

OUT & ABOUT WITH ALUMNI

ALUMNI PROFILE

An interview with Kevin Kolack: Actor and stand-up chemist

Interview by Norman Dean

In both of the last two graduating classes, the department has had graduates with double majors in chemistry and theatre. **Keven Kolack**, PhD'97, had a wider range of interests than a typical graduate student while in Bloomington, where some of his other activities included renovating houses and serving as a volunteer firefighter/EMT for the Bloomington Township Department of Fire and Emergency Services. Kevin was also the subject a recent profile in the *Indiana Alumni Magazine*.



Courtesy Kevin Kolack

Kevin Kolack

Kevin, your acting resume on your website (kevinkolack.com) claims that getting a PhD in chemistry was great training for acting. It says, "Ask me why." So, why was it great training for an acting career?

KK: Successfully and sanely navigating graduate school involves independently learning and working toward a long-term goal over many years for long hours in a collaborative environment, with no set schedule for an advisor and committee whose involvement in your day-to-day research can vary widely. In acting, it's very much the same. The entertainment business is incredibly collaborative and can involve a potentially international crew of hundreds of people with varied backgrounds. Your director may be hands-on or hands-off. There's a lot of "hurry up and wait." Your goal—thanking everyone at the Oscars!—is not going to happen overnight and involves a lot of work that no one will ever see—keeping up-to-date mailing lists and marketing materials, etc., aside from the indie films you do that no one other than your mother and a few film festival goers will ever see!

Was acting something you were always interested in? How did you get started?

KK: Growing up in public school in the deep south, I was under the incorrect assumption that if you were smart, you had to become a doctor, lawyer, or scientist. I thought I couldn't stand the sight of blood (firefighting showed me it's just *my* blood I have a problem with!) and didn't really like lawyers (still don't), so before I knew it, I was happily at IU Chemistry. However, like my father, Dr. David Kolack (a lifelong barbershop chorus member for whom a scholarship at the IU School of Optometry is named) before me, I maintained both right- and left-brain interests throughout. So when I saw an ad in the *Herald-Times* for a visiting talent scout from New York City, I had to check out what he had to say. Thus began week-long trips to New York for workshops, and weekly treks to Chicago for classes through the second half of my graduate career. Luckily, I had a very understanding and encouraging advisor (Prof. **George Christou**, now at the University of Florida). I taught one semester at IU after I graduated, and moved to New York City on January 1 of the next year.

What do you consider to be your biggest and/or most interesting acting accomplishment to date?

KK: On camera, I really enjoyed developing the bad guy character in the fan film *Little Indiana Jones*, which you can see on YouTube. Off camera, I've enjoyed the philosophical discussions I've had with several of the cast members of *Law and Order: SVU*. And I'm very happy with my voice work as Tokkori on the cartoon *Kirby*, which I describe as "Ross Perot on crack."

You haven't let your chemistry skills stagnate through your acting career, either. Many people haven't heard of The Cooper Union. What is it like teaching chemistry there?

KK: Cooper is one of the top engineering schools in the country, and is tuition-free for all students, thanks to an endowment from inventor Peter Cooper. Notable graduates include Thomas Edison, animator Max Fleisher, and interestingly, both of my maternal great-grandfathers. More kismet! (Both of Kevin's parents attended graduate school at IU.) I'll admit that teaching at IU spoiled me for teaching anywhere else. I'm grateful to have been able to supplement my acting income by "performing stand-up chemistry" at Cooper the past 10+ years, but in terms of support for teaching, there's just no comparison—I miss those demos from the folks in Room C021!

Is there anything from Bloomington that you can't find living in New York?

KK: New York City really is a great place to visit. But apparently, PhDs grow on trees here, because part-time faculty are paid so little! I do miss the fire department and the food. Having married a native New Yorker, I've recovered a bit of the community I lost upon leaving Bloomington. And she's an amazing chef. But I had no trouble rattling off a list of restaurants for a friend who was attending a conference at IU this past summer. I can't wait to come back for a visit.