

Variety Performers



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Occupational Subtitles:

- Clowns
- Comedians
- Impersonators
- Jugglers
- Magicians
- Mimes
- Puppeteers
- Thrill Performers
- Ventriloquists

Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Extras
- Rodeo Performers
- Stage Managers
- Stunt Performers

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Actors
- Announcers
- Disk Jockeys
- Drama Teachers

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Models
- Singers
- Talent Directors

Noteworthy Quote:

"It is widely said by entertainers and audiences alike, 'There is no business like show business,' and you better believe it, baby. I can't imagine doing anything else. To be able to affect people through your words, expressions, and mannerisms, to get them thinking, laughing, or crying, there is nothing I have found that compares to that. It makes you so aware of how and in what ways people connect with each other. And what better place to see it than from the center of their attention!"

Michelle Terrance
Performing Arts Student
New York City, New York

Variety performers (va 'ri-ety per 'form-ers) entertain audiences by performing theatrical, musical, magical, daring, or comedic acts.

Variety performers today enjoy a tradition that goes back to the traveling entertainers and troubadours of medieval Europe. Later, performers practiced their craft on vaudeville stage and in the tents of Chautauqua.

Vaudeville, the people's theatre, had something for everyone. Sideshow acts included sword swallowers and fire eaters. Singers, dancers, and actors presented operas, ballets, and dramas. Comedians, clowns, jugglers, and magicians traveled the vaudeville circuit. Theatres large and small all over America welcomed whoever could amuse, charm, or baffle an audience.

The Chautauqua movement, on the other hand, began as an educational presentation of lectures, recitals, and concerts set outdoors or in a tent. The program quickly expanded to include the lighter fare of variety performers. Road companies began traveling across the United States pitching their tents, and playing circus style to rural and small-town audiences.

Today, radio, television, and motion pictures have joined stage performances at the heart of the entertainment industry. The people's need to relax, to laugh, and to forget their troubles has not changed, and the demand for performers with the skills to entertain audiences remains strong.

Work Performed

Variety performers may work alone or in groups to entertain an audience. They practice and rehearse every day to perfect their act and performance skills.

Magicians perform original and standard tricks of illusion and sleight of hand to mystify an audience. With sleight of hand, magicians make objects disappear and reappear in different places and in different forms. An illusion is an act in



Variety performers entertain audiences by performing theatrical, musical, magical, daring, or comedic acts.
 Photo by Amy Elliott

which the magician seems to perform the impossible, like sawing a person in half or making a person float. Magicians may also be escape artists who free themselves from chains and locked trunks. They may use volunteers from the audience for their act, or they may “read the minds” of members of the audience.

Puppeteers design and make puppets or marionettes from materials such as wood, styrofoam, and wires. They design, carve, and paint the faces, and make the clothing, shoes, wigs, and other details of the costumes. They operate the strings attached to the marionettes to bring them to life. They usually also talk or sing during the performance so that the puppets seem to have voices. The audience does not see the puppeteer, only the puppets or marionettes. Puppeteers also design stage sets and write the scripts for their puppet or marionette shows.

Ventriloquists project their voice so that a dummy or puppet seems to be speaking or singing on its own, even though the audience can see both of them. The ventriloquist also makes the dummy or puppet move to make it appear more lifelike. The ventriloquist and dummy become known as a team. The ventriloquist designs costumes and creates the character of the dummy. They write their own dialogue, usually humorous, or they may hire a writer. The act is often a role reversal. That is, the dummy is the clever one, and the ventriloquist is the dummy. Some ventriloquists use several dummies.

Mimes use body movements, facial expressions, and gestures (rather than speech) to present serious, funny, or burlesqued portrayals of feelings and actions. They wear costumes and makeup (usually whiteface). Mimes can “walk” without moving, “cry” without tears, or “lean” against nonexistent walls. They can become “trapped” in an imaginary box, making the audience feel their fear and frustration. They may also perform comedy routines to make people laugh.

Jugglers keep balls, plates, clubs, or other objects in the air by continuously tossing and catching them. Sometimes they use objects of different sizes, shapes, and weights in order to show their dexterity. Jugglers may also chitchat with the audience, or combine their juggling with other skills, such as cycling or skating. They may add suspense by juggling dangerous objects such as chainsaws, or pretending to lose control.

Impersonators imitate another person, kind of person, animal, or object. They copy the mannerisms, expression, style of dress, tone of voice, form, or sounds of the character or thing they are impersonating. They often do comic impersonations by exaggerating those traits. Impersonators most often imitate famous people.

Comedians combine acting and clowning skills. Some are stand-up comics who deliver jokes, quips, and comic one-liners. Sometimes they sing or dance. They may make fun of themselves, other people, types of people, objects, or situations. Most comedians develop a signature walk, facial expression, manner of speech, or gesture. They may use a prop or device to maintain an amusing identity. Some play comic roles in movies, plays, and television.

Clowns are multitalented performers who combine the skills of mimes, jugglers, impersonators, and comedians. Most clowns have a persona, that is, a specific character they create and present. They portray this character in their face makeup, costumes, and physical gestures. They may juggle, play an instrument, or create balloon animals—anything to amuse an audience and make them laugh.

Thrill performers perform daredevil feats. They may dive from a high diving board into a tank of water, throw knives at a human target, or serve as a human cannonball. Other thrill performers are high wire and trapeze artists. Motorcyclists, racecar drivers, and airplane pilots do tricks, stunts, and crash work. Thrill performers may enhance their act with comedy, magic, or other skills.

Other performers include **acrobats**, **aerialists**, **amusement park entertainers**, **show girls**, **animal trainers**, **show-horse drivers**, **wire walkers**, and **contortionists**—just to name a few.

Variety performers present their acts in many ways and styles in order to meet the interests and tastes of their audiences. Performers may do a single show, or they may present a complete show at nightclubs, theatres, circuses, fairs, carnivals, or sporting events, or in motion pictures or television.

Performers may have an agent, or they may do their own bookings. They may have a steady employer or be freelancers. If they are self-employed, they also take care of the business details of their career. They may make their own videos to sell. They may teach or do other kinds of work to support themselves while they are getting started or when bookings are few and far between.

Working Conditions

Variety performers work under all kinds of conditions. They may work indoors or outdoors, at night or in the daytime. They may perform in theatres, nightclubs, circuses, fairs, carnivals, motion pictures, or television. They may perform for business, social, or private functions. Those just starting out can often be seen entertaining passers by on sidewalks or at popular landmarks in cities like New York, Chicago, Hollywood, and Las Vegas.

The pace of performing is demanding, exciting, tiring, and stressful. Nightclubs can be crowded and noisy. Sidewalks and walkways may have limited space. Business, social, and private functions can be noisy and distracting. Theaters and music halls may range from excellent to barely usable.

Travel is usually a requirement. Many entertainers travel an established circuit. They wedge rest and meals between travel and performances. When they are first starting, performers may have little money for meals and hotel rooms. If they become really famous, however, they can live and travel in luxury.

Hours and Earnings

Few entertainers work regular hours. A performance may be anything from a ten-second television commercial

to a full-length performance lasting several hours. They may contract for a single appearance or for a long engagement of several weeks. Some maintain steady employment at one establishment. Besides performing, they spend time each day in practice and rehearsals.

The earnings of variety performers vary with their skill, fame, employer, geographic region, and kind and amount of work. They may receive anywhere from \$10 to \$10,000 a performance. Famous performers can earn hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single performance. Midrange fees often range from \$100 to \$1,000. Some entertainers earn more for an hour than others do for a whole week. The catch is that one hour may be all they get for a month.

Minimum union scale for live performances, set by the American Guild of Variety Artists, is around \$150 a day for one to eight hours of work, and \$300 a week for six shows. Pay for other workers such as clowns and characters at amusement parks is negotiated separately.

Professional performers often receive \$100 to \$250 or more a show plus expenses. School shows average \$75 to \$150. Some performers may charge as little as \$25 to \$40 for small functions such as birthday parties, and as much as \$200 to \$2,000 for large functions such as fairs.

Many beginning variety performers begin showcasing for no pay. They develop their acts in clubs, cabarets, and places that have an open mike. Sometimes performers put on their act on the street or at festivals and ask for donations from passers by.

Those in film work, both television and motion pictures, may earn as little as \$100 a day or up to \$1,250 a week. These fees are set by the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and depend upon the extent of the performance. Individuals can, of course, bargain for more.

Union contracts also set terms for overtime and residuals (payment for reruns of films, commercials, and television shows in which the performers appear). The performers may also get a percentage of any sales from videos or other items such as dolls and games modeled after these performers.

Since most performers are self-employed, they do not receive the fringe benefits other workers get. Although they work nights, weekends, and holidays, they seldom get extra pay. Union contracts may include pension plans, health insurance, and other aid. Sick leave and paid vacations are rare. National and local arts organizations sometimes offer group insurance and other benefits for those not covered by union contracts.

Most performers have other work. Many take whatever kind of work they can get to fill in between jobs. They may teach or sell their own tapes, films, books, or other products.

Education and Training

There are no defined educational requirements for performers. They do need to study and practice their craft. All successful performers have worked long and hard to perfect their skills.

A good academic background is important. High school subjects should include English, the arts, and business skills. A college degree is a strong asset. Many colleges offer programs in theater arts, which include interpretation, costumes, makeup, history, directing, and related studies.

Students who want to be performers can start developing their skills in grade school. They should appear in school plays and shows and perform at parties, for church and community audiences, and in talent contests. The more appearances and practice the better.

Unions and Professional Societies

Most professional entertainers belong to one or more labor unions. Unions help negotiate contracts on wages, hours, and working conditions. One such union is the American Guild of Variety Artists which represents performers in nightclubs, circuses, and other places that present live entertainment. Other unions include the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the Screen Actors Guild, and the American Federation of Musicians. The Associated Actors and Artistes of America is the umbrella organization (affiliated with the AFL-CIO) for the seven autonomous unions that represent performing artists.

Variety performers may also belong to professional organizations which represent their particular talent or act. These organizations include the Association of Comedy Artists, the North American Association of Ventriloquists, the Professional Comedians' Association, and Clowns of America, International.

Personal Qualifications

Since performers have to sell themselves to agents, employers, and their audiences, they must have charm, style, and originality. They should have talent, stage presence, and self-confidence in order to establish rapport with their audiences. They must also be able to work well with their co-performers, technicians, directors, and others.

Stamina, self-discipline, commitment, and the determination to keep trying are vital. Performers should be able to adapt to a constantly changing schedule. They must be able to withstand the tension of performing, as well as the stress of no bookings.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Variety performers may work anywhere. They are, however, more highly concentrated in and around large cities where they can attract a larger audience. The main centers for the highest paid workers are New York, Hollywood, and Las Vegas.

Performers can work in nightclubs, casinos, hotels, resorts, and restaurants. They may work on street corners or in private homes. Schools, colleges, and organizations of

all kinds book performers for special events such as fund-raisers, parties, seasonal and holiday shows, parades, and other social and business events. Performers may find work at festivals, pageants, sporting events, and fairs.

They may travel with a carnival or circus, or on a cruise ship. They may tour other countries as part of a company, or with a USO group. They may appear in stage shows, at dinner theaters, in motion pictures, and in television shows and commercials. City parks, recreation departments, and amusement parks also hire these entertainers.

Employment Outlook

Although there is no accurate way to determine the number of performers or the number of jobs available, employment in the entertainment field is expected to grow faster than the average rate through 2010. This growth will be spurred by the increasing number of people who enjoy entertainment, as well as expanding media operations. Both are creating a growing demand for performers of all kinds.

Despite a projected growth in the entertainment industry, however, the unemployment rate is high for these workers because the competition is stiff. The number of job seekers is always greater than the number of jobs. Most entertainers work only part time. At best they make only a modest living with only a few becoming rich and famous.

Entry Methods

Many performers start out by performing for local charity or school programs, or appearing in talent shows. Beginning variety performers in New York City and other major cities may develop their acts in clubs, cabarets, and places that offer an open mike. Some entertainers perform on the street or at festivals. As they become better known they audition for booking agents, producers, and other employers.

Trade journals list jobs. The Yellow Pages of the telephone book list theatrical agencies and booking agents. Performers may get leads through a union or professional organizations, or from friends and associates. They may make phone calls, write letters, and send resumes to employers. They must have a portfolio and possibly tapes to show prospective employers their record of performances.

Advancement

As performers continue to practice they acquire ever greater skill. Those who work constantly to improve are more likely to succeed. The outlook in the entertainment field is limited and uncertain. Performers have no guarantee of promotions, fame, or higher pay. Still, with determination, talent, clear goals, and luck performers can achieve great success.

Performers may become known locally, and then either do their own promotional work or hire an agent to get bookings in better venues (establishments). Some may

advance to starring roles or become celebrities and earn a great deal of money. Others may not even look for fame and are content just to have steady work doing something they love.

Performers may work all their life as a solo act, or they may start their own company and advance to directing and producing. They may take an active part in their union and advance in organizational leadership. They may teach, present workshops, or work as promoters or agents for other performers.

For Further Research

John Wiley & Sons, Customer Care Center, 10475 Crosspoint Boulevard, Indianapolis, IN 46256.

How To Get Into The Entertainment Business.
Ron Tepper. 214 pages. \$14.95.

Acknowledgments

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