

DAVID COPPERFIELD

By Samuel Patrick Smith

In the spring of 1972 David Kotkin, aged fifteen, was too young to drive to the local magic club meetings. Older members of the group – I.B.M. Ring 200 in New Brunswick, New Jersey – often gave him a ride to the monthly get-togethers. Al DeLage, who laid claim to “The World’s Fastest Magic Act,” was one such benefactor.

David cherished those trips, and thanks to this support he became a regular at the meetings. Monthly reports in *The Linking Ring* mention his performances, including “a flashy rope-to-cane effect” and a demonstration of “Mento-Pen,” his own invention which to his delight made it into *Tarbell Course in Magic, Volume 7*.

Fifty years later David Kotkin – now known as David Copperfield – has become the leading illusionist of our era, the most financially successful magician of all time, and the owner of the world’s largest museum of magic history. This year the International Brotherhood of Magicians is recognizing his achievements during



David Copperfield will be honored at the 2022 I.B.M. Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG



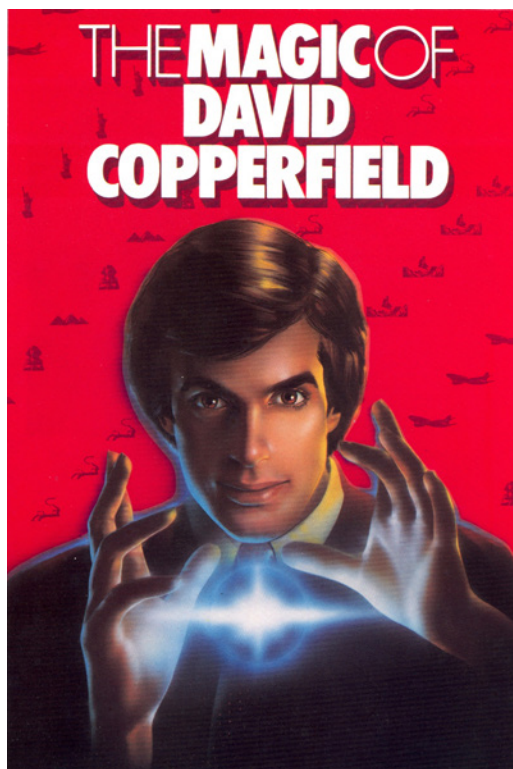
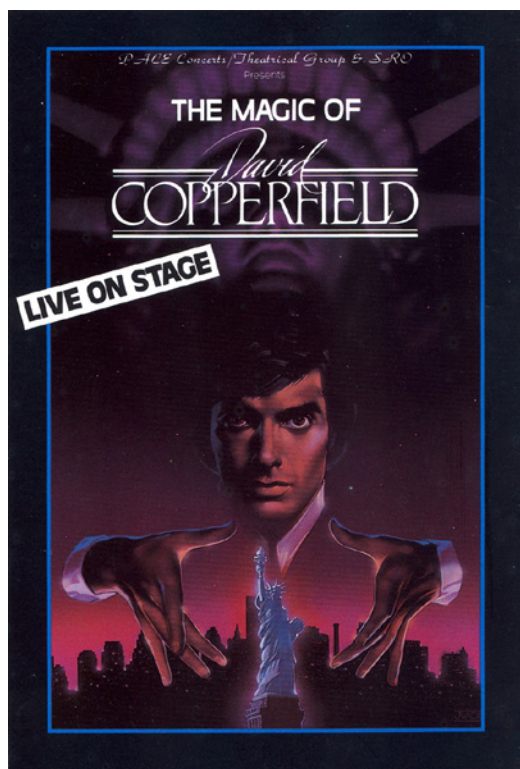
David Copperfield overlooking displays of rare magic memorabilia in the International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG

the organization's one-hundredth anniversary. Next month David will appear virtually from his base in Las Vegas, Nevada, throughout the I.B.M. Annual Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, and will receive a special award from International President Ken Scott.

In addition to the I.B.M., there were many other positive influences in David's early years. As a shy only child, David spent hours absorbed by movies and television shows. Watching Paul Winchell sparked his interest in ventriloquism, and around age eight his parents gave him a ventriloquist figure. A couple years later he asked for a new one, and they took him to the magic counter at Macy's Department Store in New York City to make his selection. The demonstrator, Danny Tsukalis, showed him an effect called Xylo Board in which a coin repeatedly vanished and reappeared. David was hooked. Soon he discovered Tannen's Magic Shop and was wide-eyed at the colorful display of

magic supplies. He switched from ventriloquism to magic and never looked back. At age ten he called himself "Davino the Boy Magician," checking out magic books at the library and visiting Tannen's on Saturdays. The impact of these visits was so profound that David has created a replica of the shop's showroom in his International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts on the outskirts of Las Vegas.

With the discovery of Tannen's, magic became a compelling passion. Soon David was performing at birthday parties, winning school talent shows, and – at sixteen – teaching magic at New York University. Yet his larger-than-life heroes were not magicians but film stars and directors like Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Orson Welles. He was fascinated by their storytelling, creativity, and ability to touch viewers' emotions. David recalls, "I wanted to tell stories and move people like they did with my magic." At age eighteen



Handbills promoting *The Magic of David Copperfield: Live on Stage* for the years 1985, 1986, and 1987. SPS COLLECTION

David got his chance. Auditions for a musical comedy called *The Magic Man* were being held at the Shubert Theater in New York City. He performed a routine with the Dancing Cane, sang “Hey, Little Girl,” and got the part.

The show opened in December 1974 at First Chicago Center in Chicago, Illinois. The wife of a *New York Post* reporter had suggested he change his name to David Copperfield, the title of a beloved Charles Dickens novel. He liked the sound of “Copperfield” and headlined in the musical under his new stage name. David recalls that as the show progressed he did more magic and fewer songs. “That says it all about my singing,” he jokes. Nevertheless, the press gave the teenager stellar reviews: “David Copperfield is a marvel” (*Sun-Times*), “David Copperfield, a master

magician, is a delight” (*Daily News*), “Copperfield is a magician of extraordinary skill combined with a rare grace that enhances every illusion he performs” (*Chicago Tribune*), and “Copperfield proves that magic can be a theatre art” (*The Windy City*). Not only were reviews glowing, but his new stage name proved memorable.

After the show closed in July 1975 following an unprecedented eight-month run, David expected the doors of opportunity to swing wide open. They stayed stubbornly shut. “I went to New York and starved,” he says. “Sometimes I didn’t know where the next dollar was coming from.” His father, Hy Kotkin, who owned a menswear store in their hometown of Metuchen, New Jersey, was supportive of his decision to pursue a career in magic,



but his mother, Rebecca, who worked in insurance, didn't like the odds. "She was a cautious person," David recalls. "She wanted me to get a real job and do magic on the side." However, his friend and mentor, Russell Swann – a successful stage and television performer who also served as vice president of the American Guild of Variety Artists – encouraged him. "You know, it's possible you could do this professionally," Swann said. "Maybe you should give it a shot."

David tried his hand at industrial shows while still pursuing storytelling with his magic. He choreographed a levitation routine to the music of George Gershwin, produced corporate executives from the Backstage illusion, and presented Assistant's Revenge with a Keystone Cops theme. By October David had booked his first significant television appearance as an act on *Magic at the Roxy*. Filmed in

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he shared the stage with such well-known magicians as Carl Ballantine, the Amazing Randi, Richard Ross, and Shimada. The show was released May 26, 1976.

In July he landed his first major magic engagement presenting *The Magic of David Copperfield* in Honolulu, Hawaii, at the Pagoda Hotel's C'est Si Bon nightclub. Performing two forty-minute shows nightly, David received rave reviews. "A long-legged, personable charmer, the 19-year-old Copperfield is a master at his art, and uniquely performs in a smoothly-paced ballet style," wrote the *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, also noting the "thunderous applause at every performance." He concluded his eight-week engagement on September 5. The next day he gave two free performances for underprivileged and elderly citizens of Oahu. More than five thousand tickets were distributed, and the mayor appeared at the show to thank David for his generosity. On Thanksgiving week, he returned to the Pagoda Hotel with a mostly new production, running into the New Year.

Back in New York, he used footage from his *Magic at the Roxy* appearance to produce a demo videotape. "Then I started knocking on doors," David recalls. Eventually, renowned producer Joe Cates saw the tape and sold a show to ABC-TV. *The Magic of ABC Starring David Copperfield*, a program announcing the network's fall lineup, aired September 7, 1977. At twenty-one, David's career steadily ascended.

The next year, still produced by Cates, CBS hired him to create his own special, *The Magic of David Copperfield*. David's childhood hero, Orson Welles, hosted the show. Between 1978 and 2001, David produced twenty television specials and won twenty-one Emmy Awards. Each show included his unique brand of storytelling magic and featured dramatic illusions such as levitating a Ferrari (1980), vanishing a seven-ton Lear jet (1981), vanishing the



Statue of Liberty (1983), floating over the Grand Canyon (1984), walking through the Great Wall of China (1986), escaping from Alcatraz (1987), and vanishing an entire train car from the Orient Express (1991). The David Copperfield Channel on YouTube includes many of these illusions with David's audio commentary.

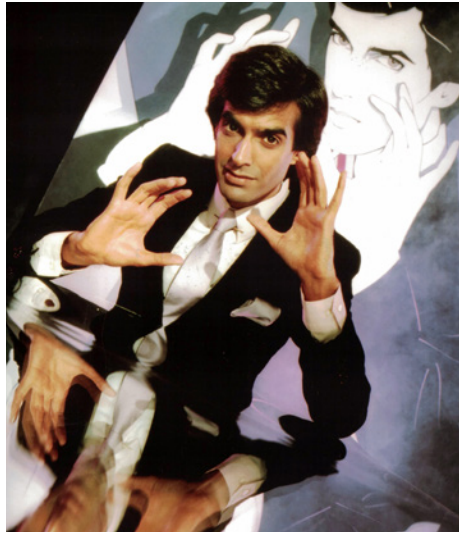
The television specials enjoyed enormous viewership and drove people to theaters for his in-person performances. In 1983 he produced *The Magic of David Copperfield: Live on Stage*. After ten world tours, and stints in Las Vegas at the Hilton, the Riviera, and Caesar's Palace, David began residency at his own 750-seat theater in the MGM Grand Hotel Las Vegas in 2003. There he continues performing fifteen sold-out shows per week.

Top left: Childhood photo of David. His family lived in a small red-brick garden apartment complex known as Redfield Village in Metuchen, New Jersey. Top right: Davino the Boy Magician. Right: Aerial shot of the beach and pool at Musha Cay, part of the Islands of Copperfield Bay.



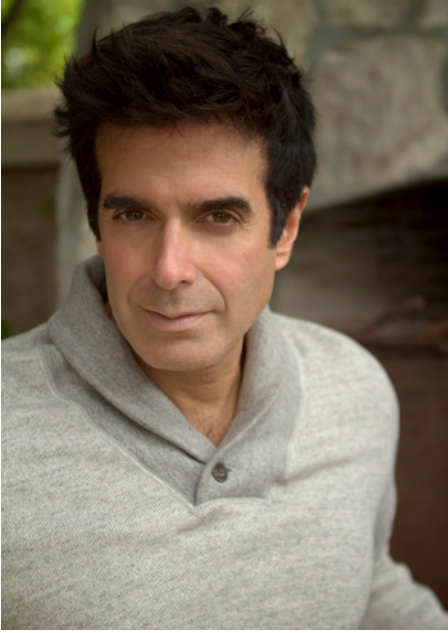
Guinness World Records credits David with the most ticket sales worldwide by a solo performer of any kind. His sales have been estimated in excess of four billion dollars. In 2018, he became the only magician in history to achieve billionaire status. In 2016 he purchased for seventeen million dollars a 30,000-square-foot home in an exclusive area of Las Vegas, where he lives with his daughter, Sky, and his better half, Chloe. He also has two older children, Dillan and Audrey. "I have a great family," David says, "and to me family is everything."

Forty-two weeks a year David performs his show at the MGM Grand Las Vegas. For the remaining ten weeks he usually recharges in the Bahamas, a four-hour trip by plane. In 2006 he purchased for fifty-six million dollars a chain of eleven islands, including Musha Cay, eighty-five miles southeast of Nassau. He invested an additional fifty million dollars developing the Islands of Copperfield Bay, where the



Top: David Copperfield has produced twenty television specials and made ten world tours. Bottom: A theater appears on Musha Cay, one of David's islands in the Bahamas. The daily rate for the island facilities is upwards of \$50,000.





David Copperfield. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG

daily rate is upwards of \$50,000. With a staff of forty, his facilities on Musha Cay aim to create a Fantasy Island experience. “We use a lot of magic principles,” he says. “For example, movies and theater appear on the beach out of nowhere. We have a lot of fun ideas underway to make the experience even more incredible.” While he goes to the Islands of Copperfield Bay to relax, David still works on ideas for his island paradise. “Usually when I leave Las Vegas, I head straight to the Bahamas,” he says.

When asked how he schedules time to plan his work, he says, “There are no rules. I just keep going.” Although he has an office in his warehouse and a magic lab, he explains, “The office happens where I am, at the warehouse, backstage at the theater – even the stage itself can be a palette for creativity.” The propensity for action is David’s hallmark. For example, when stumped by a question and given the opportunity to think it over, he says, “No – let’s talk about it now.” He forges ahead.

When both problems and opportunities arise, he deals with them thoughtfully and immediately. In 1991, while making plans

to vanish a seventy-ton Orient Express passenger car, an entirely new aspect to his magic life was coming around the bend. David’s focus always had been on the invention and performance of illusions. “I never looked back into the past too much,” he recalls. Now, however, one of the most important magic collections in the world – the Mulholland Library of Conjuring and Allied Arts – was coming up for auction. Some feared it would be broken up and dispersed. His friend, Mike Caveney, urged David to buy it – and he did. “This is all Mike’s fault,” David says grinning.

The library had been assembled by John Mulholland, a noted writer, editor, and magic scholar. In 1966, he entrusted it to the Player’s Club in New York City. After Mulholland’s death in 1970, his wish to keep the collection intact was honored until 1984 when the club sold it for \$575,000. Seven years later, the original purchaser declared bankruptcy, and the entire collection went up for auction. David won with a bid of 2.2 million dollars.

The purchase was met with relief by many of his colleagues. A few, however, seemed to resent his acquisition and questioned his commitment to properly care for it. The critics have been silenced



David in one of his favorite illusions, Flying.



Top: Rare collection of Robert-Houdin clocks in David's museum. Bottom: Robert-Houdin's The Marvelous Orange Tree. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG

by David's three decades as caretaker of these treasures, reflecting the same dedication to excellence he brings to everything he does. "I bought the collection to rescue it," David said at the time, "because if I hadn't, everything would have been scattered." Although the collection is not open to the public, from the beginning David planned for it "to be available to serious students and scholars of magic and the performing arts."

Meanwhile, in an undisclosed location in Nevada, David was building a 40,000-square-foot warehouse where he would live, construct and store his illusions, and house his new venture, the International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts. As he delved into the Mulholland materials, David's love of history deepened. "These are my roots," he said. David began acquiring additional artifacts – such as Houdini's Water Torture Cell which he purchased for \$300,000. He discovered, however, that his presence at auctions drove up prices, so he began sending representatives. The museum is now six times the



David has recreated the showroom of Tannen's Magic Shop, where he spent many magical Saturdays in New York City. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG

size of the Mulholland library and includes more than 300,000 books, props, and other magic artifacts. Through an endowment, David is providing for the future care of the collection.

His museum has also been memorialized in a lavishly produced book, *David Copperfield's History of Magic*, published last October by Simon & Schuster. The stunning photos by Homer Liwag show rare artifacts in David's collection. Jointly written with magic historians Richard Wiseman and David Britland, David shares stories of twenty-eight magicians whose memorabilia resides in his museum.

As the collection grew, David's other work continued. His television specials and sold-out theater tours, however, left one childhood performance dream unfulfilled: a show on Broadway. Beginning at age twelve he had sneaked into Broadway shows and at sixteen the ushers at the Imperial Theater allowed him to sit on the floor to watch *Pippin*. David ended up coaching the star, Ben Vereen, for the number, "Magic to Do." He also spent time

with the director and choreographer, Bob Fosse. "That was the beginning of bigger things for me," David recalls.

Years later, in December 1996 – with help from his friend and creative advisor, Francis Ford Coppola – David opened at Manhattan's Martin Beck Theater with *Dreams and Nightmares*. He worked with an A-list team, including playwright David Ives and Eiko Ishioka as visual artistic director. The show, which featured David's original illusions, such as the Death Saw and Flying, took in more than five million dollars before it opened. With sixteen performances per week throughout December, *Dreams and Nightmares* set records, grossing more than even the biggest Broadway musicals. The *New York Post* called it "the most classy and sophisticated magic seen in years and years and years." *Variety* reported, "David Copperfield prestidigitates a crowd-pleasing (at some points a crowd-stunning) show that's already breaking box-office records" and noted "David's 'likable, self-effacing demeanor.'"



A display of rare and unique Houdini artifacts, including his Water Torture Cell and a prop trunk.
 PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG



A selection of David Copperfield's promotional photos through the years. COURTESY OF THE MICHELLE AINSWORTH COLLECTION

Even a skeptical *New York Times* reviewer conceded, "The expressions on the faces of the audience volunteers suggest real delighted amazement." By the end of his Broadway run the same newspaper called him "our era's giant of magic." Following his sold-out engagement on Broadway, David continued touring with seventy tons of equipment in a road show edition of *Dreams and Nightmares*.

"From the very beginning," David once said, "I studied acting, directing, lighting,

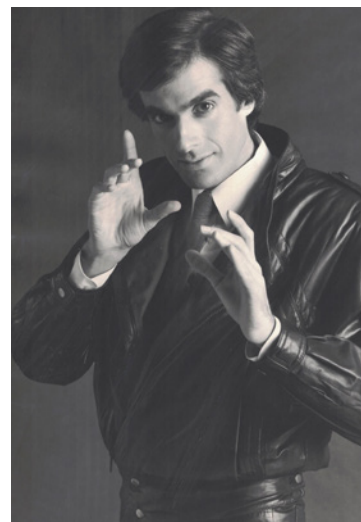
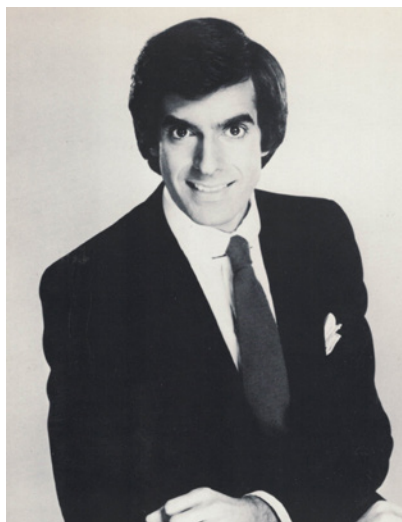
dance, and movement. I didn't rely on just the magic to take place. It's a shame that many magicians rely on the effect itself, and they have no other contributions. They get away with the wonder factor, and I don't think that's enough. It's great, but it's not enough."

While his life may seem idyllic, David says, "I take big risks, and like everyone, I fail. Every day is a battle, but I'm a dreamer and I hope to inspire others to dream." Sometimes called a workaholic, David seems constantly in motion, with a demanding performance schedule. He makes good use of time between shows, working on new projects, making phone calls, handling business. He has been the target of several lawsuits, and his inventions are often pirated. Once a performer produced an unauthorized show called *The Magic of David Copperfield* for a fairground in the Midwest. As with anyone achieving great success, David has encountered jealousy, but as he says, "I just keep going."

When asked if he has any hobbies, David replies, "I like to create." David surrounds himself with other creative people, including his executive producer, Chris Kenner, who has worked with him for



David prepares to walk through the Great Wall of China, 1986.



thirty years. David says, “Chris is a constant source of inspiration and motivation to do more and reach higher. As executive producer of my show, we’ve traveled the world and continue to live a dream.” In 1994 Homer Liwag joined the team as David’s design director and in 2011 began co-directing David’s stage and television shows. “He is the one person I know who is closest to being a true Renaissance man,” David says. “I’ve worked with many collaborators and magic consultants, but none of them have had the range of skills and sensibilities that Homer has.”

David’s spectacular illusions have always involved collaboration with other brilliant magicians. The late Don Wayne worked with him for eighteen years as magic creator and illusion director, over the course of seventeen television specials and eight hundred weeks of international tours. André Kole was another powerful influence. “André is awesome,” David says, “He is a loving, caring person, in addition to being a great inventor of magic.” David and André collaborated on David’s Death Saw and Fan Illusion, among others. “We also revised several of his inventions, including Thru Steel,

Squeeze Box, and Head Mover,” David recalls.

“My show consists of all my own inventions. My team and I create illusions you don’t see anywhere else,” David says enthusiastically. “A spaceship half the size of the theater appears over the audience. A dinosaur appears ten feet over the spectators’ heads. These aren’t adaptations of anything else. The principles are new, and we are proud of that.” The Death Saw and Laser Illusion, David notes, were new technologies, and The Blade – his vertical sawing – “was something completely fresh.” Other Copperfield classics include the astonishing Barclay House – a spirit cabinet with ghosts flying into the audience, plus the disappearance and return of three spectators – and Flying, in which David appears to fly through the air and then carry a spectator with him.

His current show at the David Copperfield Theater in the MGM Grand Las Vegas Hotel carries a nostalgic storyline, with childhood memories and reflections on the importance of family. With these themes – and David often stepping into the audience to perform his magic – the production offers a more inti-



Top: David stuns his audience at the MGM Grand Las Vegas with the appearance of a spaceship half the size of the theater. Bottom: Entrance to the David Copperfield Theater at the MGM Grand Las Vegas where David has performed since 2003. PHOTOS BY HOMER LIWAG



David charms the audience in his show featuring boyhood dreams of aliens, dinosaurs, spaceships, and time travel. PHOTO BY HOMER LIWAG

mate experience than a traditional illusion show. "I'm trying to change the language of magic," David explains. The routines are unusual, featuring boyhood dreams of aliens, dinosaurs, spaceships, and time travel. David's performing schedule at fifteen shows a week is rigorous, but he says it keeps him in shape. "My workout is the last show I did."

When asked if he has become more sentimental in recent years, David reflects, "I think as you mature you start to look at moments in your life when you were affected by certain people and events. Those things become more meaningful over time." Last month David acquired at auction the props and scrapbooks of Russell Swann, the first working pro who encouraged David to pursue magic for a living. "I'm so fortunate I got his props and memorabilia," David says, "because I'll do a beautiful display in the museum to honor him."

Other items in his collection have far more monetary value, but David is not impressed by the price of a collectible; he is more interested in the story behind each

piece. David recalls acquiring the harness for Robert-Houdin's *Ethereal Suspension*. He had seen this historic prop in Europe many years earlier, but now it was in his hands as he stood in his museum. Tears streamed down his face as he thought about the significance of the illusion, the miracle that it had been preserved since 1849, and the fact that he was now its caretaker.

Although David has become increasingly passionate about preserving the history of magic since buying the Mulholland library thirty years ago, he points out that he's not just looking toward the past. Through his inventions and innovations he wants to move magic forward, and through performances to help others fight for their dreams. "I want people to know that they can do great things, no matter what struggles they face," he says. "I want to do what I can to make a difference. I want everyone to know they can fly."

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