

SOPHIE BECKER & HENRY GUNDERSON
THE JERRY MAHONEY SUCCESS SEMINAR
Marriott Marquis Hotel
February 16, 2025

"I am the dumbest version of myself... When my mind is empty anything is possible," the audience chants in unison after visualizing a self-administered lobotomy. Performance art styled as a corporate training seminar, the session was headlined by archetypal dummy Jerry Mahoney, a character created in the 1930s, which played a pioneering role in bringing ventriloquism to early TV. Jerry's literal handler, Sophie Becker, introduces herself as his humble assistant. Lampooning the amped-up toxic self-help guru (think Tom Cruise in *Magnolia*), Jerry belittles his aide for her wide-eyed adoration, but beneath her corporate-core persona there's a sultry eyebrow raise that elicits our kindred complicity. We know she is the puppet master.

The Odets conference room on the fourth-floor of the John Portman-designed Marriott Marquis Hotel, just steps from Broadway and Times Square, offered a go-go 1980s time capsule for the seminar, written by artist Henry Gunderson and developed with Becker. Jerry's stock framing questions like, "Are you where you want to be in life?" and "Do you feel you've been sold a false dream of success?" felt at home in the room's bland professional décor. However, Gunderson and Becker updated the format to our idpol-empowerment era, simultaneously making Jerry a dummy activist. Via PowerPoint presentation, he traces a brief history of dummies, from their wholesome representation on variety shows like *Ed Sullivan* to deranged depictions in horror movies like the *Chucky* franchise. The seminar's program blends capitalist ambition with zen meditation to make the once-maligned dummy the epitome of aspiration: "Being dumb is your greatest asset" is its clarion call. Dumb people are statistically happier and more successful, famous, and attractive than smart people, Jerry contends, adding that their "lack of substance makes them exceptional politicians." Everyone laughed hard at that quip—these days it couldn't feel truer.

In the final act, a disingenuous catharsis unfolds, staging a reconciliation between the two selves embodied by Jerry and Sophie, the grandiose and the self-effacing. The slideshow with images of hope malfunctions and inspiration strikes, prompting Sophie to break into song. As their rendition of Kylie Minogue's "I Believe in You" unfolds, Becker's voice-throwing virtuosity produces the illusion of two beings singing together. That uncanny state of knowing we cannot *believe* our own eyes resonated profoundly despite the satire. Jerry bid us farewell: "I want you to leave this room dumber than ever before." We were left in a state of giddy glee, elated by collective release, a group of over-educated liberals feeling just a little bit better about failing the capitalist rat race. Freed from intellectual pressures, the Boomers could let go and pass the torch, the Gen Xers could shrug their shoulders and smirk and the Zoomers could feel relieved of guilt about their anti-woke tendencies and bring "retarded" back from exile once and for all. —
LIZ MAGIC LASER