PLAYING FOR LAUGHS

JASON KULLER

BY BILL GLOVIN

WHAT WAS SUCH A NICE JEWISH BOY THINKING WHEN HE GAVE UP A LAW CAREER FOR THE LIFE OF A STAND-UP COMIC?

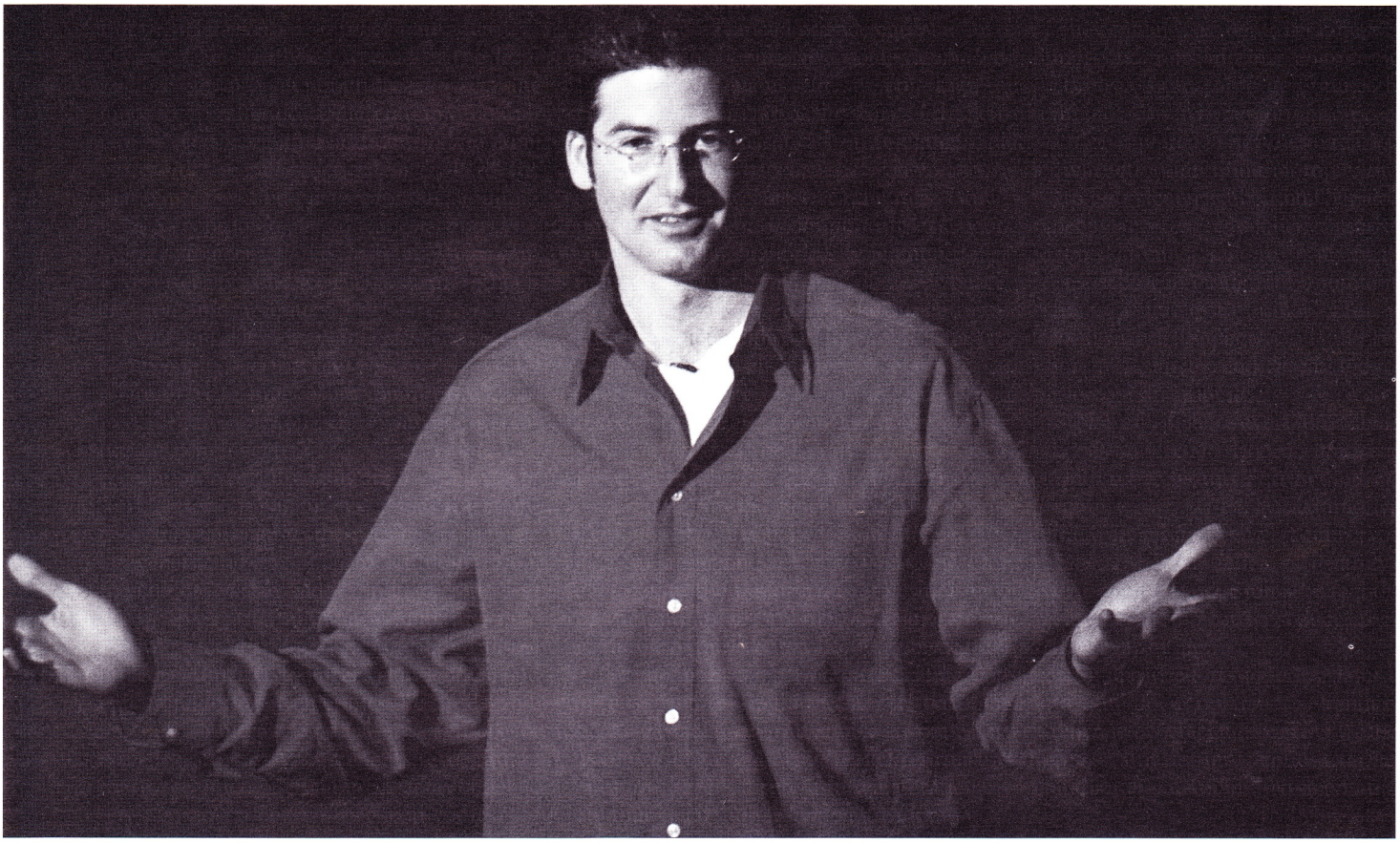
Jason Kuller was confident that lightning wouldn't strike twice and get in the way of his network television debut on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. A few months before, he had been bumped from the green room when Whoopi Goldberg went long. In a few days, he would do the drill again: visit the hair stylist and dry cleaners, put his relatives on alert, and fly from Los Angeles to New York. But then his manager called with bad news: He'd been bumped again when Jerry Seinfeld decided to make a last-minute appearance. "I guess Jerry was afraid of the competition," deadpans Kuller. "At least that first time I got to see my name in *TV Guide*."

If Kuller J.D. '89, A.M. '90 has learned anything since he decided to give up a law career for stand-up comedy, it's to roll with the punches. In the five years since he bombed before his fellow attorneys in a local comedy club contest, he has performed at some of the most prestigious comedy festivals in the world, appeared on Comedy Central and Louie Anderson's *Comedy Showcase*, and taped a one-man show for HBO. He was re-invited to appear on the Letterman show in early January and is now developing a sitcom to be co-produced by HBO Independent Productions and Castle Rock Entertainment.

Kuller's biggest break came when HBO spotted him at the Montreal Comedy Festival last year and signed him to a two-year development deal. As part of the deal, HBO asked him to develop an autobiographical, one-man theater piece that is scheduled to air in the spring. "Before my older brother Glen died, he always encouraged me to pursue my dream," says Kuller. "His death crystallized the notion that I should not look back in twenty or thirty years and think, 'I wonder what would have happened if I had given comedy a shot?'"

For Kuller, rolling with the punches has meant putting up with naysayers and hecklers, jealous colleagues, and club owners who expect new talent to work for free or next to nothing. He has developed his own sardonic style and strives to "just have fun on stage, which is harder than it sounds," he says. "If the people don't laugh, no big deal. I just go home and sob quietly into my pillow." Now that Kuller is on the precipice of moving from an unknown to a discovered talent, the pressure is on to succeed—or fall back into anonymity.

Kuller, now thirty-five, couldn't have been



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further from a career as a comic when he graduated from Duke's law school. He grew up as the youngest of three sons in a family that often made him the brunt of their humor. His brother Glen had dabbled in comedy for a short time in his early twenties, but had lacked discipline and patience. Says brother Mark, a Washington, D.C., attorney, "While our father was always funny with a joke and quick-witted, and my younger brother Glen was this hilarious, larger-than-life character, Jason was always very quiet. When I heard Jason was leaving the law for comedy, I told my dad, 'But Jason's not funny.' "

Kuller points out his family's perspective on his comic sensibilities in his one-person show, "Goodbye Yellow Brick Joke"; the title refers to a joke by his father that becomes a metaphor for life. The show traces Kuller's unlikely journey to become a stand-up comedian as he struggles to please both his parents. As he speaks on stage, a large screen behind him compares a picture of his mother, Millie, a beautiful woman from an Orthodox Jewish family, with a less-flattering photo of his secular Jewish father, Sol, whom he describes as "a low-level Mafia bookie." Their courtship, which begins on the lower East Side of New York, continues when his father is drafted into the Navy during World War II, makes a small fortune scamming his shipmates with an unmarked deck of cards, then treats them to lavish dinners at every port. "I wish my father was some sort of war hero, but unfortunately we didn't play the Nazis in poker," Kuller laments.

After wining, dining, and otherwise "conning" Millie into marrying him, Sol moved to Monticello, New York, the Catskill Mountains region known for its Jewish resort hotels, bungalow colonies, and race track. Millie sent Kuller and his brothers to yeshiva (a private Hebrew school), but Sol exposed them to Borscht-belt comedians and the trotters at Monticello Raceway. His was a family in which the mother lit Sabbath candles, kept a kosher home, and encouraged her sons to become doctors or lawyers, while the father took bets, slipped his sons ham, and beamed whenever one of them delivered a good joke. "Once you've tasted ham, it's like smoking crack," Kuller quips. "Pretty soon you're on the corner hocking your yarmulke for bacon."

When Millie died from cancer a month before his bar mitzvah in 1976, his father moved the family to Las Vegas. By this time, Mark, who is ten years older than Jason, was on his way to becoming legislative counsel to the head of the Internal Revenue Service. Glen, five years older, was on his way to becoming one of the biggest bookmakers on the West Coast, not only in terms of betting action but in weight—he topped the scales at more than 300 pounds. "I once questioned Glen on one of his point spreads and he gave me this incredulous look and huffed, 'They didn't question Van Gogh on his use of yellow.' Fortunately, Mark was in a great position to help Glen and my dad with their considerable income-tax issues," says Kuller.

In Las Vegas, Kuller was enrolled in a public high school, where he ran track, was president of a Jewish youth group, and received straight A's. He also started perfecting some of the magic tricks he had learned years earlier as a way to wrestle some of the attention away from his brothers. He attended workshops and hung around magicians who performed in the casinos. But he lacked direction: "It was like I had Mark on one shoulder advising me to stay in school and get an education and Glen on the opposite shoulder encouraging me to do whatever made me happy."

Still hearing his mother's voice in his head and feeling that his traditional upbringing had kept him sheltered, Kuller decided to come out of his shell in a big way. "I decided to become the nation's first Jewish president." To achieve this lofty goal, he enrolled at Georgetown University, which put him in the nation's political center as well as a multicultural environment. "Growing up so immersed in Jewish traditions, I thought I'd see how the other half lives by going to a Jesuit school," he recalls. "I tried to pass myself off as a Catholic, but the giant, rapper-sized Mezuzah was a giveaway."

A highlight at Georgetown was performing his card tricks for Patrick Ewing and the other basketball stars who lived on his dormitory floor. But mostly, Kuller says, he was a "nerd" and an "egghead" who was so shy that he had but one date in four years. "Even that ended in disaster when I underestimated the cost of dinner, didn't have enough money to pay for a cab, and we had to walk home from the restaurant in the pouring rain."

His friends admired his wry, cynical observations, but he didn't know what to make of such praise. "As far as I was concerned, I was just reflecting one-tenth of my dad's and Glen's sense of humor and charisma."

In May 1985, he received a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy and political science. "Imagine my surprise when I discovered that none of the big philosophy companies were hiring," he says. That summer he visited his childhood best friend, Todd Slayton '84. As boys in Monticello, Kuller and Slayton had recreated Marx Brothers routines and made Super Eight films with their G.I. Joes. "I had the typical Eastern preconception that North Carolina was Hicksville," says Kuller. "But I was won over by the charm of Durham, the fried chicken, and the Southern women—not necessarily in that order. I really love fried chicken."

Kuller stayed in Durham with Slayton while he took a year off to ponder the future. In the interim, the philosophy major found work as a car salesman: "Once I got customers questioning their own existence, it was very tough to sell them an extended warranty." The job turned sour when the dealership was closed by consumer regulators for faulty business practices. "I almost did something illegal, which was a proud moment for my dad," he says. But he ultimately heeded his mother's advice and applied to Duke's joint degree program in law and philosophy. "I wanted to stay in Durham, so my goal shifted from president to philosopher-king."

A huge basketball fan, Kuller had reveled in Georgetown's success during the Patrick Ewing era. But the atmosphere at Cameron, his admiration of Coach K and the ACC style of play, and two Final Fours in his three years at Duke persuaded him to switch allegiances. One favorite hangout on campus was "The Bubble," an outdoor basketball court enclosed by a chain-link fence in the middle of the woods between the law school and Cameron. Success on one of the Bubble's courts frequently meant Kuller skipping or arriving late for class. When he won a grant from the Freewater Film Society, he took his cues from the Bubble and began making a *Spinal Tap*-like mockumentary about a mild-mannered Duke business professor who, despite his unassuming appearance and thick Slavic accent, was one of the Bubble's dominant players. "One of my big regrets is not finishing that film, but graduation got in the way."

That September, he started at Vinson & Elkins, a top-ten law firm in Houston. He was attracted by the firm's budding entertainment division and his desire to help put together film deals on the "third coast." But he soon found himself working on less-glamorous corporate law matters, like securities regulations, so he switched to the firm's appellate division.

"For the first time in my life, I had the creature comforts—the nice apartment, the fancy car—all the things people generally associate with success," he says. "But I knew in my heart of hearts that I didn't want to be practicing law for the rest of my life."

Frustrated by three years surrounded by humorless lawyers, Kuller spotted an ad for a comedy workshop and, within weeks, had written and performed five minutes of his own material in front of the class. Afterward, the instructor told him he was a natural and suggested that he try performing at an open-mike night in a real comedy club. Says Kuller, "It was two weeks before my thirtieth birthday. I figured it was now or never."

He compares hearing his name announced from the stage for the first time to being pushed out of an airplane. "There was no going back. That was the moment I realized there's a huge difference between making my friends laugh and trying to be funny in front

of a group of strangers. I tried to ignore the blinding spotlight, the noise from clinking glasses and conversation, and the deafening lack of laughter. When I finished, one of the regular comics there came over and told me that my material was good but that I needed more time on stage to get comfortable."

Those few words of encouragement inspired him to return each week and tape his act. Working on cases during the day, he found himself drifting from torts to comedy tactics. He also started to improve. "The euphoria I felt from making strangers laugh kept me coming back. Stand-up is such a wonderfully pure form of entertainment because, unlike anything else, there is instantaneous feedback." That year he entered the "Funniest Person in Houston" contest, made it to the finals, and invited everyone from his law firm to the competition. "I was so nervous that I bombed. It was difficult to show up for work on Monday. I thought they were going to fire me because of my set."

But he didn't give up. Based on the many successful sets he had delivered in Houston's comedy clubs, he was invited to perform in a "New Faces of Texas" show in July 1993 at the Improvisation in Los Angeles. It was there that Sol and Glen first saw him perform. "I could see them laughing in the audience," he recalls. "When I came off stage, they hugged me as if I had just won the NCAA Tournament. I think I genuinely surprised them." Six months later, Glen, who had been fighting a drug and weight problem, was dead from a drug overdose.

Kuller, who had always been encouraged by Glen's support and positive outlook on life, was devastated. He didn't feel much like telling jokes anymore and stopped performing. A year later, shortly before the unveiling of Glen's gravestone, Sol was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and told that he had less than a year to live. Leaving the law firm and any chance he had of making partner behind, Kuller moved to Florida to spend time with Sol. "I was only twelve when my mother died, and I hadn't realized that she was so sick," he says. "Her death had been a total shock. I wasn't going to let my father go without him knowing how much he meant to me."

After Sol's death in September 1994, Kuller moved to Los Angeles with an ultimatum: He had three years to find a way to support himself as a comic or comedy writer. He found contract work as an attorney to pay the bills and hit the open mikes. Sometimes he would wait as long as four hours for a five-minute spot in front of three people. "There are so many talented comedians in Los Angeles. It was both inspiring and depressing. You have to really want it bad."

Andy Kindler, one of his comedy idols, helped boost his confidence one night when he approached Kuller after a gig and told him he had enjoyed his set. In March 1997, Kuller invited Kindler to "headline" an amateur showcase at the Comedy Store's Belly Room. A talent scout from MTV came by to see Kindler and happened to catch Kuller's act.

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Kuller was floored when the scout invited him to perform at an upcoming MTV showcase at the Improvisation on Melrose, one of the city's top clubs. "It was a fluke," he says. "I was an open-mike comic and most of the other showcase performers had been on television. I talked myself into not being nervous and just having fun. Two beers helped."

Kuller's set at the MTV showcase got him an audition for the "Just For Laughs" Comedy Festival in Montreal, the largest comedy festival in the world. He was competing with several hundred comedians from every English-speaking nation for one of the coveted "New Faces of Comedy" slots. When the twenty-four "new faces" were announced, Kuller was on the list. He says his odds of becoming a "New Face" without an agent or manager was like "an at-large team making it to the Final Four."

A good set at the festival led to an agent, a manager, and the development deal with HBO. When HBO encouraged Kuller to fashion his one-man show, he pitched them on his life story, and they were sold. Says Kuller, "My family history is filled with death, and the major challenge in writing and performing an autobiographical theater piece was to walk that fine line between funny and sad, between humor and pathos, which is a much different creative process than stand-up."

His debut performance in December 1997 at the HBO Workspace in Hollywood went over so well that he was invited to perform "Goodbye Yellow Brick Joke" along with his stand-up act at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, the country's premier comedy festival. "I had an amazingly successful series of performances in Aspen," he says. "Men were coming up to me saying I had made them cry for the first time, strangers were handing me bottles of wine and telling me how much my show had meant to them."

On the last day of the festival, his manager called with word that both the Letterman show and *Politically Incorrect* were interested in having him on. "I was on Cloud Nine—make that Cloud Ten," he says. "Letterman is another idol of mine. And his show breaks in only a handful of new comedians each year."

Kuller is now at a crossroads of sorts. He's developing a sitcom with Alan Zwiebel, co-creator of *It's Garry Shandling's Show*, for next season. He's also started on a screenplay version of his show, in which the movie industry has expressed interest. Then there's his manager's advice to continue developing his stand-up act, which cannot be dismissed lightly: His manager also represents Billy Crystal and Robin Williams.

Kuller, trying to do all these things, says his heart is still with the show. He dreams of expanding it and taking it Off-Broadway. "My friends have told me that I seem so happy when I'm doing the show. The show helps me relive those glorious times when my family was all together and laughing. It's like I'm carrying the family torch and presenting them in such a way that the world can enjoy them, too."

One thing Kuller says he's sure of: He will not go back to practicing law. "Duke Law School should pray I become its most famous alumnus, though," he says. "Otherwise, they're going to be stuck with Nixon and Ken Starr."

In October, Kuller screened the HBO video of his show for relatives at a post-bas mitzvah brunch at Mark's house in Potomac, Maryland. Most thought he was crazy or, at the very least, misdirected for giving up the law for show business. Even his brother, now his biggest booster, said he should have stayed with the law firm and made partner. Now, as the credits roll, his aunts, uncles, and cousins have tears in their eyes as they line up to congratulate him on his work and to give him their blessings.

"How can I explain to you how this feels?" Suddenly he has the answer: "It's like hitting the winning shot against Carolina." ■

Glovin, senior editor for Rutgers Magazine, *was in the audience when Kuller appeared on the Letterman show January 7.*