Thinking Outside the Box: Kevin Ford and the Business of Abracadabra

By Mary Furlong

“I’m kind of in a box right now,” Kevin Ford said at the outset of our conversation. I figured he meant the sort of metaphorical box that we all find ourselves in from time to time. After all, this 1979 NU grad is a pretty busy guy, who operates his business, “Mirage Entertainment,” in exhilarating, but exhausting, one-man-band style. Each year, he takes his magic act to between 80 and 120 elementary schools in New York state, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. In addition, he entertains with a comedy-hypnosis act at county fairs and on college campuses. With such a daunting schedule, it’s no wonder he finds himself “kind of in a box” now and again. Perhaps I’d called at the wrong time.

“No, really,” said Kevin, “I’m in a box.”

Ah! A magic box! He was rigging up a trick to add to his repertoire. Exciting images came to mind — false bottoms, sliding panels, criss-crossed swords, Houdini-like escapes. Breathtaking Penn and Teller stuff, only much more elegant and tasteful if I know Kevin Ford.

What happened was that, having emerged from his box, Kevin produced a magic trick as a spectacular wind-up to the company curtain call. With a wave of his hand, he produced a flash of fire. Shazam! Lightning at his fingertips! Then, with a quick twist of the wrist, he extinguished the blaze, plunging the entire theater into darkness. Shazam again! A spectacular ending to an enchanting evening.

Theater and magic — they’re inextricably entwined. It’s become a cliche to describe a drama as magical. And even the most artful magic falls flat without the magician’s theatrical persona. All of which goes a long way toward explaining why Kevin Ford is so successful in his performing career; he’s both a skilled magician and a versatile actor, who, during his undergraduate years at Niagara, performed principal roles in more than a dozen major theater productions.

But which came first, the making of magic or the magic of theater? In Kevin’s case, it was the former. He fell in love with the art of illusion at the age of six or so, when his father, returning from a business trip, brought home a pocket magic trick he’d purchased in the airport gift shop. It was a most successful coming-home present. Kevin played with it for hours on end. His interest in the toy led to a dawning awareness of the magicians who were such a staple of television entertainment at the time. Magicians who had wondrous tricks at their command, not to mention splashy sets and glittering costumes to set off their skills in the most flattering and mystifying of lights.

And then, wonder of wonders, he learned that there were real live magicians practicing their art right near home, in Niagara Falls, N.Y. He begged for the chance to go to their
Gerard Miller III, ’01, finished a successful run with his improv group, The Royal We, in “Does This War Make Me Look Fat?” He has also been around the city in various comedy clubs and open mic nights. The Web page to his improv group is www.theroyalwe.org.

Damian Vanore, ’02, was one of 35 selected to participate in Royal Caribbean Cruise Line’s “Krooze Komic Kareer Daze,” a seminar for its top comedic performers to workshop new ideas and future events for the company.

Josh Fast, ’01, performed in “Myself in Third Person” with the TVI Actors’ Studio, New York City.

Matt Knight, ’02, recently signed with Cunningham Escott and Dipene in New York for voiceover and on-camera commercial work.

NU acting professor Paul Todaro, ’87, recently finished a highly successful run of “Out to Sea,” by polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York City.

Thomas Gates, ’95, was the production stage manager for the critically acclaimed off-Broadway production of “The Exonerated,” assistant stage manager for the Broadway revival of “Noises Off!” and first assistant for the national tour of “Chicago.” His next job is as production stage manager for the off-Broadway revival of “The Normal Heart.”

Amie Hendrix, ’03, is the director of youth programs at the American Red Cross in the Finger Lakes. Among her projects is a Hollywood initiative where students perform theater and work with celebrities to promote nonsmoking in movies. She is also working with the students to create their own statewide film festival.

Former Buffalo arts commissioner David Granville, ’92, was recently named executive director of Shakespeare in Delaware Park.


Bac DeLorme, ’94, was assistant director for “Spider Man 2,” “Spider-Man,” “Red Dragon” and “The Run Down.” He also had a small acting role in “Spider Man 2” and acted in the independent film, “Dumping Jack.”

Left Field Productions, headed by Michael Buttiglieri, ’02, produced the Los Angeles premiere of “Pageant” in December. Dave Rogge, ’03, designed the set for the production, which received rave reviews, and Melissa Seifert, ’01, was the makeup designer.

Armand Schultz, ’81, starred in the Tennessee Williams classic, “Night of the Iguana” at the prestigious Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. Watch for Armand in his most recent national commercial for Verizon.

Natalie Slipko, ’93, recently opened her one-woman cabaret show “Makeup Your Mind! Tales of a Beauty Consultant” at Don’t Tell Mama cabaret theater in New York City.

Brendan Connor, ’94, has had a string of national commercials including those for ToysRUs and New York Lotto. Television appearances include “Sex & the City,” “Law and Order,” “NYPD Blue,” and “Third Watch.”

Justin Dimieri, ’03, was featured in a documentary on the life of Monsignor Nelson Baker, called “Legacy of Victory: Remembering Father Baker.”

“The House of Nunzio,” the latest play by Patrick Riviere, ’88, had a developmental production done in November at the TheatreSource Theatre in New York City. Starring in the production was Chris Wisner, ’97.

Dale Sandish, ’83, was seen last holiday season in “Plaid Tidings” at Studio Arena Theatre.

After finishing a run of “Shear Madness” at Washington, D.C.’s prestigious Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, Neil Casey, ’91, returned to Boston to star in the Lyric Theatre’s production of “When Pigs Fly.”

Susan Drozd, ’02, starred in “Escaping the Box,” Pandora’s Box Theatre Company’s fifth annual showcase of short works written by and featuring women, at the Alleyway Theatre in Buffalo.

Kim Schwenzer, ’98, is currently on the National Tour of “Seussical the Musical.”

Kelly Murray, ’01, was featured in a commercial for Jim’s Steakout and in a promo for the television show, “Soundcheck.” She also appeared on NBC’s “American Dreams.”

Katie Sorice, ’03, was accepted into Second City New York and will be attending school there for writing and acting.

Brian Mysliwy, ’96, recently designed the sound for “Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna,” an adventure game for the PC being released by Microsoft and Mad Doc Software. As sound designer, Brian also had the opportunity to hire some of his fellow NU-ers: A.J. Sullivan, ’92; Jennifer (Swart) Mysliwy, ’95; and Christopher Wisner, ’97, can all be heard voicing characters in the game. And, Jackson Hale Mysliwy (Jen and Brian’s son) made his acting debut in the game playing a wailing banshee. Born on March 22, 2003, Jack was recorded crying at the tender age of one month!
David Autovino, ’03, performed in “I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change” at the Downstairs Cabaret in Rochester.

Dan McDonald, ’93, starred as Dream Curly in “Oklahoma” with Sandy Duncan, and as Rusty Charlie in “Guys and Dolls” at the Cherry City Playhouse in Muskegon, Mich. He was also the assistant choreographer for “Guys and Dolls.”

Lori Granchelli, ’97, teaches acting classes at Studio Arena and Theatre for Youth. She also runs a drama club with her middle-school students at South Buffalo Charter School.

NU Theatre interim director Brendan Powers, ’96, and professor Paul Todaro, ’87, will be performing in “Translations” at Buffalo’s Irish Classical Theatre in March.

The recently engaged Denise Payne, ’99, is singing and tap dancing in the first national tour of “42nd Street.”

Julie Burdick, ’03, is currently on the national tour of “Fame.”

Michelle Ninacs, ’83, will be directing a production of “A Night in November” at Buffalo’s Alleyway Theatre.

NU Theatre and Castellani Art Museum Join Forces for Exhibit

Anyone who visited the Castellani Art Museum’s delightful exhibit on children’s storybook illustrator Leo Lionni last fall may have heard some familiar voices and seen some familiar faces. CAM curator Laurene Buckley welcomed Brother Augustine Towey, C.M., NU Theatre interim director Brendan Powers, speech professor Amanda Sharpe and chairwoman Dr. Sharon Watkinson as participants in the museum’s Saturday Storytime series. They read a variety of Lionni’s stories to children, and their narratives were also recorded and made a permanent part of the exhibit. In addition, NU Repertory Theatre fully staged one of the Lionni stories on exhibit and performed it in the central gallery before an audience of all ages.

“It was a terrific collaboration!” said Powers. “The response was wonderful and we look forward to doing more together.” Plans are under way for another storytelling series in late spring, this time inspired by works in the museum’s permanent collection.

NU Production Makes Powerful Impact

The September production of the post-World War II drama, “A Shayna Maidel,” made a strong impression on Sylvia Schwartz, executive director of the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo. She arranged for more than a dozen local Holocaust survivors to attend the final performance and join the actors for a unique and profound talkback session with the audience. In a letter to NU Theatre interim director Brendan Powers, Schwartz wrote, “HRC’s mission is to help provide the education necessary to eliminate hate and prejudice so that history does not repeat itself. [NU Theatre] has joined us in providing this education, and you have done so in a way that we, and everyone who saw the performance, will always remember.” In November, Powers was invited by Schwartz to accompany a group to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. It was also recently announced that a scene from “A Shayna Maidel,” featuring the cast from the NU production, will be part of the Yom Hashoah Observance Ceremony in Buffalo this April. This annual day of recognition of the Holocaust will be held at the Jewish Community Center, and brings together more than 600 people.

Dancer/Choreographer Slipko Visits NU

NU theater students will get a workout from alumna Natalie Slipko when she visits NU in March to conduct two master classes in dance. “I’m excited to return to Niagara!” says the 1993 grad, who now lives in New York City. “I want to assist the Niagara theater students in every way possible, from giving them advice on dance to offering tips on pursuing a career in musical theater.”

Slipko estimates that she has been to at least 100 dance auditions for Broadway, off-Broadway or regional productions. “Natalie is in the thick of it right now,” says Brendan Powers, NU Theatre interim director. “This type of student/alumni experience is invaluable, and we are grateful to Natalie for this opportunity.”
“Enormously talented.” That’s how Brother Augustine Towey, C.M., director of Niagara University Theatre, describes theater alumna Carmen Ruby Floyd, ’00, who is currently starring on Broadway. She covers the character “Gary Coleman” of the 1970’s television sitcom, “Different Strokes,” in the musical production of “Avenue Q.” The production is on stage at the John Golden Theatre on West 45th Street, New York, N.Y.

Making it to Broadway this summer was a dream come true for Carmen. And so was July 31, 2003, the musical’s opening night. Just before the show began, Carmen was presented with the Actors’ Equity “gypsy robe,” a colorful icon that is presented on the first night of a new Broadway musical to the actor in the production who has the most Broadway and off-Broadway credits.

Carmen’s journey to the bright lights of Broadway is a testament to her God-given gifts, her passion for her craft, and something more. “I’m a very blessed person,” she said. “I am forever grateful to God, my mother, my family and friends, Niagara University, and the city. No one does it on their own. We all get a little help somewhere.”

Carmen believes that friendliness and kindness can also help aspiring actors get ahead. She added, “Be nice to people without compromising yourself. You never know when they may be a casting director or the writer’s son. And try to surround yourself with those who support your craft.”

What’s next for Carmen Ruby Floyd? She says she’s happy to continue working. “Right now,” she noted, “my main focus is on the ‘Q.’ A month or so ago, I finished recording a demo, so maybe that will take my singing to the next level as a recording artist. I’m also starting some commercial work in TV and film.”
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Friends of Niagara University Theatre

The central gallery of the Castellani Art Museum was filled once again as theatergoers attended the 19th annual Friends of Niagara University Theatre Gala on October 18. After enjoying a wonderful dinner and a silent auction featuring a wide variety of prizes, guests made their way to the Leary Theatre, where NU theater students performed Stephen Sondheim's musical “Into the Woods.”

“It was a delightful evening, from beginning to end,” said Art Traver, president of the Friends. The gala was co-chaired by John and Karen Sanderson and James and Sharon Burdick. The silent auction was chaired by Mike and Maria Arena.

Ballard Wins Contest

Luxam, Inc. recently selected NU scene/lighting designer Michael Ballard as the winner of its product naming contest. At the United States Institute for Theatre Technology Conference in Minneapolis, the company unveiled for public viewing its equipment for rendering light in miniature using high-quality fiber optic fixtures and hardware. Luxam agreed to have attendees at USITT submit suggestions to name the system that utilized specialized museum-display-lighting fiber optics. More than 50 entries were received and Ballard’s suggestion, “Luxam’s Mini LuxLab,” was selected. Ballard received his custom LuxLab kit with the thanks of Luxam for finding a name expressive of the kit’s composition.