EPISODE 45 – Brian Glow

Interview Transcript

Show notes available at: http://savvyeventpodcast.com/45
Tom: Folks, I'm on the line with Brian Glow. Brian, welcome to the show.

Brian: Hey, Tom. Thanks very much for having me.

Tom: I'm thrilled to have you here. Brian, you are an international corporate entertainer, and you're based in Canada?

Brian: I'm based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, that's right in the center of Canada above North Dakota.

Tom: And you travel all over the world to entertain at corporate events?

Brian: Right. For corporate events, I've done over 40 countries, casinos, a few more.

Tom: Okay. Now, I'd like you to start by telling our listeners a little bit about your background and how you evolved into the international event industry.

Brian: Sure. About 1966 we used to watch Ed Sullivan here at home as I was a child, as it was religion. And they always had magicians on, and I loved it. And I tried to do it, absolutely couldn't. My poor mother took pity on me and took me to a library where I got the first magic books and started my bug going, and I did the usual birthday party circuits and stuff.

But in 1972, 73-ish, I started working at a restaurant. I had sold the manager on me performing magic from table to table, doing magic between the soup and salad. And it just happened that this was a higher-end restaurant that catered a lot to corporate clients, so the kind of people that were coming were businessmen from all sectors, and a lot of out-of-town people. And as I would go around doing magic, I'd invariably do stuff with personal objects and things from the table, and every once in a while, someone may have come from a trade show and had a product or some weird item, and they said, "Do something with this," and I would. And they went crazy over it. They said, "That would be fantastic at our booth, at a trade show booth." And then I went, "Oh, that would be wonderful." And I went, "What's a trade show?" I had no idea back then.

And in 1973, I was doing literally almost full-time, and it started my professional career. And very soon after that, I did go see a trade show, which I thought, "I would be a perfect fit for this." I knew in my mind there's a few people in the world that are going to be incredibly famous. My friend, Doug Henning, for instance, became incredibly famous, and Dave Copperfield, and a few others. But outside of that, I thought the ability for a magician to become famous was not going to be in the cards, possibly, but if I was going to make a
living at it, you know, go where the money is. And it happened to be that the corporate entertainment realm was perfect.

So I started talking to event planners and people who were putting on trade shows, and conventions, and sales meetings, and product launches, and I happened to have, I guess, the right ideas, because I could come up with solutions for their problems. Sometimes, you would have a conference, and they'd say, "Oh, well, we had a comedian, but he just didn't connect with the audience," or, "We had music, and then only 10 people danced, and that wasn't any good," and magic really catered to a much broader audience. And the idea that I could actually incorporate a sales message or a product right into the show itself appealed to the producers as well as the people who were booking the events. So that's really how it just took off, and here, 500 trade shows later and maybe 8,000+ concerts, corporate is my world.

Tom: Now, you started with trade shows. Am I correct on that?

Brian: Yes, trade shows was really my first introduction into the corporate world, and it was kind of the baptism in fire, because I had no idea what I was getting into then. I'd be on a floor from 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning to go 5 or 6 in the evening and then do a hospitality suite after that and then three days later be in another city doing the same thing for a completely different product and trying to unite a message and product show after show. It got pretty crazy. But it became part of my life, and that was the fun part.

Tom: Now, you also kind of diversify. If I remember correctly, we were talking about how you were able to go in and do the trade show and then save event planners by doing different things. What was it? An after dinner show, hospitality suite, that kind of thing. Tell us a little bit about how that first came about.

Brian: Well, exactly right. In fact, one of the event planners, who became quite great friends with me, had this...we were doing a trade show, and it was probably the third one in a dog and pony kind of show going across Canada at that time, and they got stuck for a breakfast entertainer. The entertainer that was supposed to be there did not make the flight, and they said, "Could you do a show?" And I said, "Well, I actually do a huge stage show, and we have illusions or one-man show. Anything you want. And because I'm just by myself, I can easily put a show on in the morning for you." And it started that way.

There was about 800 people, and I did a one-man 45-minute comedy magic show, and he went berserk. He said, "I didn't know you could do that. What else
can you do?" And I said, "Well, I do workshops and seminars, and I speak about integration and memorability of products in a show," and that's really how it started. All of a sudden, I was doing every kind of event you could imagine in a show. So now I was not only the MC and the after-dinner entertainer, I also did the workshops, and I did the evening performance for the banquets, and during the day, I was doing the trade shows for some times. That's when some conferences have trade shows, and many, many do.

So I became this kind of all-in-one knife that would be able to be fitting. And I saved the event planners a lot of money, because instead of having four or five different acts coming in, I was diverse enough and had enough material that was different enough, not just being a magician, because I do far more than just magic, that it suit their needs. And it ended up saving them sometimes thousands and thousands of dollars.

**Tom:** So you started working, I would assume, what, trade shows in Canada and then branched out from there?

**Brian:** I did. My first shows were in Canada, and I had clients, like Cargill, who were doing a lot of shows throughout the U.S. And my first visas were actually gotten by the companies themselves, and because we were doing so many of them, we ended up getting year-long visas, and at a time when I was getting a lot of press, so I was, I guess, a performer of note, it was very easy for them to get a visa for me. Now, I get my own, and I have blanket periods of an entire year, so I can come and go to Canada and the U.S. without any hassle, because I've already got the pre-approved visas.

Nowadays, it can take, sometimes, up to nine months, because of the mass immigration from other countries coming into North America. That would hurt an event planner immensely, because they just wouldn't have the time to pre-plan. Some shows which are a year, two years in advance are not a problem. But when you've got something coming up in six months, how can you be assured that you can get an international performer of note into your event and just hope for the best? You can't. The process is just too arduous and can become very expensive, too.

So if an event planner is looking to bring in someone international, you want to make sure that that's the first thing they know, is that, A, can they travel easily, and what's the process of either getting a visa for them, or do they have their own? For me, it's a matter of signing a contract. I do all the paperwork. I am over the border. I can do it tomorrow. There's no hassle. But someone else, again, might take nine months.
Tom: Wow. I didn't realize all that. Generally, when I've gone in, I've worked in through speaker agencies or talent agencies who handle all the paperwork on that end. Do you advise that an event planner, if they're looking to bring in an international act, would work with a talent agency or speaker agency rather than an individual performer? Or do you think there's...I mean, give me your thoughts on this.

Brian: Well, yeah, I think that would be a better way to go. In my case, I'm more of a rare commodity that I do have my own ability to be able to travel internationally throughout the world. Now, there's many other performers who are quite...if they're quite famous, that's really not going to be an issue. I mean, if you're going to get a headline act, more than likely, the fact is they probably have that paperwork done already from their management companies, because they will be touring throughout the world, anyways. If it's someone who is lesser known but might be a specialty act who you really want, or a speaker, I don't know, maybe a specialized workshop leader, something like that, who you really want to bring in maybe from the UK and bring him into the States, or maybe someone from Indonesia wants to bring someone in from China, there's just as much hassle in every country.

Everyone's got their own barriers for trade and for performers, not just for products. So, yes, having someone who can handle that load would be way smarter, because, as I said, the paperwork can be quite arduous, as well as having to sometimes get lawyers involved, which can become really, really expensive. Even visas right now are running a few thousand dollars. So that is going to be a sign that automatically says, "Oh, you are out of our price point," in a lot of lower-end cases.

If it's some giant show where a speaker is getting $60,000 or something, the visa cost is going to be negligible, but if you're bringing in an act for $3,000, $4,000, you're not going to spend a couple of thousand dollars on a visa and the month that it might take to do all the paperwork and collect the notoriety that the person needs to get that visa, and that's really important. Again, people like myself who've done all that work already, it's a matter of calling up and saying, "Are you available for this date?" "Yes. Okay. Done. Thank you very much. Sign the contract. It's done." But that's not always the case. So they absolutely have to do their homework.

Tom: Okay. That's great advice and great information. Again, that was something. As much as I've traveled and gone through Homeland Security, and the TSA, and all that type of side, my trips have been relatively easy. Now, when you're doing illusions, you carry a lot of props. Talk to us a little bit about that process, if you would.
**Brian:** Absolutely. I have everything from a one-man-show all the way to a 22-person concert. Our largest show, we've had 70+ people in it, but generally, those people will hire maybe 50, 60 people in another country and go in early and get them ready for an event. But when I was touring my "Glow...In The Dark," which was my largest production with 22 people, we were on the road 6, 8 months a year just with that show, as well as our smaller version of "Smoke and Mirrors" that was going on about another 3, 4 months a year. So we can range anywhere from a suitcase to three and a half semi-trailers. That kind of tonnage can get really, really crazy.

So one of the things we always have to do for going across border is arrange what they call a carnet, and that's a bond that says, "My equipment is coming into your country, and we promise to take every nut and bolt back and not add anything to it as well." And so the paperwork that we do is right down to virtually nuts and bolts sometimes, especially if you go to Japan. You have to be that meticulous on what you're taking over, what you're bringing in, and what you're taking out.

Carnets are used in about 85 countries around the world right now, and it's basically a get-out-of-jail pass, so you don't have to pay any duties, any taxes. You don't have to pay a fee for what they call a storage fee. There's multiple, multiple taxes and little waives they can bring you. But the carnet is a flat fee for getting the paperwork done, and it's basically a bond that a company will set up and say, "We promise that they will not take or leave anything extra, and we'll guarantee it with x amount of dollars."

So if your equipment is worth, say, I don't know, like ours, four and a half million dollars, we will...it's like an insurance policy that you pay, and they do the bond work. There's a hefty fee to doing stuff like that, but it's a necessary way of doing business. Again, for us, it's easy, because we've done hundreds and hundreds of them. Other people, if they're doing it for the first time, it's going to be months' work. So, again, something to make sure is that the performer, if they're bringing in some kind of big or large production, that they do have all the necessary paperwork to be able to get their equipment in and out very quickly and easily.

**Tom:** Wow, that is so much great information. It sounds like it's so complicated that it's almost better to have someone else who has experience with it, like yourself, to do all that stuff.

**Brian:** Right. You want to make sure that whoever you're getting to, these are the questions that have to be asked before the signing of a contract. Many times,
you're booking something a year in advance, and then, again, did they do all of this work? Can they get here? I don't want to dissuade bringing in international acts, that's what makes the world so fantastic, because we get to play in other people's playground. But at the same time, you want to also make it as easy for the event planner as possible. So the entertainers have got to know, and the event planners have to know as well, that each can fulfill the promises that they are being asked. But the questions have to be asked by the event planners first.

**Tom:** You're talking about the international aspect and bringing people in. I'm noticing a trend, and maybe it's been around for a while, but I noticed it with the last few interviews I've done, where we've been talking about cross-cultural topics, not necessarily on the podcast, but it's something that's coming up with the guests, and an international act adds to that cross-cultural. When you're going into another culture, do you try to bring in elements of it?

**Brian:** It depends on the client, to be very honest. We were doing a tour for Hewlett-Packard, for instance, and we were in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Manila, and this was two months of touring the show into very, very diverse cultures and languages. One of the things that we did is, because we were doing very large illusions and making the products appear and disappear and change shape and size, is we had soundtracks that were made in each country's language. And instead of having like translation, as we were doing the productions and the events, any kind of taglines, any jokes, everything was all done digitally.

And it got fantastic reactions, because I'm not murdering a language or trying to tell a joke in the wrong way, and I do. I always try to learn at least a few words properly for welcoming and thanking people and that sort of thing, of course, but these are in the context of we're doing these big productions with dancers, and music is going already, and they're, of course, talking about the introduction of a new printer, or scanner, or software. And these are technical details you don't want to get wrong or misconstrued, so that was one way we solved the problem, and they loved it, and the reaction was absolutely fantastic.

**Tom:** That is truly brilliant. I've got to give you a hand for that. That is very, very clever. Now, you've said you've played in, I think, 44 countries?

**Brian:** Yes, 44 now.

**Tom:** Okay. When you're going overseas, obviously, the U.S., the UK are big for events, some of the other countries that you've mentioned, what is it like when you go there and are working with event planners? Is there any difference, or is everything just across the board very similar?
Brian: Oh, no, absolutely, absolutely, completely different. It can be the entire rainbow spectrum from event planners who've done the Olympics to event planners, it's their second job, and they landed a major client, and they have no idea what an LED lamp is. They have no idea that you need a stage that can actually hold x amount of pounds per square foot even though it's in the writers, just absolutely new concept. So you would get to an event, and we're expecting to have 120 foot by 80 foot stage as they had said it was going to be, and they have a 30 by 30 that's 2 feet off the ground, but there's 3,000 people. And it's a workaround. You have to do a lot of communication, and there's many times when we've had to hold people's hand.

I can give you a nightmare scenario, perfect example. Years ago, we were doing 24 shows in Bahrain for National Day's, and they had sold out 70,000 seats. So we knew that we were going to be doing literally four shows per day for the week. It was intense. We got there two days early, so we would get over the jet lag, and we had a very large show for this event, and all the equipment had been shipped in. We'd sent it 48 days early, so it had got there on time. I have enough equipment that we can run several shows leapfrogging each other, but this particular show was quite a big show. And I was known for doing a lot of firework shows, and we had the world's largest fire show back in the '80s, and '90s, and early 2000s before Rhode Island.

So we arrive, and we see this beautiful, big building, but it's not a building like a theater. It was made of plastic. They had literally built this building. It was just thin plastic, and it was massive. It held 3,000 people each show, and it was beautiful, but it was translucent. So during the day, and two of the shows were during the day, the light from outside beamed in, and it didn't help that it was a 104 degrees outside.

Tom: Oh, jeez.

Brian: So the inside was reflecting heat and keeping heat in, so that was interesting. They had a huge stage for us. I think at that time it was a 60 by 40 foot stage for this event, which we had planned for, all of that, and we sent the writer, and when we got to the theater, there were boxes, and boxes, and boxes, and we realized that it was all the lighting. They had never had lighting of that kind of technical before - moving lights and other paraphernalia that we needed for the show. It was just in the writer, but they didn't care. It was National Day's. It was a huge event. They were spending millions on the event, so what's some light?
So they just ordered them in as per the writer, but they had no one who knew how to set them up. So we had our tech guys literally do 28 hours of straight through setup, hanged the lights, focused, got everything, ran the cable. They didn't even have cables. We had to do everything. It was incredible. We literally built their theater for them. But that's the kind of nightmare scenario you can run up, because they had lots of money with no experience.

Tom: Oh, man. Those are two experiences that you shared. When you were talking about the small stage, two feet off the ground with that many people, my heart sank at that, and then hearing you're in basically a greenhouse, having the heat come in. How did those shows go, out of curiosity, with all that heat in there?

Brian: You know what, it was fantastic. You have to remember, this is a population that's used to that kind of heat. I'm from Canada. We get -40 degrees when we play hockey out here. So it was a little different coming there, and it was unbelievably hot. I almost passed out a couple of times, and we learned to drink water literally all day long and took two salt pills every single day just to replenish and make sure that the green room area that they had set up, they put air conditioning in.

They hadn't even thought of that, because it just wasn't in their culture. And so they got air conditioning in there, so that as soon as the show finished, they would run like mad people to this building that was the only air-conditioned building for probably miles around, which is ridiculous. Well, I'm sure their office buildings were, but certainly not the area that they had built up for this new theater, which was, like I said, wasn't a theater. It was just a big, giant...it's almost like a plastic tent, I'd guess you'd call it, except that it held 3,000 people and didn't have any poles in it. It was an unbelievable architectural structure.

Tom: Wow, I'm actually surprised when you say they went well, because you're right, I can understand where they're used to the heat, but every time I've worked an outdoor program where the audience and some planners don't think about the audience, they just think, "We need chairs, or we need a place for people to sit," they're out in the sun, and they're dying from the heat, and that really limits response. Kudos to you for making that work. You shared with us a horror story. Let's talk about an event that you've been to, and you don't have to mention any names, but an event that you've been to that just was over the top, and share a little bit of that experience and what made it so special.

Brian: Well, I've done shows for the Winter Olympics and the Pan-American Games, and I have to say that those are some of the most exquisitely run operations I've ever seen in my entire life. I mean, thousands of volunteers
being coordinated by an army of lieutenants, and then on top of that, the structure was literally military, and it was brilliant. Talk about clockwork. When they said, "Your rehearsal is at 7:05," it started at 7:05. It ended at 8:26. That was it. It was like, "Next!" You didn't have a chance, and you had to.

They were literally controlling 2,000, 3,000 people on the field for stadiums that held 80,000–some-odd people, incredible, incredible. And there were drivers. There was food. If you needed something, if you needed a paintbrush, someone ran out to get it for you, and the right color paint. And if we had to touch up something, if we needed a screw that had come out, that wasn't in our toolkits, someone got something, not that that happened, really, but it was that kind of precision, is what I'm saying.

We knew there was always someone telling us what was happening, when it was going to happen, where to go, absolutely brilliant. In terms of an event planner's nightmare, or could have been, it was brilliant. But then, again, there's planning. There's literally several years of planning. And they get to stand on the shoulders of many, many Olympics and Pan-American Games that were before that.

But that's where passing knowledge from one entity to another...and I had found out, of course, especially for the Pan-Am Games that I was doing, it was a team that had actually done two other Pan-American games before that. So they brought that collective knowledge with them and expertise of massive events. But learning how to do mass events for us was a whole learning curve as well. It took a good year plus to plan for that one project, but we were as ready as they needed us to be, too.

**Tom:** Well, and so basically, the precision, the ability to help you out in anything you need, the fact that everything ran like clockwork, all that planning made that event even more special.

**Brian:** It was absolutely. And it had to do a lot with the playbooks. They had lists of lists, and checking off things, and they had the manpower, frankly, to be able to do it, because they had all these volunteers, not something that a lot of conference producers get to have unless maybe they've got some interns working for them, but this was a mass scale, obviously.

But if you take it down even to the small events, some of my smaller events that I've done have been run exactly the same way. People who have gone through things like the MPI training programs, where they've gotten their accreditation, this is old hand to them. You can always tell a planner who's got the experience, because they literally have a playbook of what's going on. It's not something
that, "Oh! We forgot to get the pens on the tables." It's been done. It was done six hours ago.

**Tom:** If you were working with somebody who was just getting into the event business, what advice would you give them as, perhaps, a contracted entertainer, or overall, that would help them improve their events?

**Brian:** On a couple of notes, one, especially new event planners who may have gotten graduate certificates and things, is to mentor with someone who's been in the business a long time, because there's nothing more overwhelming than your first couple of shows. They can be horrific because of detail. You get comfortable with that. It gets better. It's all I can tell you right now. It gets better.

On the entertainer's perspective, just knowing what the client needs and know that you can be the solution to the problem. Isn't that always the way? But the entertainer's got to be flexible enough to be able to do what the client needs as well. And finding that match, finding that right entertainer to the right speaker, that right juggler, ventriloquist, there is only one ventriloquist, yeah, of course, if the state is there, and it can work, you'll be the hero. You'll be the total hero. But it's all about organization and planning. I can't say enough about it, because, for us, for instance, even going into rehearsal, we know if we have to teach a new dancer this illusion, they have to do this step, this step, this step, this step, and we know what has to be taught, because we've done it 20 times.

Yeah, but what happens that first time? It's like, "Oh my!" Well, start out by making the list, finding what is missing. It's the small details that can really, really screw you up, like not having the pens on the tables. I remember being at an event where they literally had no pads or pens on tables, and they were scrambling last minute to find them. Someone had just plain forgot about it. Here was the speaker coming in and giving very detailed work notes, and everyone was trying to find something to write down and jot notes down, and it really caused a real panic. The hotel did come through. They found some stuff in a stockroom, and they got stuff, and...but it slowed things down 45, 50 minutes, and that just cascades like a domino to every single event that's going on during the day.

**Tom:** Some great stuff there, Brian. I do appreciate it. Now, if any of our listeners are interested in finding out a little bit more about you and the types of events you do, how could they reach out to you?

**Brian:** Oh, easy. We're all over the web. It's just brianglow.com, it's B-R-I-A-N G-L-O-W, like "Glow...In The Dark," brianglow.com, and YouTube's probably...
got about 60 cuts or, you know, little bits from different shows, more coming up this year, in fact. We arrange everything from one-man shows to big illusion shows. We do product launches, sales meetings, AGMs, trade shows, media events. There's something we haven't even talked about, creating buzz for an event. Can your entertainer or speaker get publicity? Can they get onto radio, television, and print?

Things we do, for instance, I might do predicting a headline of a newspaper that we had maybe meet a media job there a week earlier and visited all the newspapers and told them we were going to predict what was going to be on their headline and unveil it at the conference. That gets huge attention. There's many, many other ways, but being able to be good on radio, TV, and get media event exposure for a conference or any kind of a sales meeting or product launch, that's what these companies they would kill for. Because a single media spot might cost $5,000, $10,000, $20,000 for seconds, 20 seconds, 30 seconds.

If you get in a paper or get a radio spot, you're literally adding a ton of value for your clients. So if the producers are talking to their entertainers and speakers, find out what they can do, or if they're willing to do something that day for a media event to help bolster the panache of the event, if you can add "grab a toast" to an event, the event planner is going to look like a hero, you're going to look like a hero.

**Tom:** Brian, I want to thank you so very, very much for taking the time to sit down, talk with me, and share all these bits of information with our audience. Thanks again for being here.

**Brian:** Hey. Thanks, Tom.