

KEVIN JAMES

THE MAN WHO KNOWS TOO MUCH!

Millions of people became converted to the bizarre magic of Kevin James after witnessing his stunning performances on America's Got Talent, but we've always known that Kevin was so much more than a great talking point on a TV talent show. His unique creations and powerhouse performances have made him a genuine star of world entertainment – not just magic. Yes, he's a huge star, but what do we really know about this mega-talented fellow? Graham Hey aims to find out.

Born on an American Air Force base in Toul, France, Kevin's father flew helicopters and jets, and his mother was a nurse. "My parents were both from Michigan so after 5 or 6 years of travelling they settled back there in a little village called Jonesville," reveals Kevin. "That is where I really grew up. It was a tiny town of 2,000 people. I was the only magician in town, with no magic shop, no Internet, no DVDs. What it did have were 6 magic books in the public library and I was the only one checking them out, over and over again!

"When I was about 12, an elderly neighbour told me that there was some kind of magic place about an hour away, in a town called Colon, Michigan. I did some research and couldn't believe my good fortune that it was only a 1 hour drive away. I talked my parents into taking me there and it was the longest hour of my life. On the edge of town there was a billboard that said, 'Welcome to Colon Michigan, The Magic Capital of the World'. I about had a heart attack!"

Kevin tells me enthusiastically that he can vividly recall everything about his first real magic shop experience. "The building was black with white skeletons painted on the front. When you walked in the old wood



Kevin pretending to be Colonel Sanders with Brett Daniels.

floors creaked with every step. There were 10 to 15 big illusions in the centre of the showroom with a velvet rope keeping them from me exploring every inch. It had a delightful musty smell and was so mysterious. There were old black and white photos on the walls and on the ceiling were beautiful full colour posters of great magicians of the past. I was walking around just staring at the ceiling for a really long time. It was overwhelming. Most importantly I knew I was in the right place." I can tell he's right there in his mind! He then adds, "Abbott's Magic also had a really large catalogue and I memorised every page."

Before turning professional, Kevin had a succession of part-time jobs to pay for his expensive hobby. "I cut people's grass all through high school; I worked in a grocery store and cleaned a butcher shop, that one was especially disgusting. Then when I moved to Los Angeles, I worked as a magic bartender. My favourite job was as a demonstrator in a magic shop. I got paid to sit and read the magic books all day. Then I was finally able to phase into strolling close up work in restaurants and private parties.

The transition from close up to full time stage performing was a fairly long time. It took many years to develop a product for the stage that was really commercial."

I ask him when he realised that his brain was different to everyone else's? "I am not so sure that my brain is any different than anyone else's!" he laughs. "I made the conscious decision to be as different as possible from the rest of the magic shows that I saw. It was a lot of trial and error...lots of error. My ideas are not all diamonds. I come up with 1,000 ideas and 3 are good. I only show you the good ones. When they asked Thomas Edison how he invented the light bulb, he said that he didn't invent it. He found 1,000 ways not to invent the light bulb first. It was just a lot of elbow grease. It is hard work to try and be original but every ounce of sweat is worth it in the end."

What was the first effect of yours that really made you think you could be successful in the business, I ask? "I think the Floating Rose was the beginning of that feeling. I was trying to figure out a way to become a stage magician so I thought why not take some of the things

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that I am getting a good reaction with in my close up and just try to make them play bigger for the stage. Sounds logical, right?

"I was getting lots of reaction with my Floating Bill when strolling. One day I saw a bartender make a rose for a customer from a cocktail napkin and something clicked in my head. It was the answer to the question I had been asking myself for several months.

"The napkin was light enough to do the animation part of the Floating Bill, and then I could twist it into a paper rose and make it do the full float. Then if it was flash paper, I could turn it into a real rose, giving me a guaranteed applause ending. It could even have a romantic theme. It all came together pretty quickly, faster than most.

"Then at a magic convention where I was competing, Mike Caveney brought Copperfield over and asked me to perform the Rose for him. Copperfield liked it and wanted it for his TV special. I think it was at that moment, when my hero validated my creation, that I thought I might have some talent as an inventor. Later I flew to where he was performing on tour and taught it to him.

"The funny thing is, if you see Copperfield's show today in Las Vegas, he is still doing the Floating Rose. I think it is the effect that has consistently been in his show the longest. It was impossible to ever imagine that I would have created the 'most performed' effect of David Copperfield's career."

I ask Kevin to give me a potted history of his career up until America's Got Talent. "I started performing in a chaotic dinner theatre. I was doing a stand up comedy magic act. It was fairly classic with a few original moments. It was a good training ground as there were lots of drunken people and you never knew what they were going to shout out or do. It made me learn how to deal with every possible situation.

"I met my diminutive assistant there, Antonio Hoyos. His job was to walk around and play with the customers as Charlie Chaplin. I noticed how they instantly connected with him. They loved this cute, funny character. We worked there together for about 2 years



before I asked him if he wanted to work on a project with me. He said sure. I later found out that he used to work with Siegfried and Roy. They used to shrink Roy in the DeKolts Chair and it was Antonio. So we began working on the Broom Suspension. Later I tried to figure out a good way to get this interesting little character onstage. That is when I developed the Chaplin Doll Illusion.

"We started to do some international magic conventions, festivals and TV. I tried to get the biggest agent in Paris to try and book me at the Crazy Horse but she wouldn't. One

day an act fell out of the line up for a big TV show. She called and said can you be in Paris in 2 days. Sure we could.

"We did well on the show and the host loved us. He just gushed about us. I told her to just take the video from this TV show and give it to the owner of the Crazy. She did and he booked us immediately. So we performed there on and off for 3 years.

"Then we got an offer to headline in an important show on the Las Vegas strip, called Splash. Shimada was leaving and we were

going to take his place. That went on for about 4 years. Then we did Caesar's Magical Empire at Caesar's Palace. We opened for several big celebrities and did lots of international travelling. I was performing for about 6 years in a show in Las Vegas called The World's Greatest Magic Show."

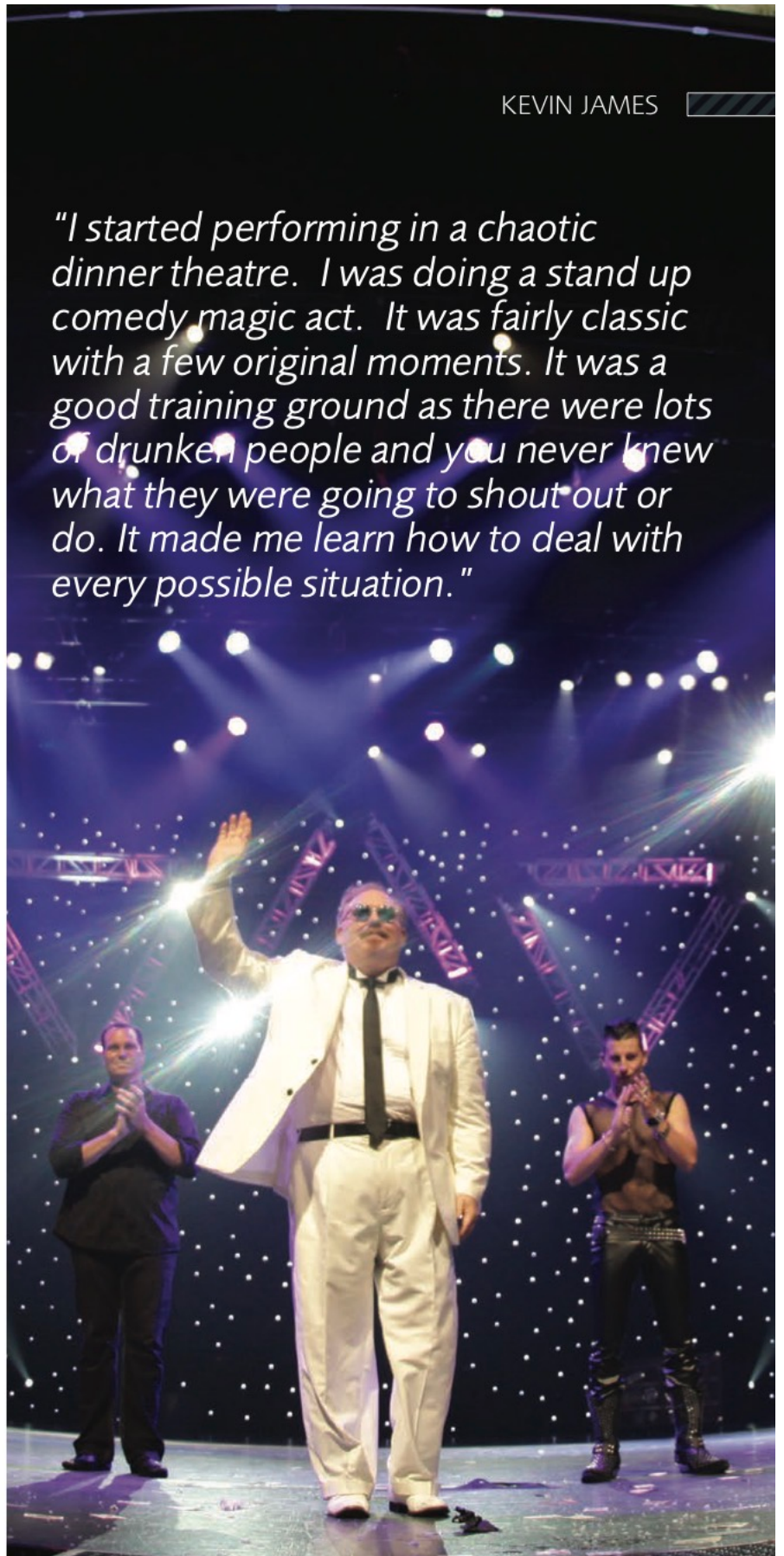
So that takes us up to America's Got Talent and Kevin tells me that Nathan Burton is responsible for getting him on the show. "I found it very stressful" he says, almost relieved it's all over. "Imagine being in front of 20 million and getting buzzed or even worse verbally abused by Piers Morgan. They like to put you in stressful and unprofessional situations. For instance, they will tell you that next week you have 3 minutes to do your next segment. So you work hard on the pacing of the effect, changing your blocking, and editing your music. Then one day before the taping they tell you that they don't have enough time so they want everyone to cut their act to one minute. That is stressful!"

So, how did it go? "I got a great reaction for all 3 of my segments. However the third segment I got tossed under the bus! After my beating from Piers, Jerry Springer thrusts a mic' in front of my face and says, "You have thirty seconds to tell America why they should vote for you." I basically said 'I create all of my own illusions. You have singers come out here and sing other peoples songs. Imagine if they had to write and perfect a new song each time. I think I should get an A for effort. Plus, last week I did this very same routine for the Prince of Monaco and he loved it. The audience here loved it.' They didn't air any of that. The producers decide when it is your time to get off the show, not the voting audience."

Prior to going on, Kevin says he was confident in his material and thought that he should risk it, despite the obvious reservation that "no-one wants to get slapped in front of 20 million viewers." He reveals that just before the first taping he had ulcers thinking that he had chosen the wrong effect to start with. "I chose to do the Chaplin Doll. There is a fake mistake when his head falls off. I thought I was going to get 3 buzzes when that happened and not be able to finish the illusion. That would have really sucked.

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Fortunately they all laughed when the head fell off and were too busy to buzz me. I thought that with so many people seeing my act, only good things could come from it. You don't go on that show to win, you go on for the exposure and to try and stay on as long as possible for the most exposure."

Fortunately, Kevin's Operation Illusion went viral, and he is still getting work from that video. "If I had a show in Vegas where I was trying to sell tickets, I would do it all again. I was invited to perform for Obama in the White House because of that AGT clip on Youtube." I ask him where he got the inspiration for what is now one of, if not THE, most watched illusion of all-time. "About 15 years ago I was at Mike Caveney's house and he showed me some photos of a very old version of the sawing in half with a guy named Johnny Eck. I was really intrigued with the method and decided to modernise it for today's audiences. I experimented a lot and finally came up with the version you see today. I think it is still a work in progress. I still have more to do with it."

With a show like Kevin's, it's so much more than just performing, and he tells me that the most difficult aspect of his job is actually managing a lot of people. "I did a show at a Sheraton Hotel in Korea for 17 months with no day off, 2 shows a day, with a cast of 30 people. At the end of that time I took 4 months off just to re-value things and see if I really wanted to continue with magic. I was burnt out. I was so busy putting out stupid fires. For instance, this person got drunk and started a fight. This other person got into a big fight with the stage manager, another guy tried to hit on this dancer. What I realised is that I needed a company manager who could handle all of this day-to-day stupid stuff. I needed a buffer from that junk. That is how you learn."

Here at Magicseen Towers, we are massive fans of Rafael – not only is he a really lovely guy, his creations are truly brilliant – and he works closely with Kevin. I ask how the pair first met? "I don't actually remember the first time I met Rafael," says Kevin with a puzzled look upon his face, "It just seems as if he was

always there. It was probably on some TV show. He is one of my very close confidantes with whom I can share what I am working on with and love to brainstorm with. He, Gaetan Bloom, Sonny Fontana and Adrian Soler are part of that circle. They are all creative and generous brainstorm partners. It is important to find a group like this to help you exchange ideas. People you love and trust." What does your 'team' consist of? "I travel now with a team of 4 or 5 assistants. My wife Claudia is there with me all the time. Then the rest of the team grows or shrinks depending on what illusions we need to do in that particular show."

Kevin is soon to be performing in the UK as part of The Illusionists show, and as I mention this, it is obvious that he has positive feelings about the place. "I love performing in the UK. I have so many friends there. I just wish we were spending more time in London. Let me rephrase; more time off in London so I can do the fun things!

"I am having a great time as part of The Illusionists team. It is a show with lots of flavours, there is something for everyone. The cast is diverse and all great at what they do. It keeps you trying to do your best every night. Backstage is like a mini magic convention, it is a fun place to work!"

The Illusionists show is something to really look forward to, and Magicseen will be featuring it in a future issue. But what else is happening for Kevin? "Well, there are always 5 or 6 new effects in the pipeline at any given time. I will hopefully have some of them in the show when we hit the UK.

"Another project that has got me really excited is a book that I am publishing. It has been about 15 years in the making and is finally coming to fruition. It is called Full Bloom and is a 2-volume set of all Gaetan Bloom ideas. It will be about 800 pages in total. I suspect it will be a modern day classic. There is so much good material in there. It is also a tribute to a great man, creator and career. You can find it at www.kjmagic.com."



Tell us three things about yourself that people probably don't know...

1. I love to experiment in the kitchen. At one time I was seriously thinking about becoming a professional chef.
2. I love dogs, tennis and naps.
3. I snore so loud, that at one time I actually thought about searching for a deaf woman to be my wife.

Your proudest moment in life?

I think it was when my son was born. I thought that this was real magic and how could I actually be a part of that.

What's your most guilty pleasure?

I love a good back scratch. I must be half bear. I thought it would great to get those bamboo back scratchers made with my name and website on them. Like Robert Houdin had little folding fans made. This way when they are in the middle of a great back scratch they associate that great feeling with you. You have fans for life.

How do you create magic?

I get inspiration for magic ideas from many places. Some common ones might be movies, literature, life experience, toy stores, hardware stores, music, old effects that could use a good revamping, etc. I live life expecting to have new discoveries every day. I live with the curiosity of what the day will bring.

I try to ask myself the right questions. If the answer doesn't come right away, I sleep on it. Some morning you will wake up and the

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answer will fall out of the air and into your notebook.

Early on I used to think that if it cost too much or was too big to travel with, don't work on it. I used to edit my thought process before I ever got started. This was a mistake. I had a friend who, if the new trick didn't fit into the little case that he took on the airplane with him, would not include it in his show. That is a mistake.

I try to let my mind be free to create without any limitations. Even if in the real world I have limitations like money, time or a place to perform a big amazing illusion, I ignore that now and get the idea into my notebooks. Some day you may have an opportunity to do something big and extravagant and then it will be sitting there waiting for you in your notes. Maybe some day you will get an opportunity to do a TV show and you will be ready. Just because you can't use it now doesn't mean you won't in the future.



It takes 5 people to perform my Operation Illusion. Some of them have to be very special. Many people told me not to go down that road. I ignored them and discovered that if you have a really impactful effect, producers will pay for the cargo, the extra airline tickets and hotel rooms, and the extra salary needed to bring everybody. If it is

great and unique, they will pay for it. It may also be that thing that can get you noticed and onto the next level of your career.

Your aim should be to ask yourself the right questions. What is the most amazing thing I could perform on stage? Don't restrict your brainstorming sessions. Some ideas you will be able to use now and some you will be able to use in the future, just write them down and date them.

I started with The Illusionists about 2 years ago. We are constantly thinking about ways to improve the show. A while ago, the producer Simon Painter asked me what would I do in the show if money and size were no object. I am still working on that question. So let your mind go free to discover the next great idea.

Which other illusionists/performers do you really admire?

I am a huge fan of Penn and Teller. They are very smart guys. I love the way they have directed their careers. They have done TV shows, Broadway, made movies, have their own very successful Las Vegas show, hosted game shows on TV, done reality shows, and written amazing theatrical plays. And at the same time, they keep coming up with an incredible amount of new great magical content for their live show. They work very hard.

I also like very much Gaetan Bloom, David Williamson, John Carney, Adrian Soler and Juan Tamariz.

I would have loved to have seen and met a few people from the past like Devant, Jarrett, Chung Ling Soo, Selbit, LeRoy, DeKolta, Robert Houdin. I also liked very much the work of Hans Moretti and Richardi.

See Kevin James live! The best place to see the tour dates and to buy tickets is on the website, www.theillusionistslive.com/tour.html