

THE GIRL WHO HAD HER FAMILY KILL
BY KATHY VINE

THE MOST FANTASY PARTY PLANNER IN DALLAS
BY KATHY VINE

Texas Monthly

ESCAPE

13 TEXAS GETAWAYS—one for each weekend this summer—including a trail ride, a river retreat, a spree, and the coolest family campout.



...so much fun!

STOCKS ARE DOWN, UNEMPLOYMENT IS UP, AND EVERYONE'S FEELING LOUSY. EXTRA-OUTRAGEOUS PARTY PLANNER



WHICH IS EXACTLY WHY YOU NEED TO SPEND TIME WITH STEVE KEMBLE, THE STATE OF TEXAS HAS EVER SEEN. BY KATHY VINE. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT HUMPHREYS

STEVE KEMBLE has thrown so many over-the-top parties it is hard to decide which one is most outrageous. A Canadian consulate event in 1996 would certainly be a contender. The theme for the Dallas gathering was "moose." A custom carpet with a moose motif was installed beforehand. At the gala, a chef served salmon mousse, chocolate mousse, and a lobster concoction milled "moose milk." Guests had their photo taken with a person in a moose costume. A real-life Mountie checked invitations. The classic Steve Kemble party, however, doesn't rely solely on theme for its grand effects. Like a judge at the Olympics, one must consider different qualities. When assessing the level of difficulty, for example, some devotees of his work nominate a debate hall in 1900s. For this occasion, the Dallas Opera's rehearsal hall at Fair Park was outfitted with white surpacing and several thousand yards of white spider drapes. Belgian artist Jean-François painted portraits of delegates to the 1900 Exposition Universelle. A custom arrangement of "Oh Happy Day" was sung by a 46-member gospel choir led by one of the song's original recording artists. Any guests who weren't sufficiently impressed had time to reconsider after leaving the party and driving by a roadside billboard with the song title plastered on it.

Many event planners in Kemble's hometown of Dallas, such as the city's predominant party designer, Todd Fucos, create elegant, modish affairs. But disciples of the craftsman that nobody in Texas pushes the envelope like Kemble. He hands down the

crustier party planner in the state. For one hit party years ago he requested that a client paint the walls light gold, dress them in Versace briefs and combat boots, and serve the guests appetizers off a cardboard cake. At the annual meetings for a major real estate company, he instructed the CEO to arrive in unusual ways, such as via helicopter or by riding down a snow hill. This tendency toward the rare and marvelous is significant in Dallas, a city with a reputation for decadence. In some circles, Kemble is regarded as the man who single-handedly resurrected the audacious Dallas parties of legend at a time when the social scene had grown predictable. And across the country he is known as a 24-hour party person, an obsessed, eccentric, and regenerative genius who is able to pull off events others wouldn't attempt in any economic climate, fair or foul.

When I told Kemble last fall that I wanted to attend one of his parties with him, he said, "Oh, I'd love to go to see something fun and fabulous!" He ran down a list of projects: an opening for a new residential high-rise in Boston, a wedding for major league pitcher Kyle Farnsworth in Savannah, Georgia. "I'm working on a party for this adorable little girl in some of the Huggies baby commercials," he said. "That's that." After we later he had found the perfect event—a private Christmas party in Dallas—and confirmed the date. The e-mail salutation was "SO FUN!"

kind pair of \$6,400 Gucci pants embroidered with a peacock design. (Madonna has a pair. Faith Hill has a pair, and Kemble has a pair) But not all of his notable attire is couture. The fifty-year-old has been seen in public wearing a cardboard cake on his head. He has been known to walk into a party sporting a custom jacket made from the same material as the tablecloth. Some years ago, at a wedding celebration in New Orleans, he wore a red feather jacket, a silver tiara, and a copy of the Heart of the Ocean blue-diamond necklace from Titanic. Surprisingly, his enthusiasm for his wardrobe tends to impress even his most buttoned-down clients. One former businessman who hired Kemble for a wedding remembers meeting him at the site of the ceremony, a garden in Vermont. "Steve showed up in white tights, leather pants and a white jacket with fur trim," the client told me. "As we were walking through the snow, the garden curator turned to me and said, 'If he falls off the stage, we're going to lose him in a snow machine.'"

One night last fall in Oklahoma City, at a cocktail party at a hotel following an intensive bridal-planning weekend called the Wedding Workshop, I waited while Kemble changed clothes in his room. Kemble gracefully slid into his lobby, wearing as he approached, his moose-in-a-jacket. He had replaced a white brocade jacket he had worn earlier with a dark-purple crushed-velvet coat and a lavender tie. His beard and mustache were trimmed into Vandyke, and his brown hair, receding slightly at the temples, was trimmed short. Kemble had the dramatic energy of Richard Simmons, the cosmic timing of Poo-wee Herman, and the controlled, singsong laugh of a thirteen-year-old. Anyone not looking in his direction was doing so intentionally to avoid staring. He chatted his

way through the sea of guests like a sailboat in a small port, stopping to chat with a wedding dance instructor demonstrating her skills. As event organizer who stood with a shrill voice in a hotel lobby, he then held the microphone and asked Kemble, "What am I supposed to do with this?" prompting Kemble to whisper one of his party rules: "No explicit or implicit rules."

Kemble's flair for the dramatic is no act. One day last winter in Dallas, he picked me

up in his black Mercedes at 6:05 in the morning and began telling me about his day. "Last night when I went to the Ritz until about two and then I got up at four thirty to do a radio show and I realized that a piece I needed to write for the *Fort Worth Observer* was due this morning!" He screamed. "So I wrote that up and I looked at the clock and it was five-fifty-five, and I was like, 'Oh, my God! I'm supposed to pick Katy up at six!' We drove to Fort Worth, where Kemble recorded his severe clockwork disorientation, then we headed back to Dallas. He showed me as we flew down the highway: 'Everyone, get up! It's seven-fifty and we're already on to our second stop!'

Kemble's mood three weeks out of the month, and there is no day when he is not at his laptop from five in the morning until ten at night—unless he's doing an event. In which case he's working seemingly 24 hours a day. ("I don't need a lot of sleep," he told me. "It's a family thing.") He has many long-standing clients, so he has the luxury of declining offers from new prospects. He spends a lot of time with a potential customer on the phone, a process he refers to as "prequalifying." "It has to be a perfect match," he explained. "Because regardless of what the party may be—corporate, social, or nonprofit—I'm going to be spending a lot of time with this person, and we have to be able to get along." Those who make

the cut marvel at his abilities, particularly because he works solo. Clients such as Charlotte Jones Anderson, a vice president of the Dallas Cowboys, and Prunty Furd, the founder and chairperson of Classic Residence by Hyatt, know that when they hire Steve Kemble Event Design, the party won't be spearheaded by an assistant or a team, as it is with most companies. His resulting schedule may seem punishing for very strong caffeinated beverages. Despite a party's cost, which can range from \$10,000 for an intimate affair to \$1 million for an all-out bash (Kemble's cut is a flat fee determined in the negotiation process, though the industry rate is about 20 percent), his clients spend with him as if he were the greatest vacation they had ever had. "People will always talk about these parties," one of Kemble's clients told me. "The ones I have done! Yeah, they're expensive. But how much fun it is to work with him!" After complaining about a ball event she was coordinating, she began to talk about Kemble as if he had an itch she needed to scratch. "Give me a reason to throw a party again," she said.

BIG FUN COMES with strict rules. Kemble established his guidelines years ago. Rule number one: Touchball. Once guests, Kemble goes to great pains to create what he calls sensory points, and this objective often leads to a complete overhaul of a space. He doesn't think when a client walks into a hotel ballroom and suggests that he replace all the chandeliers or re-create the space to look like the client's living room. In fact, he frequently re-creates the event area in order to hit two sensory points at once: look and feel. "We'll put a paid dance and re-orient the paid," he told me one day last fall, during lunch at *Centurion on Park 230*.



Dancing around Kemble, photographed at the St. Regis Hotel, in Dallas, on January 16, 2009.