

"RIMSHOT"

Written by

Bruce Kane

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Bruce Kane Productions

Contact information
bk@kaneprod.com

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(Lights Up. A speaker's podium occupies center stage. A drum kit sits stage right.

Professor Lynn Frobisher enters carrying a handful of papers and places them on the podium. Frobisher will read from these notes from time to time as any lecturer might. This allows the monologue to be performed entire script. It also gives it an air of spontaneity. Before talking, Frobisher takes a sip of water from a large glass sitting on the podium. Frobisher will sip from this glass periodically, but must do so without drawing undo attention. It will become clear later on why this is necessary. When Frobisher finally speaks, it is in a delivery that is dry and academic. Frobisher is here to inform not entertain and is definitely not Jerry Seinfeld.)

FROBISHER

Good evening everyone. I am Lynn Frobisher, professor of music here at Haverford College. For tonight's talk I will be traveling somewhat beyond the borders of my expertise and into new territory. I have to say, up front, that in all my years in academia, there is no subject I found to be more involving than the subject we are about to discuss. That subject in American humor and, specifically, one aspect of American humor that not only relates but goes hand in hand with my primary field of expertise, that, as I have said, being music. I feel that, since the subject of tonight's

(MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)

talk is humor, it is only fitting, that I start with a joke.

(Puts on reading glasses. Frobisher will take off the glasses when speaking then put them back on for reading. The following joke is read as example rather than a moment designed to elicit a laugh.)

Here goes. Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(This joke should get little, to no, response)

Obviously, even though well told, that joke did not evoke much in the way of laughter, a chuckle or even a titter, for that matter. Why is that? Is it the joke itself or could it be some something else? Is it missing something? Something you as an audience might have been expecting. Something you can't quite put your finger on. Something that would have helped "land the joke" (*does finger quotes*) as though of us who toil in the vineyards of comedy like to say.

(The DRUMMER enters sits down behind the drum, picks up his drumsticks and waits)

What could that missing element be? Let's try that joke one more time and see if we can locate it.

(Again reads from notes flatly.)

Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer provides a rimshot.)

A ha. Our missing element. The "rimshot." A percussive sound consisting of three beats created by simultaneously hitting the rim and head of a drum with a drum stick. The "rimshot" is common to those areas of modern music that we like to refer to as jazz, pop... and, of course, rock...

(MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)

and... roll. But, more importantly, for our discussion today, the rimshot has been associated with those comedy monologists who perform vertically as opposed to, let's say, horizontally, leading to what we, again in the field, like to refer to as "stand up."

Although we can not pinpoint the exact moment or identify those very first participants who introduced the rimshot into the comedy vernacular, we do know it was popularized by comedians in the middle of the last century. Particularly those who practiced their craft in summer resorts in New York's Catskill Mountains. Which, by the way, will be the subject of my next talk, "Hitting Below The Borscht Belt."

But, let's get back to that always fascinating "rimshot." In some cases the drummer, to gild the lily, as one might say, will sometimes add one more element to the rimshot. As in...

(Reads again from notes)

Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer fires off a rimshot followed by a cymbal crash.)

The cymbal crash. Our second element. And to add, even yet a third element, the speaker in question might react to the "rimshot" and cymbal crash as if he or she did not expect it. This is what's known as doing a "take." A take is when the comedian or speaker quickly turns his or her head to look at the drummer as though surprised. An example of the "take."

(reads from notes)

Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer delivers a rimshot and a cymbal crash. Frobisher shoots the Drummer a quick look.)

Then, of course, there is the "double take." That is a take, quickly followed by a second take, as in...

(reads from his notes)

(MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)

Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer fires off a rimshot and cymbal crash. Frobisher does a head take quickly followed by a second head take.)

Although my reaction may have led you to believe I was surprised by the rim shot, in truth I was only pretending or acting, if you will. The rimshot and the take it evokes is always rehearsed and the speaker's reaction, in the form of a take or double take, is part and parcel of the presentation. The speaker may sometimes embellish the double take with a physical reaction as in...*(reads from notes)* Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer fires off a rimshot and cymbal crash. Frobisher does a take, then a second take followed by throwing his elbows up and out)

Then there is the verbal addendum to the double take and the physical reaction, which looks and sounds like this. *(reads)* Two friends meet on the street. The first one asks "Hey, who was that lady I saw you with last night?" The second one replies "That was no lady, that was my wife."

(The Drummer fires off a rimshot and cymbal crash. Frobisher does a take, then a second take, throws his elbows up and out and says...)

"What the heyyyyy???" Any questions, so far? *(not waiting)* Good. Now to the meat of the matter and the purpose of my talk, here, tonight. The "rimshot" used by comedians to save a joke, in my opinion, and I'm sure you agree, has long ago outlived its usefulness. However, it is my contention that when properly utilized, the rimshot can have a whole new life, energizing the familiar, the stale and, even, the hackneyed. And this applies across the board where ever speakers are trying to capture and hold the attention of an audience, whether from the pulpit, the stage, the podium or, even, in our everyday communications with one another. A few examples, if I may. I'd like to start with a writer who is a favorite of mine and I hope a favorite of yours. Of course, I'm talking about, none other than the Bard of Avon, William Shakespeare. I contend that with the simple use of the rimshot, we can shake off the dust accumulated over four

(MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)

hundred years and bring new life to the writings of the Bard.

*(reads from notes,
rather stiffly)*

MacBeth - "Is this a dagger I see before me?" *(Rimshot)*
Julius Caesar - "Beware, yon Cassius, he hath a lean and
hungry look." *(Rimshot)* And, of course, Romeo And Juliet -
"What light through yonder window breaks? *(rimshot)* Tis the
east and Juliet is the sun."

*(Rimshot, cymbal
crash followed by a
head take)*

What over quoted movie line couldn't be given new life with
one simple addition?

*(reads from notes,
again stiffly
without emotion)*

"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." *(Rimshot)* "Forget
it Jake. It's Chinatown." *(Rimshot)* "You had me at hello."
(Rimshot) "The truth?" *(rimshot)* "You can't handle the
truth."

*(Rimshot plus cymbal
crash. Frobisher
does a take and then
a second take)*

Now, politics.

(reads from notes)

"Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." *(Rimshot)* "We have
nothing to fear but fear itself." *(Rimshot)* "Ask not what
your country can do for you." *(Rimshot, cymbal crash)* "Ask
what you can do for your country." *(Rimshot, cymbal crash,
head take, throws elbows up and out...)* "What the hey?"

And how much more interesting would the evening news be with
the simple injection of a "rimshot" from time to time.

*(reads dryly from
notes)*

"The stock market dropped one thousand points today."
(rimshot) "Early this morning Miami, Florida washed into the
sea." *(Rimshot, cymbal crash)* So far, I've been quoting
lines from the theatre, movies, politics and television. But
what about our everyday lives? Can the rimshot bring new

(MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)

energy to our usual discourse? I believe it can. When used judiciously, the rimshot holds the key to diffusing even the most difficult personal exchanges.

*(reads from notes
imparting little or
no emotion)*

"It's not you. It's me" *(rimshot)* "Does this dress make me look fat?" *(rimshot, cymbal crash)* "Congratulations, Mr. Smith, you are now the father of quintuplets." *(rimshot, cymbal crash, double take)*.

Now, granted, not everybody has the advantage of traveling with a skilled drummer. But, there is, fortunately for us, a verbal equivalent of the "rimshot." One that we all can employ. It goes like this...

*(fumbles through
notes)*

It's right here. Ah yes... Here it is. "Ba da bum." If you will indulge me for just a moment, I'd like you, if you would, to join with me to perform a verbal rimshot in the form of a "ba da bum." Ready? One, two, three.

AUDIENCE

Ba da bum.

FROBISHER

Great. But I wouldn't give up your day jobs.

*(The Drummer does a rimshot and
cymbal crash. Frobisher does a
take)*

FROBISHER

Now I'm going to read you a statement. When I'm done I would like all of you to respond with a "ba... da... bum." Hold on. Let me just find it here.

*(Rummages through
notes. Lifts up a
sheet of paper and
reads)*

Here it is. *(reads)* We are sorry to inform you the paper you submitted entitled "Hitting Below The Borscht Belt" fails to meet even the minimum standard for publication and therefore... *(trying to save the moment)* Sorry... *(hunts for then finds the correct paper)* Here it is. I am going to hold up a card on which I've written a simple statement we hear everyday. I'd like this half of the audience *(points to one
(MORE)*

FROBISHER (cont'd)
half the audience) to read what's on the card and this half of the audience (*points to second half of audience*) to provide the verbal rimshot by simply saying "ba da bum." Are we ready?

(*He holds up a cue card*)

FIRST HALF OF THE AUDIENCE
 (*reading cue card*)
 The check is in the mail.

SECOND HALF OF AUDIENCE
 Ba da bum.

FROBISHER
 Very good. For this next exchange I'm, again, going to hold up a card. This time I'd like this side (*indicates second half of audience*) to read the card and this side to provide the verbal underscoring in the form of the "ba da bum."

(*Holds up a card.*)

SECOND HALF OF THE AUDIENCE
 (*reading card*)
 Your secret is safe with me.

FIRST HALF OF AUDIENCE
 Ba da bum.

FROBISHER
 Good. Now, let's begin to enhance our verbal rimshots by adding some of the elements we discussed earlier. I want this half of the audience to read the card (*points to first half of audience*) and this side (*points to second half*) to provide the "ba da bum." But, in addition, I want this half (*points to first side of audience*) to react to the "ba da bum" with a "head take." Got that? Line. Ba da bum. Head take. Here goes.

(*Hold up card*)

FIRST HALF OF AUDIENCE
 "We'll send someone out."

SECOND HALF OF AUDIENCE
 Ba da bum.

(*First Half Of Audience does a head take*)

FROBISHER
 Well done. Now this half (*points to second half*) will read the card and this half (*points to first half*) will provide
 (MORE)

FROBISHER (cont'd)
 the verbal rimshot. Only this time, this half of the audience (*points to second half*) will react by doing a "double" take. Line, ba da bum, first take, second take. Okay. Here goes.

(holds up card)

SECOND HALF OF AUDIENCE
 "This won't hurt a bit."

FIRST HALF OF AUDIENCE
 Ba da bum.
(Second half of the audience does a double take)

FROBISHER
 By George, I think you've got it.

DRUMMER
(dryly)
 Ba da bum.

FROBISHER
 Now let's put it all together. This time, you will say the line. I will provide the "ba da bum." After which all of you will respond with a double take, followed a physical reaction thusly... *(throws elbows up and out)* followed by a verbal "What the hey?" Everybody got that? Line. Double take. Elbows up and out. What the hey? Let's give it a try.

(holds up card)

AUDIENCE
 "We'll keep your name on file."

FROBISHER
 Ba da bum.
(The entire audience does a double take, throw elbows up and out, ending with "What the heyyyyy?"
NOTE: If the audience does not get it right the first time, try it again.)

Well, there you have it. The rimshot. Revitalised, refreshed and repurposed for you to use in your everyday encounters with friends, family and co-workers. So, the next time someone you know greets you with a cheery "Good morning," you simply reply...

(Frobisher holds up a card that reads "ba da bum" while taking a sip of water. Upon the audience doing the "ba da bum," Frobisher spritzes a mouthful of water across the entire stage in an epic demonstration of the classic "spit" take. The drummer gives him a drum roll and a cymbal crash.)

Thank you and good night.

CURTAIN