

WTE column of March 28, 2015. Editor's headline: "Is it fantasy or is it real?"

CST column of same date: "Don't deride your audience for buying into our fantasy"

Guitarist Cormican recently presented an evening of "Mark Cormican as John Denver" at the Laramie County library in Cheyenne. For ninety minutes straight the performer belted out Denver favorites in a voice closely matching that of his idol, adding his own compositions alongside others from the era. As he sang and played, he got to looking more like the original at every turn.

The evening should have been a memorable experience for his audience; curiously, it turned flat halfway through. Inasmuch as the dynamics between an audience and a performer, similar to those in a love relationship, are ephemeral and changeable, it's instructive to examine what went wrong. Love relationships, too, can fall flat, sometimes because one or the other conversation partner lacks courage and conviction, which invariably influences the partner for the worse. Was this the case with the "John Denver" performance?

Halfway through the evening, Mr. Cormican announced that, next, he would present "the saddest song you'll ever hear." We might not recognize it as such, he warned, because it's disguised as a children's song. The piece turned out to be "Puff, the Magic Dragon."

That was a letdown. Not everyone feels strongly about a boy, Jackie, who, after visiting a dragon by the seashore, becomes his friend and playmate. Actually, the song's message is about aging: "Dragons live forever, but not so little boys."

Well now. Aging may be a problem for us individually, but for humanity—indeed, for all creatures great and small, flora to fauna—it's part of existence. I, for one, didn't see the need to puff up the song, pun intended, and hoped the performer would move on fast.

But no. Mr. Cormican rescued the song from its melancholy ending by singing his own two additional verses. Jackie has grown up, but his son visits the dragon. They play happily ever after.

Still a bit thin. Worse, the performer went on to tell how, during an earlier show, an audience member burst into tears at conclusion of his addition. When he inquired, she sobbed—and here Cormican imitated her mincing voice: "That's so sweet."

Disappointing. Let's move on. But the performer was determined to play out what he perceived to be his trump card. "Well, you know, the dragon is a fictional character," he informed us as if we didn't know. "No need to get all wrapped up in his story."

At this, he lost my sympathy. After all, every entertainer does his or her best to create a fantasy for the duration of the performance. Even "Rocky Mountain High" or "Almost Heaven, West Virginia" is a fiction the singer strives to make real. Usually, the audience participates willingly in such gentle deception, although, as we file out, we may feel let down because the fantasy has come to an end.

But when, having invited us into a fictional world, the artist derides us for buying into his spiel, it's game over. To remind an audience that a performance is an artificial construct is like informing a lover that the relationship is but a diversion. In each case, the speaker is guarded, too reluctant to share a closely-held memory or a story of personal value. The other's reaction is predictably glum, even hostile.

We all hold close to our hearts a wealth of memories. Some are easily revealed, some not. The wise individual understands that memories deserve to be shared, yes, even the shameful ones. Especially the shameful ones. Sharing makes us human, and sharing keeps us from gossiping about what someone else has disclosed. Yet sharing demands something all but absent in entertainer/audience relationships: a reciprocating conversation partner, someone willing and able to actively listen. This puts the burden on the entertainer.

Knowing this, Mr. Cormican could have explained that, in Denver's lifetime, the hippie community became convinced that "Puff, the Magic Dragon" was a song about getting high, "Puff" referring to toking a joint, the "Magic Dragon" representing psychedelic LSD. Whether or not one wishes to give credence to the rumors—the Beatles might belt out, "I get high with a little help from my friends," but squeaky-clean John Denver?—revealing the story would have been more honest than manipulating his audience.

Did the lack of a full house influence the artist for the worse, making him unwilling to risk himself? Yet even an audience of one is worth investing yourself. Besides, surely this is not the first time that an audience was disappointingly sparse? A Denver retrospective may hold little interest for young people today.

In the instant case, despite his accomplished performance, Mr. Cormican came off as shallow, glib, and opportunistic. Gossip and sentimental soundbites substituted for thoughtfulness, conviction, and depth of feeling. Let it be a lesson to all of us.