

— DAVID KAPLAN —
the road to
“Greatness”

By MARK NELSON

Announced as “The Great Kaplan,” a nondescript, bearded, and bewildered performance artist takes the stage. Dressed in tuxedo jacket, vest, and brown cloth hat, he is eager to involve his audience in a series of vignettes designed to showcase a peculiar facet of his considerable and varied talents. Within the next few moments, his props will be destroyed, his ego will be deflated, his nerves will be jangled, and his audience will be sent into fits of hysterical laughter.

This is “The Great” David Kaplan, who appeared in competition at the combined IBM-SAM Convention earlier this year in Louisville, Kentucky to resounding roars of laughter, cheers, and applause from the gathering of 1,900 magicians — but who did not, in fact, take the top prize. Like the juggler at a magic convention (a booking slot he has filled many times before), David is beloved by the audience, but the excellent magic in his act is often overlooked because people are doubled over laughing at his comedy. Much like the character he creates onstage, 52-year-old David Kaplan takes it in stride and moves onward. To him, it’s all in a day’s work.

“I can’t shake the juggler stigma,” David smiles, shaking his head. “‘Oh, he’s not really a magician. He’s a juggler.’ That being said, I’ve been booked as a juggler, the variety act, on many Abbott’s shows and I’ve never really felt like I had to do any particular discipline. What I really wanted to do was have the performance be magical. And get laughs. And however I can figure a way to do that, with whatever skills I have with my limited abilities, is what I try to fit in.”

The competition act David performed at the IBM-SAM Convention was basically the opening eight minutes and the closing three minutes of his regular act, which he refers to as “the big show.” The big show is designed for performing arts centers and family entertainment with overtones of fantasy. The Great Kaplan (whose self-applied modifying adjective shifts throughout his program from “Great” to “Above-average” to “Adequate” and full circle to “Great” again, as circumstances dictate) is a performer who blends music, magic, juggling, and comedy into a joyful cocktail of enjoyment. David plays between ten and twenty of these theatrical venues a year, frequently with his musical director Dave DeWitt, who plays organ accompaniment to silent films and provides the musical foundation for the antics of the Great Kaplan.

For his opener, David arrives onstage to great fanfare and announces his first bit, the classic “hat on the nose” balance — which he also carefully enunciates in French for those in the audience who may have had the benefit of

a continental education in the fine art of juggling. But before he can begin, he is distracted by a sight in the flies above. Ignoring the audience, he scurries offstage and returns with a folded paper grocery bag. He steps to his case, removes a box of Tic Tacs, and pops a mint in his mouth, then removes a wrapped straw and blows the paper wrapper off with businesslike acumen. Standing center stage, he opens the bag fully and, using the straw as a makeshift blowgun, heaves a puff and projects the minty missile high above the stage. After a perfectly timed beat, a bowling ball apparently plummets from the flies, tears through the paper bag, and hits the floor with a resounding *bam!* The audience explodes with laughter and applause, and the stage is set for a visit to the oddball world of the Great Kaplan.

David's comic timing is so meticulous — every event on the stage occurs at precisely the right moment to score the maximum laugh — that one suspects he might have a musical background. A percussionist, perhaps, like Spike Jones, Charlie Callas, or Johnny Carson. And one would be correct. “Oddly enough, I play steel drum,” he confesses. “That was an offshoot of guitar. I like Latin music and I got interested in steel drum when I was in my twenties. I got interested in magic about the same time.” For the past eighteen years, in addition to his Great Kaplan gigs, David has performed in a steel drum combo called the Sun Kings with his longtime friend Dave DeWitt on the bass steel drums.

A late bloomer to magic, David's musical skills were evident at an early age. He picked up guitar rapidly and has played the instrument in numerous bands going back to the fifth grade. He was majoring in fine arts at Ohio State University when he saw a street performer from New Orleans appear on the Oval. His moniker was Moonbeam, and his act, which consisted of three-ball juggling, a Linking Ring routine, and water spouting, was a revelation to Kaplan. “Water spouting used to be popular,” he enthuses. “There were people who did water spouting as an entertainment — an imitation of a sprinkler, where they project water from their mouths, or they do a fountain where they project a single spout, then two, then three. Moonbeam's thing was forty squirts. He hardly spoke at all; he might have just said ‘forty squirts,’ and that was the end of his patter. Then he drank a big gulp of water, and he'd squirt water out of his mouth, one squirt at a time. ‘One! Two!’ everybody would count along, ‘Three, four, five!’ And they'd get into it. ‘Thirty! Thirty-One! Thirty-Two,’ they'd chant, and finally

‘Thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty!’ The last squirt. And then, after a beat, of course there's ‘Forty-one! Forty-two! Forty-three!’ He probably did about sixty. It was really funny — he couldn't control it. I was very moved by that performance, and so I started doing juggling and magic in my bands.”

At first, David just added the new material indiscriminately, slowly developing an onstage persona that he admits took a long time to emerge. “I'm still developing it,” he says today. “I've done the act for twenty-some years, and maybe I have another twenty ahead. Hopefully, I'm about halfway or a little more. I didn't know what I was doing at first; all I knew was I liked the

The audience explodes with laughter and applause, and the stage is set for a visit to the oddball world of the Great Kaplan.

street performers as opposed to the formal stage performers.” He burrowed through the magic section of his library and read Mark Wilson's *Complete Course in Magic* while continuing studies at Ohio State. Classic magic, however, didn't

appeal to him. “I came in through the back door. I took art classes and got a degree in fine art. Basically, the only thing I got out of that was: You shouldn't really set boundaries; don't be afraid to fail; don't be afraid to explore. It wasn't a real practical education, but in retrospect it makes a lot of sense.”

For a time, David took to the streets, performing juggling stunts and magic routines. Drawn to the renegade characters of Butterfly Man and Gazzo, he peppered his act with smart-aleck remarks to the crowd. Then, in 1992, David was hired to work Mira Flores, a huge flower exposition in his hometown of Columbus. Street performers from everywhere were invited to perform at the event, and it was there David met Glenn Singer, known popularly to audiences as the Horse Guy. Glenn is a West Virginia-based street performer and corporate entertainer who bills himself as El Gleno Grande. “He would dress up in this horse outfit that looked like a midget riding a horse. It was the stupidest thing... What could you compare him to? He was like Johnny Thompson as a midget riding a horse. El Gleno taught me to draw people in, because I was having trouble gathering crowds, which is not that easy to do.” Glenn became a mentor to Kaplan, advising him on his comic approach and revising his style. “Don't act, just be comfortable in who

The Great Kaplan in his competition appearance at the 2008 combined IBM-SAM Convention in Louisville, displaying his prowess at hat-balancing as well as unusual musical ability.

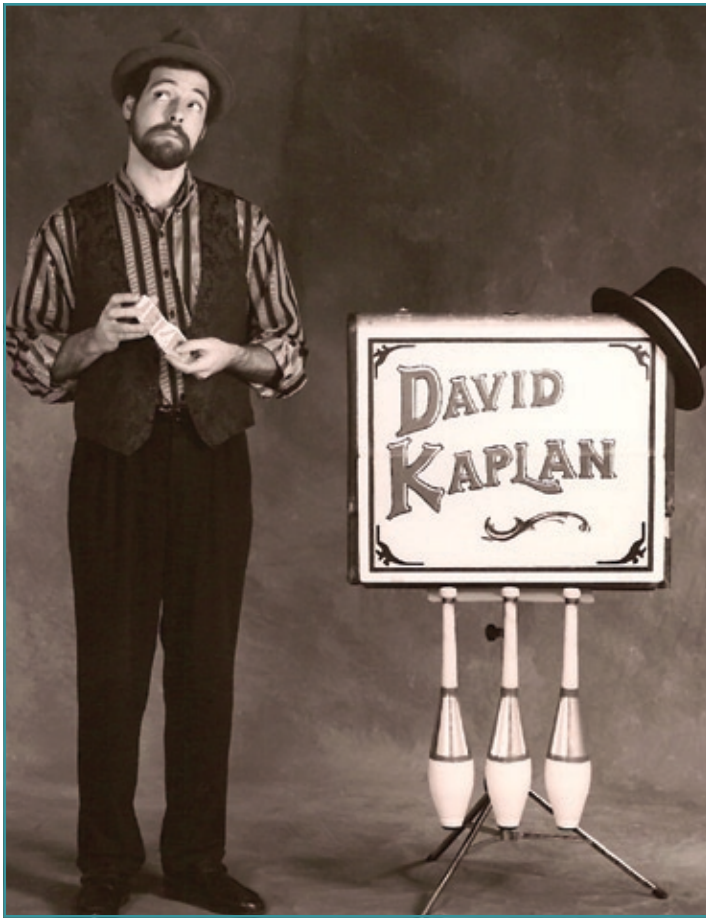
you are,” he told David. “Neutral is better.” It was advice David took to heart.

“What I try to do when I'm performing is let the objects and events be the more interesting things in the show,” David says. “I'm just there in the middle of all this mayhem. I'm a little delusional with my character, but I'm just like everybody else who struggles to get through their day, really, even though I may call myself great.” The Great Kaplan is rooted in the comedy of Buster Keaton, Peter Sellers' Inspector Clouseau, and Chuck Jones' animated nemesis of roadrunners everywhere, Wile E. Coyote. “Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius,” Kaplan grins. “I love that.”

At a midpoint in The Great Kaplan's performance, the bowling ball he had carefully set on a side table rolls off and thuds to the stage once again. Troubled by the interruption, Kaplan retrieves the ball and returns it to the table with another thump, which causes his “The Great” sign on his case to clatter to the floor. He crosses to the case to reaffix the sign (which now reads “Above Average Kaplan”) and returns to firmly



PHOTOS: DAVID LINSSEL



replace the bowling ball on the side table. Dashing offstage to acquire a new paper grocery bag, he opens it and places it to one side of the table to catch the impudent ball should it attempt to escape again. While he adjusts the bag, the bowling ball incredibly floats upward, into the flies above the stage.

The bowling ball is Kaplan's nemesis, the Roadrunner to his Coyote, and he has spent a great deal of time creating the comedy logic of the Great Kaplan's

world. For David, the image — the idea — of the gag comes first, and he knows how he initially wants it to appear. But then an organic process takes place, developing bit by bit from his comedic point of view. He rarely finds commercial material, something that already exists, that he can adapt to his act. "The bowling ball thing started out as a juggling bit where I would juggle a bowling ball, a bowling shoe, and a plunger," David says, remarking he still occasionally does the bit today. "I catch the bowling ball on the plunger and balance the shoe on the bowling ball on the plunger on my head, and then I notice I can see my reflection in the bowling ball and proceed to comb my moustache. Anyway, I thought I should have an interesting way to present the bowling ball. I got a briefcase, and reconfigured it so I could put the ball in the briefcase, close it, pick it up, and the ball was still on the table."

Kaplan says, "I really like the nuts and bolts behind the act, building the props. All my stuff is handmade. I've spent many hours building all that apparatus in my basement. I like the idea of coming up with something I want to happen, then figuring out a way to make it happen. Some of my happiest hours are spent fidgeting around with that stuff."

As complex as David's props may be, his metronomically-timed execution is aided

electronically, thanks to his friendship with Kerry Pollock, the comedy magician who invented the Show Tech cuing device. "Kerry Pollock changed my life," David enthuses. "I had two music cues when I met him, and then I started thinking in terms of music and effects and how they would fit with the show. I recorded a lot of my music, and Dave DeWitt has recorded a lot of it. And I borrowed sound effects from here and there; I like doing that. When that bowling ball comes down from the flies, the "swoosh" sound is from *The Hudsucker Proxy*, the most obscure Coen Brothers movie that you've never seen."

David generally plays one-nighters, and he misses the luxury of extended runs where he can perfect both the techniques and the timing of his act. The closest he has come so far was an extended tour with Murray Hatfield — 77 shows in 2006 and 2007. Earlier in his career, while working restaurant close-up, David experimented with his mixture of comedy and magic. Uncomfortable with approaching tables and introducing himself cold, David came up with a cover story — more or less a coin-rolling version of "Forty Squirts." He would approach a table of guests, rolling a silver dollar in his fingers, and announce that his restaurant was sponsoring his entry into the *Guinness Book of World Records*. "I'm going to attempt to set the world



[Top] Kaplan before he was "Great": posing in 1996; doing the bowling ball, shoe, and plunger routine; and performing close-up magic.

record for rolling the coin around the hand a number of times right in a row. The current record is 253. I'm going for 370, right here at the restaurant," he would begin. Then he'd commence with "One... Two..." and drop the coin. "And I'd pick it up again and go 'One..." he continues, laughing, "then I would sit down at their booth and continue. That was so fun to do." With that opener, he rarely got sent away from a table without doing a show.

The idea of being able to repeat a routine over and over to see how different people responded was the best part of David's close-up career, he claims. "Sometimes they would really like the magic and not the comedy so much, and sometimes they would really like the comedy and not the magic; sometimes they would like *neither*. It was interesting—exactly the same routine, you know?"

Given the peculiar nature of the Great Kaplan's act, some in the magic community are curious. Why has he started appearing in magic competitions recently? Wherever he appears, he has taken the competition shows by storm and earned the admiration and respect of thousands of magician attendees, first at the Columbus Magi-Fest in 2005 (where he took First Prize) and subsequently at the IBM Convention in Miami in 2006 (where he won the People's Choice Award). When he appeared in competition at the IBM-SAM earlier this year, the reaction to his act was incredibly strong. Was David planning a FISM appearance? Was the condensed and disciplined version of the Great Kaplan's "big show" an attempt by David to challenge himself artistically?

"I need to work and I've never really had as much work as I wanted," David responds. "I called Hank Moorehouse to try to get booked on the IBM-SAM and he told me, 'We already have enough people [for the Gala shows].' So, because I live just three-and-a-half hours away, I thought, *I'll go down and compete; maybe I'll win some money, but maybe I'll get some work*. At least I'd be part of the thing." Although David did not pick up the big cash prize in Louisville, he *did* win a fistful of contracts. "I got Italy, Germany, the Japan SAM, and Sweden. I got a contract from Abbott's, but I've done that quite a bit in the past, and I got the SAM in the States next year. I got the Magic Circle, too; I'm doing their Christmas shows. And I'm doing MacMillan's

International Magic Day in London. And Blackpool—but I'm booked this year, so I have to do it next year. It was nuts!"


Even though 2009 could be the year of the Great Kaplan, David, like his character, takes it all in stride. "What I do is not going to be everybody's cup of tea," he admits. "I'm just trying to get it better. It's a taste thing; it's not a normal act, and I'm still coming in through the back door on this whole magic thing." Nonetheless, the recognition is gratifying. "It's nice to get some recognition, but still my goal is to have a car with less than 100,000 miles on it!"

The Great Kaplan proudly steps forward to introduce his final number, to be played on a hand-made ukulele built by his great-grandfather Carl in 1887, and passed down to him through generations of Great and near-Great Kaplans. But before he begins, he places the instrument delicately on a nearby chair and

does a sales pitch for those members of the audience who wish to take home a souvenir. "The Great Kaplan Action Figure," he announces, revealing a miniature Great Kaplan and pointing out that even though the toys are factory seconds, "they are just as good as the ones in the store"—at which point the action figure promptly loses its pants. "Kids love them," the Great one continues, "and there are no small parts to choke on." Whereupon the toy bursts into flames. In a series of comic actions that are again timed to perfection, the Great Kaplan tosses his burning facsimile into his show case, where it explodes with a loud *bang* and a cloud of smoke. A beat, and then the "Above Average" Kaplan sign clatters to the floor. Another beat, and the bowling ball swooshes down from overhead and crushes the ukulele into mandolin picks. And the Great Kaplan stands amid the wreckage, a study in comic chagrin.

Still, the undefeated entertainer manages to salvage the act by performing a plaintive rendition of *The Impossible Dream* on an inflated balloon. Hitting the high note at the end of the number earns him a roar of appreciation and applause from his delighted audience.

"The truth is, my goal is to someday be able to become really, really skilled at

what I do," David Kaplan says. "My hope is to present a creative, funny, and original performance on a very high level. I want to connect as deeply with the audience as possible." Every inch a perfectionist, whether preparing for his shows or performing them, David still feels he has a long way to go. But the more shows he performs, the more laughter he brings to appreciative audiences, the closer he gets to his goal. "As long as I can make enough to support my family, I'm happy," he concludes, "because it gives me a chance to become artistically expert—which is the grail." 

"It's a taste thing; it's not a normal act, and I'm kind of coming in through the back door on this whole magic thing."



Street performer Kaplan juggling two pumpkins. Three-club juggling in 1986. Playing steel drums in his band, the Sun Kings.