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ALEX RAMON BRINGS
MAGIC TO THE GREATEST
SHOW ON EARTH





BY RORY JOHNSTON

In 2006, producers Kenneth and Nicole Feld re-imagined the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, implementing some of the biggest production changes since it left the big top in 1957. They dropped the traditional three-ring presentation and changed the basic act/act/act format — the pattern of circuses for centuries — by introducing a theme and storyline to the show. Their first themed production was the 136th edition, subtitled *Circus of Dreams*, and the loose plot revolved around a lucky set of parents and their intrepid kids — actually Ringling Bros. performers — who were invited by “singing dream weaver” Jennifer Fuentes to live out their circus dreams. The following year’s show, *Bellobration*, centered on the world-famous clown Bello Nock, stretching beyond comedy to perform amazing feats and demonstrate that anything is possible. For 2008, the show was subtitled *Over the Top* and featured a rivalry between the grand ringmaster, who wanted his show to be the most spectacular ever, and the clown who thought it should simply be silly. On January 7, 2009, the 139th edition of the “Greatest Show on Earth,” *Zing Zang Zoom*, opened in Tampa, Florida, to an enthusiastic crowd. The show also has a theme centering on the rivalry between two characters; one is a clown and the other is — for the first time in Ringling history — a magician!



Christmas 1998, Richmond, California: Thirteen year-old Alex Ramon Gonzalez opens a brightly wrapped package from under the tree to discover a wondrous book — the *Mark Wilson Complete Course in Magic*. He has already been introduced to the art of magic by Paul Brown, a friend of his father's, and was "amazed and immediately hooked by it." Opening the covers of this marvelous gift, he dives headfirst into the pages. Soon, Alex finds himself a regular at San Francisco's Misdirections Magic Shop, becoming close friends with the owner, Joe Pon. For years, Alex is reluctant to perform magic for audiences. He chooses to enjoy the art simply as a fascinating hobby. Finally, his mother convinces him to do a show for his father's fiftieth birthday party. Three years later, Alex wins the Lance Burton Award at the 2004 World Magic Seminar with a classic dove act. One year after that, he receives a call from magician and theme park show-producer Steve Daly, whom he had met at the convention. Steve has recommended the young performer for a new show being created by Kenneth Feld, the producer of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, *Disney on Ice*, *High School Musical on Ice*, and *Siegfried & Roy*, among other spectacles. The show is called *Disney Live! Mickey's Magic Show*, and although he has never heard of Kenneth Feld, Alex auditions for one of two lead roles. He gets the job, and soon he and fellow magician Brad Ross are starring side-by-side in the massive touring show across North America and Asia, presenting high-energy magic with many famous Disney characters [see *MAGIC*, December 2006].

January 2009: Only ten years after that fateful Christmas gift was unwrapped, Alex Ramon, as he is now known, is the first featured magician to host a unit of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. His is a success story right out of a Hollywood feel-good movie — an entertainer's dream come true. At only 23 years of age, this young man's career has gone *Zing Zang Zoom!*

The possibility of transferring to a different kind of Kenneth Feld production was first mentioned to both Brad and Alex while they were touring Asia with *Mickey's Magic Show*. "That was in January of

Alex Ramon, dubbed the magical Zingmaster of the circus, presents several illusions throughout the evening, including a Fire Spiker [top, not yet flaming]. Alex helps a young magician from the audience levitate a parent. Alex Ramon and Clara Ruiz, a.k.a. Levitytia.



Alex and his assistants combat a villainous clown and his henchmen by using magic, including this segment in which one of the bad guys receives the slice-and-dice treatment in *The Wheel of Zoom*.

2007,” Alex says, “which gives you an idea of the time it takes to plan a show like this.” At that time, the rumors were only whispers in the Far Eastern wind — “Kenneth has a new idea and wants to put you into a Ringling show!” But in March, the murmurs grew louder, and they continued as winter turned to spring and the heat of the summer reflected off the crowded sidewalks of Osaka, Japan. “Jerry Bilik, the writer-director of *Mickey’s Magic Show*, hinted about the possibilities, but there was nothing concrete,” explains Alex. Then, during a five-week break from the show, the two magicians were approached by Kenneth and Nicole Feld about the possibility of joining the circus. According to Brad, “Nicole threw some ideas out about making an elephant disappear and doing some really cool illusions. We were very excited about this.”

Returning to tour Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, Brad and Alex kept the possible project a secret and did not discuss it with any other cast members or friends. In fact, they had a secret code word for the circus any time they talked about it: Bosco — a *Seinfeld* reference, because both were fans of the show.

Upon returning home after Thanksgiving 2007, the magicians received word that Kenneth wanted them to attend a meeting of the creative team: the Felds; Tim Holst, vice president of Ringling; Sanda Sawyer, the director of the new show; and Jim Steinmeyer, the illusion creator, who had also designed the illusions for *Mickey’s Magic Show*.

“Alex and I were very excited about the potential opportunity in front of us,” says Brad. “We’d spent many months talking about working together long-term even after *Mickey’s Magic Show*, so this had possibilities of becoming a great continuation of that partnership.”

It was at this meeting that Kenneth and Nicole first explained the idea of a magic circus. “Kenneth started the meeting by saying that they didn’t know what direction the project was going to go in and they weren’t sure what level of interest we both had in joining the circus,” explains Brad, “but they wanted to bring together all the key players to talk. We were both very honored that they thought so highly of us to include us in such a meeting. It was very exciting.”

The team of Brad Ross and Alex Ramon was offered a contract to star in the new

Red Unit production as featured performers. “At that point, we never thought about one of us accepting the contract and the other one not,” says Brad.

Brad returned to New Jersey and Alex to California, where they both thought long and hard about leaving *Mickey’s Magic Show* for a whole new life on a circus train. “Alex and I had a family with *Disney Live!*,” explains Brad, “and it wasn’t an easy decision. Entering into that show together, neither of us had ever worked with another magician and had no idea of the chemistry we would develop onstage and the friendship and connection we would have offstage. We are more than friends — we’re like brothers. It wasn’t until countless telephone calls and emails back and forth, discussing the options, and many sleepless nights, that I finally decided to say, ‘Thank you, but no thank you.’ Circus life just wasn’t for me and I wasn’t ready to leave the show I had helped to create. What can I say? I’m just Disney kid at heart!”

Alex, on the other hand, decided to accept the offer without knowing exactly what his role would be — illusionist, ringmaster, host, or something else?



and his team of ‘heavies’ who try to bring everyone down.”

Levitytia is actually Clara Ruiz, a Brazilian circus beauty who does an act walking upside-down on a platform, 35 feet in the air, with no visible means of support above or net below — an illusion in itself. She works with Alex to present a number of the illusions, but is not necessarily the person upon whom the magic is perpetrated in the traditional magic-assistant manner. In fact, much of the magic in the show is presented in an unconventional way, often as a transition between acts. For example, the show opens with a large smoke-cabinet appearance of three women, then Alex produces Levitytia from his cape. The Grand Parade follows, ending in a mind-boggling elephant vanish. Then, a dog is produced from an empty doghouse, leading into an act with trained dogs. At the conclusion of the act, a dog runs back into the house and Alex makes the canine vanish. He exits, leaving the prop behind, so a group of clowns decides to try and make a dog appear too, but Mr. Gravity is produced instead.

Mr. Gravity, portrayed by a Scottish clown known only as Tweedy, becomes Alex’s nemesis throughout the show. “In the circus, everyone is defying gravity,” explains Feld. “Someone trying to bring them all down seemed like a great antagonist.” After the three parent levitations comes the big spectacular “slice-and-dice” section of the show, in which the villain’s clown-henchmen are subjected to a giant Fire Spiker, a unique Stretching, and an original cutting-in-half christened The Wheel of Zoom — all performed to a musical number titled “Don’t Try This At Home.” Finishing off the first half is a Head Drop on a clown, a Steel Plate illusion with Levitytia, Mr. Gravity in an Assistant’s Revenge, and a Cannon Illusion.

The second half opens with Alex doing a short two-ring Linking Ring routine, which leads into another circus act. A silk trick introduces a huge thirty-by-sixty-foot cloth, onto which the magician’s shadow is projected. The image morphs into a tiger and an elephant, then the cloth is used to produce nineteen dancers and the presenters of the elephant act. “It’s not an actual illusion,

in the traditional sense,” Alex says, “but the surprise appearance is very magical. One thing that makes the show so unique is its magical flair for introducing acts.”

Having won a magic award for his work with birds, Alex wanted to return to his first success, so he also performs dove productions in the show. “In *Mickey’s Magic Show*, the bird routine just didn’t fit, but in *Zing Zang Zoom*, it fits my character nicely.” The birds lead into Levitytia’s gravity-defying act, which is followed by defying Mr. Gravity by turning him into a tiger. A bit of business with The Lean and a massive Wind Sheer illusion take the show to its finale.

Unlike most magicians, Alex works with a total of thirty additional assistants. These are performers featured in other acts, people of different nationalities from around the globe, many of whom do not speak English. This in itself could be a difficult challenge, but it hasn’t been a problem for Alex. “I work with them through a translator,” he explains. “They’re all terrific. It’s a tight cast and we’re going to have a lot of fun working together.”

