerade Registration Form" with "MC Instructions". It includes a checkbox for "Entry title" (read at intro), sections for "Read before entrance", "Read while performing", and "Read on exit" (all with "Script:" labels), a row of checkboxes for "Novice", "Journeyman", "Open", "Young Fan", and "Exhibition", and fields for "Presented by:" and "Created by:". At the bottom, it says "Entry #:" and "Page. 2".

MC page of registration form. Design: Philip and Kathe Gust.

If all those things are on a single page in the same order every time, it makes it much easier for you as MC to develop a consistent rhythm announcing the contestants. I like to 3-hole punch the forms and put them in a clean black or leather binder, with each new entry on the left. In the event there is a separate on-stage script page, I can punch it on the other side and put it next to the form, so both pages are open in front of me at once for that entry.

An especially useful trick passed on to me from Marty Gear is to use different colored file flags and highlighters to accent entries which require special attention, such as special cues, extra time required for setup, or a warning that the MC has a part to play in the presentation. This makes it easier to spot such entries as they arise in the flow of the show and be ready to act if needed. If there are pre-set events (announcements, guest appearances, etc.) in addition to the contestants, they can be flagged and inserted in the appropriate place in the binder, so it is ready to flip through in real time.

Rehearsal

Not every masquerade has a rehearsal, but if there is one, as MC I want to be there. If you are on other program items at a convention where you are MC, make it clear to the program department that the rehearsal is part of your program commitment!

(As an aside, practice appearing surprised. You may know what's supposed to happen next, but as the audience's guide you don't want to look bored.)

Being at rehearsal lets you ask questions in advance -- name pronunciation, cues, who may have trouble seeing, who might perhaps freeze on stage, and be prepared to keep the show flowing smoothly.

If MC interaction is allowed and requested by an entrant, walk through it physically rather than just talk it out. If there

is a prop for you that is not on hand for rehearsal, find something roughly the right size to substitute. The muscle memory will make your lines and notes make more sense during the show.

Notes

Obviously, if you are at the rehearsal, you will be taking LOTS of notes, but if the director and crew are amenable, and you are comfortable doing so, you may wish to offer “notes” or suggestions that can smooth out a presentation. It may be as simple as offering reassurance that you are there to help them look good, or it might be a suggestion to change a stage position or timing slightly. If you do this, consider it for everyone (don’t play favorites). Also, offer to make suggestions rather than simply spouting them off.

You may not feel comfortable suggesting changes to a contestant’s blocking (or the director may not want you to). Over the years, the most frequent suggestions I have made, however, have been edits to too-long scripts, which is something which does bear directly on your role as MC. That may be a middle ground you are comfortable with.

Again, the goal here is to help the entrants shine to the best of their ability; if you spot an obvious mistake in a presentation that can be corrected, suggesting a change will keep the focus on their costumes rather than poor staging, and

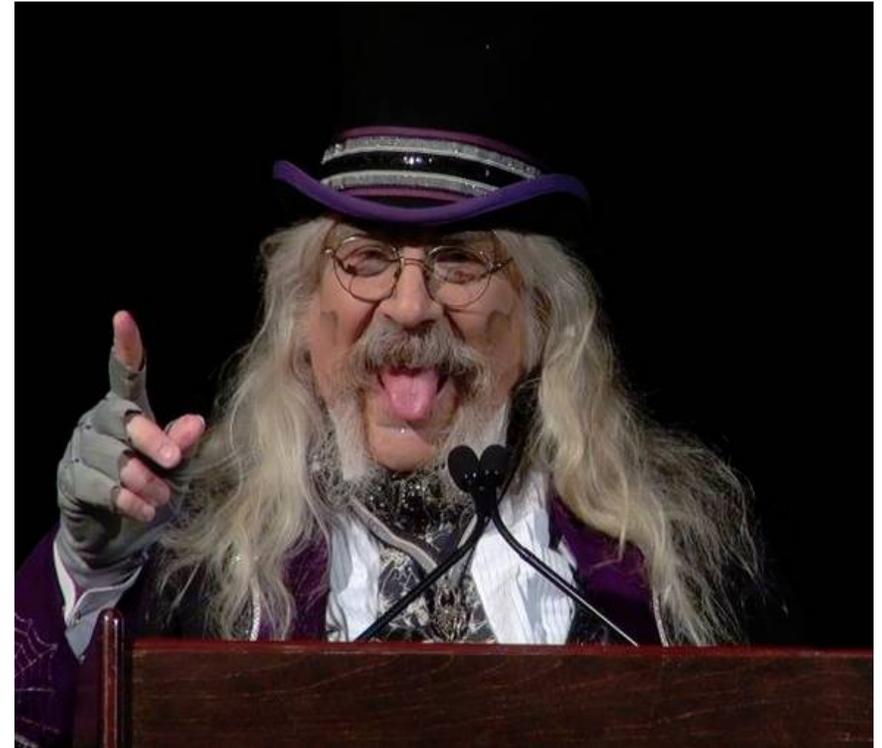
it will elicit a better performance for the audience.

Sometimes it’s as simple as suggesting they walk a “figure 8” path on the stage rather than zooming from one wing to the other, so the audience will actually have an opportunity to see their creation. Sometimes it is as simple as suggesting reading the credits in different order.

An example I will offer is the Wonder Woman transformation costume that appeared on stage at Sasquan. I offered to introduce her as “Diana Prince” and then announce the title as “Wonder Woman” after her entry. That set the audience up to cheer and applaud even more when the trademark “twirling” music started and she did the transformation out of Diana’s uniform on stage. Leaving the reveal to her and the music made everything more fun in the show.

Learn Names

This bears repeating. A tremendous advantage of the rehearsal time is learning names and weird pronunciations, plus any particular inflections an entrant may wish



MC Ricky Dick has fun with Costume-Con 32 audience. Source: [Facebook](#).

you to lend to part of their script. (I still have trouble pronouncing “Daenerys Targaryen” – and I’m always secretly thrilled when I get to switch to my sports arena “Voice of God” inflection in a script. Both require that I actually practice before the show to get them right.)

No Rehearsal?

Some masquerades don’t actually get rehearsal time. In that case, get the forms as early as you can and scan them for likely problems. Pull out that highlighter and mark the critical information on the forms. Use a different color for pronunciation question



Susan de Guardiola at the mic. Chicon 7, 2012. Source: [Chicon 7](#).

marks, and get a chance to check and note them phonetically. Use the different colored flags and pens to encode as much information as you can into the forms.

If at all possible, get backstage before the show starts to say hi to the contestants and assure them your job is to make them look their best. If you can actually walk the room/line/however they are assembled and check in with each entry, even better.

When there are young children in a show, I usually ask their parents to introduce me to them and then talk directly to them for a moment, in hopes that they will trust me a little more if they get stuck or scared. I may be the only person they can see when they are actually on the stage.

Stay Clean & Sober

This should be a no-brainer, but I've seen enough video recordings of drunken "celebrity" hosts at masquerades to include it here. Wait until the show is over to party. Talk with the Masquerade Director or the House Manager to make sure there's a plan to get water to you if needed during the show. That water delivery can actually be part of your filler schtick if necessary, like Wil McCarthy's "martinis" delivered on cue during the show at Denvention 3.

Plan for interruptions

Establish a procedure for getting messages to you as the show progresses. Sometimes it is possible to wear an in-ear monitor for this (and cues) but it can also be more distracting than useful. I personally prefer having someone dressed simply in black quietly walk up and hand me a note or let me take a step away from the mic to deliver the message in a low but normal voice (whispering carries surprisingly far!).

I've actually played that role at two Worldcons, sitting in the wings to receive messages via the stage intercom and then delivering them politely to the MC.

Practice on the microphone

If at all possible, get some time with the crew and the mic you will be using. There is no substitute for experience on a microphone, but learn where you have to stand and face to be picked up by the microphone for the show. Also learn how not to be picked up by the mic. Have someone listen to how "P"s "S"s and ending "G"s sound when you read something.

With a good system, the crew can adjust for you, but if not, you may need to consciously modify some of your pronunciation techniques, such as making Ps sound a little more like Bs so they don't "pop" on the mic. (If you can't get advance time, pay careful attention when you are doing the opening announcements)

During the show

Here we go. The costumers are lined up, the house is full, you've visited the restroom, adjusted your jacket and

Get backstage before the show starts to say hi to the contestants and assure them your job is to make them look their best.

tie/dress/toga/velvet jumpsuit as appropriate and made sure there is no toilet paper stuck to your shoe. Take 3 full slow breaths and step up to the mic.

Announcements

Every show starts with some sort of boilerplate, the safety announcements, the rules, the judge's introductions, etc. etc. This is your chance to first engage the audience,

establish your normal voice and get a feeling for the venue and its live acoustics. Find a half-dozen places in the house where you can let your gaze alight and appear to make eye contact, including the judges table.

All of this sounds artificial, but since you are actually unlikely to be able to see any actual faces with the spotlight on you, doing this as you start helps the audience achieve some rapport with you as their guide.

Lawful Neutral or Chaotic Good?

On stage, remember you're the one constant factor while all the acts around you are changing. For fairness to the contestants, you're playing a "Lawful Neutral" role, offering each of them support to appear their best (like the rest of the crew). For the audience, you're a force of "Chaotic Good", because they have no idea what's going to happen on stage and you're working to keep



San Diego Comic-Con MCs, Kaja and Phil Foglio,. Source: [SDCC](#).

it entertaining. Balancing those energies is where the art comes in.

Respect

Everyone on stage deserves equally respectful presentation on your part. That doesn't mean you have to be doleful. If they have asked you to participate in a joke, it's ok to look like you are having fun. In fact, whatever your at-the-microphone personality is, jolly, rakish or stately, you should look like you are enjoying and appreciating all the entries!

On occasion there may be a genuine surprise for you (due, perhaps, to collusion on the part of the crew and director.) Jill Eastlake famously let our "Saucer Country" entry prank Paul Cornell with a fake title at LoneStarCon 3.) If that happens, roll with it and be genuine.

It may also happen (thankfully, rarely at a Worldcon) that an entry genuinely offensive to you appears on stage. I cannot offer sage advice on how to respond in such an event, as it depends so much on circumstance and venue. If the entry is allowed within the rules (which you reviewed, remember?) I would suggest you refrain from denouncing it from the microphone. I suspect Miss Manners might forgive you for quietly observing aloud that the masquerade is open to everyone as long as they follow the published rules.



Masquerade MC Tadao Tomomatsu at Anime Conji Con 2013. Source: [Anime Conji Con 2013](#).

Dealing with the Audience

Which brings us to audience interactions. Your on-mic personality may include some give-and-take with the crowd, but disrespect for costumers is a different matter. The conventions I attend rarely have to deal with hecklers in the audience, and two MCs I respect highly, Phil Foglio and Tadao Tomomatsu, have what I've observed to be the best technique for dealing with it. They stop the show and don't resume until respectful attention returns.

In one show Tadao MCed for me (as masquerade director). When there were catcalls directed at a young lady on stage, he explained to the misogynist miscreants that security would escort them off the property if they repeated their behavior. As he did so I was pointing them out to security so it could actually happen. They decided they'd rather watch the rest of the show.

Rhythm

I mentioned rhythm earlier when discussing form design. Every show is different, but over the years as a contestant, director, MC and judge I have developed a definite preference for a standard flow from the MC:

- Entry number (and class/division)
- Intro (if any, including the title, if desired)
- Presentation (if any)
- Exit lines (if any)
- Recap: Entry number, division, category, credits

Those first and last items should be the same format, in the same neutral voice, for every entry. They bracket it clearly for the judges and audience, building that continuity and framework that holds the show together as show and competition. The other parts are where the flavor of each entry informs the MC's performance.

Filling time: humor/schtick/song/interpretive dance?

Ah yes. Stretching. Stalling. I.e., What do you do when the Giant Robot isn't on stage yet? When the crew is trying to get the last of the 10,000 Cherry Blossoms of Youthful Regret off the stage so the rollerblading Ninjadroids of Zintar are less



Sasquan 2015 masquerade MC Kevin, Roche returns after half time break.
Photo: [John O'Halloran](#).

likely to break their necks while reciting
Vogon Poetry via interpretive dance?

Well, first of all, remember that stack of announcements at the beginning of the show? You actually only delivered the ones that had to be heard before the show started. You cleverly kept back some of the others, about post-show events, and sponsorships, and where the shuttle buses would be stopping later, and now you can use them to fill in the gaps!

After that, this is the point at which you have to be quick-witted.

You can tell jokes. Marty had his vampire jokes. Susan had sheep jokes. I have (sometimes) light bulb jokes. They only work however, if you have good comedic timing, or can make hay out of your bad timing or how dumb the jokes are. I don't recommend "dead baby" or "dumb blonde" jokes.

You can tell stories. Generally speaking, if they make real people look dumb/bad, the real person in point should be you.

You can sing a song, or lead the audience in a singalong. I only recommend this if a) you can actually carry a tune a capella and b) the amount of time required is massive or c) it was known in advance you would need a giant gap in time and so you and the crew planned a musical interlude.

If you have some other schtick you're known for, or that you are completely unknown for but actually good enough to astonish the audience, go for it!

But most important, and this took me a very long time to learn:

Don't Be Afraid of Silence

The rests in music are as important as the notes, and the same is true of the flow in a stage production. If there is a momentary delay in the show, it is all right to not say anything.

Similarly, when an entry exits the stage, let the audience response reach its peak and start to fade before you read the “Recap” for the judges. The contestant has earned those applause/laughs/groans and you don’t want to cut them off prematurely.

If the audience is being rowdy, if you have been building rapport, it is possible to silence them by simply waiting, silently, at the mic and delivering the “I’m waiting” look out to the house. (I was amazed the first time I tried this and it worked).

Don’t be afraid of silence. Use it.

Own Your Mistakes

Every so often you will make a mistake. Sometimes it’s mispronouncing the name of one of your oldest friends in front of 3000 people. Sometimes it’s screwing up someone’s punch line.

If you mess up, apologize briefly, correct it and continue. If the error is big enough that you think it might affect the judging, make sure they know it was your mistake. If the contestant wants a reset and do-over, encourage the audience and judges to mentally erase the bad entrance/etc.

Interaction on Stage

This can be a tough one, and it’s why that rehearsal time is important. I include it here because it’s one of the places where those aforementioned mistakes can happen.

And sometimes because in front of an audience everything can go so horribly right, it’s a bit overwhelming. At Sasquan, “Captain Kangaroo” had asked me to meet him at the center of the stage where he would shake my hand (with the one where he wasn’t carrying a bunch of carrots for Bunny Rabbit).

I had mentioned during rehearsal that I used to watch the *Captain Kangaroo* show as a child. When it came time for his entry, when I took his hand he palmed a ping-pong ball into mine. (A favorite sketch involved “Mister Moose” dropping ping-pong balls on the Captain’s head.) I was frankly astonished, and as overcome, as if I’d met Bob Keeshan himself.

Fortunately, the audience was as charmed by his entry as I had been, so I

could take a moment to giddily show off the ping-pong ball to them before taking a deep breath and continuing. (If you’re unfamiliar with the Captain, Google it. Bob Keeshan’s show was charming.)

In any case, it all fit squarely between those rhythmic brackets of the intro and the recap -- where almost anything can happen in a Masquerade.

Be yourself

As a final note, I’ve observed that the best MCs are good at appearing genuinely comfortable as themselves in front of that microphone. They may at times appear to be befuddled, bewildered, or belligerent, but they know that they’re there as both the audience’s guide and as its surrogate. A well-spoken respectful master of ceremonies can lead the way through a show that evokes delight, despair, wonder, magic, science, fantasy, majesty and awe, and the audience will enjoy every minute of the experience, and leave wondering at how the time flew!

Kevin Roche is a sci-fi/fantasy and historical costumer with extensive experience entering, judging, and running masquerades. He was Chair of Costume-Con 26 in 2008. Kevin received the ICG's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007. He is a past ICG vice-president, and is currently president of SiW. Visit his [website](#) to read his blog and view his album of costume photos.



Sasquan 2015 masquerade MC Kevin Roche with "Captain Kangaroo."
Photo: [John O'Halloran](#)