

Panel 911: Surviving Dysfunctional Panels

BY M.C.A. HOGARTH

You've put your best foot forward: you've shown up on time. You've brought a drink that will keep you talking for an hour or two. You have business cards and a cover flat or a copy of your latest book to prop up next to your name. You're dressed in your best: a nice professional outfit or a conversation piece sure to make you stand out from the crowd.

Then it happens: the panel from Hell. Something goes wrong, and then another, and before you know it you're outside the room and the fans either don't remember your face or they know your name and revile it. If you haven't yet experienced the panel from Hell, you're running on borrowed time. The best defense is a good offense. Here are some scenarios and suggestions for getting out alive.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

You're a science fiction author and they've put you on a panel about feminist fantasy tropes. You write magical realism and they've decided you're an authority on creating alien languages. You're a writer and they've put you on a panel on how to make it as an illustrator. Eventually, someone's going to assign you to a panel that will make you wonder how you got there. If you're lucky, you'll know a few weeks in advance when you receive your schedule in the mail or it gets posted to the con website; you might even be able to ask to be re-assigned if you find out fast enough. If you're not lucky, you'll find out when they hand you your badge.

The first thing to remember: you're intelligent, you're thoughtful and you don't have to be the world's leading expert on a topic to have something to say about it. If you have the time, do some research on the topic; if you don't, give yourself at least fifteen minutes before the panel to consider different angles. Even ten minutes thinking about something will prepare you better than walking in cold.

Second: Trust that you have something worthwhile to say. If you don't believe it implicitly, you'll make an impression on your

audience...the wrong one. Be confident. When introductions start and they reach you, don't say, "I'm So-and-so and I have no idea why I'm here." Say, "I'm So-and-so, and I'm a writer; I've never been on a panel on topic X but I'm looking forward to the discussion." Or, "I'm here to add a different perspective on this topic." Stay positive.

Most importantly: Find your angle. You're an SF writer on a panel about fantasy? Find the commonalities between what you do and what's being discussed. If there are none, point out the extreme dissimilarities. You're a writer on a panel about art? Talk about cover art or book illustrations. The magic realist on a panel about alien languages? Creating language is about making symbols for what's real—so is what you do.

If you absolutely can't think of a single thing to add to the discussion, become a back-up moderator. Ask the people who seem to have interesting opinions for more information. Jog the discussion: "In science fiction, I'd have to figure out the ecological niche for all the alien creatures I come up with. Do you think fantasy animals can float above ecological considerations?"

Chances are, few people will think of preparing for a panel topic they know nothing about...which will be a great help when they sit you next to a topical expert who also happens to be a bestseller:

ACK! I'M SITTING NEXT TO A STAR!

All of us are newbies at some point. Some of us will become very successful. But few of us don't have a person whose very presence on the panel will make us stammer and fall silent. Some things to remember if you end up sitting next to a bestseller, award-winner, or person whose work you adore:

You're both professionals in this industry or you wouldn't be on the panel. Maybe you've only sold one story. Maybe you've sold a few but haven't made a name. Maybe you've sold several dozen but you're next to an award-winning star. Part of the pleasure of the audience is the exposure to both new and exist-

ing names; to be entertained by stories from both ends of the spectrum, people new to the game, people clawing their way through the middle and people who are on top of it.

Think of this as an opportunity to learn something, if you're sitting next to someone who has reached a place you want to get to; you have a chance to ask some questions of your own. Listen carefully. Even if you decide the person next to you is a jerk, the experience might still be valuable.

Finally, if it's one of the con's Guests of Honor at your side and not merely a Very Important Person to You, don't hog the spotlight. Does this mean you should become meek and silent? Absolutely not! But chances are there are more people in the audience who paid to come see the person you're sitting next to than came to see you. Don't be an egotist. Even if the person next to you is.

Which brings us to a very difficult scenario...

'IF THEY SAY ANOTHER WORD I'M GOING TO STRANGLE THEM!'

Being on a panel with someone you can't stand can make an hour seem like forty days in the desert: the panelist who clutches the spotlight; the one who won't let others talk, to the point of talking over them; the one who knows it all; the one who just has it out for you; the colleague you had a fight with six years ago and still want to punch in the gut.

Take a long, long breath. There is only one rule in the panel with a person you can't stand and that is to be bigger than them. There's nothing an audience loves more than a fight and people are quick to key in on simmering resentment, anger, envy or just plain rudeness. You don't want to be the one they remember as the jerk.

Be courteous to your fellow panelists, whether they're rude or not. Be relaxed. Make jokes, keep things casual. If they want to run away with the conversation, don't make snide remarks about it. Usually the moderator will step in when things get too unruly, but if he

doesn't, don't become obnoxious.

There will be times when you'll have to decide which is more important: to make it out of a panel having said your piece, or to make it out of a panel without having made a poor impression. You'll be surprised how many people will remember you for having kept your cool. Some of them will be important. Others will be people who are about to walk into a dealer's room to spend their money. Few people feel good about spending money on someone who acted like a brat; a lot of people won't even bother.

'RELIGION, TAXES AND POLITICS, OH MY!'

A subset of the Topic You Know Nothing About and the Panelists You Can't Stand is the Topic You Hate With a Passion. How'd you end up on a panel about something you dislike intensely? Possibly because the con-staff knew it and wanted you around to stir up controversy; or possibly because you just happened to be the only guest they could get to fill in the final folding chair. Which-ever it is, this type of panel doesn't have to be a disaster. In fact, in some cases it can be the most fun kind of panel.

Absolutely, the first and best rule of the Topic You Hate is: Don't Froth. Never froth. Be passionate and eloquent, have your reasons for your dislike handy—or be willing to work them out thoughtfully in the presence of strangers—but never froth and don't attack your fellows. Rudeness is never remembered well. People do leave panels saying 'That person was so nice, I want to go read his stuff.' It's rare they leave saying, 'That person annoyed the heck out of me... I want to read his books!'

If you are reasonable about your reasons for disliking something, polite to the people on the panel who do like it, and keep the conversation going by bringing up points for discussion without malice or anger, not only will you entertain your audience, you'll also make an impression. You never know when a director from another con will be in the audience, wondering whether you'll be worth inviting as a Guest of Honor.

'HEY, AREN'T WE SUPPOSED TO HAVE NAME CARDS?'

Conventions are hard to schedule and staffed by enthusiastic people who are not, nevertheless, superhuman. Eventually you're going to run into a panel where the moderator's gone missing. Since the moderator's the one

who usually finds the name cards, introduces you or prompts for introductions, and guides or prods the discussion, the lack of a moderator can sometimes result in an aimless panel...or a silent one. This is particularly true of panels with strange topics that none of the panelists can make heads or tails of ("The Art and Music Connection? What do you think this is supposed to be about?" "No clue. You?" "Ummm...").

If your moderator's gone missing and your audience is already in place, there's nothing wrong with saying to your fellow panelists, "Well, it looks like we've lost our moderator... anyone want to step in?"

If your topic really is bizarre and you're not sure what to make of it, ask the audience. "What did you come here expecting?" And if they don't know either, then it's time for improvisation.

Make sure if your moderator's gone missing that someone's keeping track of the time; do it yourself or get a friend in the audience or a fellow panelist to do it. But stay alert, because it's not impossible for the panel to fall into uncomfortable silence.

Yeah. Hear the crickets?

'UMM...IS ANYBODY OUT THERE?'

Believe it or not, there are panels that will lapse into complete silence without prompting. And sometimes the moderators seem as much at a loss as the panelists. If the moderator doesn't seem to be stepping in and you have a few ideas for questions, there's no reason you can't ask your fellow panelists for answers. See if you can't seed a new discussion.

If that fails, don't make small talk with your fellow panelists. Any conversation that sounds like a private one between friends is going to alienate your audience. They came to see you and your fellows be witty, entertaining and interesting on their behalf, not hear you talk to someone else about things they have no context for.

Instead, ask the audience for questions. Get them to participate. If the questions go off topic, it's still better than no talk at all.

'RUN AWAY, RUN AWAY!'

You're on a panel about a topic you passionately dislike with people you despise and a moderator who didn't prepare. Your mug is empty, it's 10 PM and you're a morning person and your hair has dried into an unintentional mohawk.

Don't panic...laugh. Really. Invite everyone to laugh along with you... "This obviously isn't my day, is it?" (Say it like you think it's funny, not as if you're angry...even if you are!) Or "I'm not sure of the exact timing, but somewhere around three in the afternoon my hair declared independence."

Rule two: Remember this is only an hour or two of your life. You can get through it. Think of a reward for when you're done getting through the wringer.

Always, always, relax. The worst circumstances are sometimes the easiest ones to shine in. If you sail into the room, laugh away your hair, make jokes about your lack of coffee and lack of sleep, politely maintain the conversation and even manage a few witty comments, you will be remembered as the pro who can be a good convention guest even if her clothes are on fire. A pro no one has to babysit is a pro people will invite back again and again...and a pro people will remember next time they're in the bookstore, or browsing the magazine racks.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The absolute best advice is, of course, practice, practice, practice. Contact your regional cons and ask to get on the programming. The more panels you sit on, the more experience you'll have with panels that go terribly, terribly wrong...and the more likely you'll be to ace the disasters when you're on a bigger stage.

Remember that you're not just at the con to have fun; you're there to do business, to market yourself as someone worth looking up. Also, in the end, remember that you're not just at the con to market yourself, but to have fun, to relax, to meet new people and laugh and be yourself. Take your responsibilities as a Guest seriously, not yourself. And if all else fails, remember in an hour or two, it'll be over! ■

M.C.A. Hogarth's passport has been stamped in exotic, imaginary locales, where she furthers her fictitious degree in xenanthropology. When she's not writing, she's doing her best to accumulate the bizarre resume of odd jobs and anecdotes that every writer seems to end up with. This is her second article on writers and public speaking, which she blames on doing presentations in every class in high school, including math. You can keep up on her endeavors through her website, www.stardancer.org. There's no public speaking there, just pictures and news.

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