



# HEAD CHEESE

**H**ecklers. Haven't I already written an article about hecklers? Yes, I have. But in the comedy club business, one of the most frequently asked questions is "What do you do about hecklers?" If you read my column about hecklers [December 1993], you know that I am of the opinion that first you give them a little attention and see if that's all it takes. Sometimes they just want you to acknowledge that they are there. Other times, they need more than your attention. They need to be informed (either subtly or not so subtly, depending on your own personality and demeanor) that it's simply not O.K. for them to be a part of your show. Comedian Larry Miller might put it as simply as this to the offending party:

"I'm funny, you're not. So . . . quit it." Another act might graphically suggest that the troublesome party perform some physically impossible act.

Sometimes the decision of what to do is colored by factors other than what the antagonist is doing and what you as a performer think would be the most effective course of action. Last month, I was working my home town, Louisville, Kentucky, and there was a woman who was trouble all through the show. Constantly talking and responding to things I did in completely inappropriate ways, she was certainly getting on my nerves. But, about half of the audience was made up of a large Christmas party from a local investment company. And she was sitting smack dab in the middle of this group.

Many things were running through my little magic-boy brain. Given other circumstances, I would certainly try to remove this offensive drunken woman from the showroom. I might not have gone so far as to physically drag her from her seat and out the door, but I probably would have asked the doorman to escort her away. However, kicking someone out of a show

can easily bring that show to a screeching halt. The *actual* tension generated by the heckler must be weighed against the *potential* tension that can be generated by stopping the flow of the show, singling someone out in the dark, and telling them to leave. In effect, you have to say to that person: "You have made a mistake. You don't belong here. I don't want you here. You are bad." You're acting a lot like their parent. And sometimes, not only the person you have singled out becomes defensive, but the rest of the audience identifies with one of their own

eventually yearn for you to get rid of the obnoxious wrongdoer. But you can never be sure that you have reached that point. Sometimes it doesn't matter. Sometimes you get so fed up that you just have to do something for your own sanity. I could have put up with the woman another ten minutes and just battled my way through to the finish of my show. But why?

I tried to be nice about it. "Mam," I said, "there are only about ten minutes left in my show and I really feel like you'd be more comfortable spending those ten minutes waiting

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and becomes defensive as well. I watched as a comedian at a club in San Francisco once told a couple to leave, and another couple on the other side of the room stood up and said, "If they're leaving, then we're leaving too!" This created so much anxiety in the room that the club manager actually yelled from the bar in the back, "Actually, you're *all* leaving. This show is canceled!"

So . . . back to my woman from hell. Through the first 35 or 40 minutes of my show I'm trying to ignore, or at least put up with, this irritation — mostly because she is part of this large party. The company has shelled out some cash to have their party at the club and I don't want to leave a bad taste in their mouth (for me or of the club itself). Also, if I am perceived by them as coming down too hard on someone that they all work with and really like, they are not exactly going to be "with me" for the rest of the show. I think in these situations the trick is to try and judge exactly how sick the rest of the audience is of the one aggravating person. If the remainder of the spectators perceive that this one person is screwing up the entire show, then they will

out in the lounge." A small bit of applause. I couldn't tell, however, if anyone from the big Christmas party was among those clapping.

She wittily retorted, "No I wouldn't." "O.K., I'm not suggesting that you leave. I'm telling you that you *have* to leave. I'm saying that I don't continue the show until you do leave." The doorman comes over and puts his hand on her shoulder and escorts her out. Huge round of applause — even from the Christmas party people. Whew!

But wait! It's not over. She has barely left the room when the guy she was sitting with stands up. He is a big guy. A really big guy. A really big guy wearing a hockey jersey — and he is not following her out of the room. I get the impression he has something to say to me. The tension in the room immediately jumps to its highest point of the evening. He stands his ground. There is a slightly drunken sway in his stance. He yells loud enough so that I'm sure they hear him in the lounge, "That's the last blind date I'm ever going on." He plops back down into his chair to gales of grateful laughter and raucous rounds of applause. Big portions of which are from me. †