

Magic – one of the most traditional arts – has been slow to embrace inclusivity, but magicians such as James Galea are changing the culture.

A deceptive joy

James Galea. Daniel Boud



“When you’re young, I think ignorance is bliss. You need so much confidence and bravado ... because some of it’s quite terrifying, but I was never scared.” — James Galea

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“In your life as a magician, you get really good at deceiving people,” says James Galea. That’s your world. It’s your job. Then you have this thing that you’re told needs to be a secret, and that becomes part of your life. It can be really hard to distinguish the two.”

In last year’s autobiographical musical, *POOF! Secrets of a Magician*, Galea explored these blurred lines and reckoned with how his sexuality has shaped his work. One song wondered aloud: Are all magicians gay? But gay and openly gay are two different things, and he didn’t have a single touchstone of a queer magician to aspire to while he was growing up.

“That was kind of the jumping-off point for the musical,” Galea explains. “I wrote those songs thinking, ‘This is ridiculous. There’s so many of us around, why is it not being spoken about?’ Like anything, time changes those things. There’s many out famous queer magicians now, and it’s great to be part of that life.”

That shift to inclusivity hasn’t always been easy in a field that can be painfully beholden to tradition. The Magic Circle, perhaps the most fabled magic organisation, only allowed women to become members in the 1990s. It’s a telling detail that the Amazing Randi, one of the most esteemed and influential magicians of the past century, only felt able to come out in his fifties.

“Some things change slowly,” Galea reflects. “I don’t think anything institutional like that is quickly passed. Those things, they take time. There are people that are trying to keep it the same.”

It’s a bit hard to reconcile the leather-jacket-wearing, classic-car-driving Galea of today with the stories he relates of a restless teen obsessively practising magic and eyeing it as a means to escape. But the pressure he felt to conceal his sexuality as he made his first steps into life as a performer weighed heavily. For Galea, that outsider mentality and the impulse to make art are impossible to prise apart. “You always feel like the odd one out,” he says. “And what I’ve found out, as long as I’ve been in this business, is that everyone in the arts feels like that. I think that’s what pushes you to create as well.”

That creative process has not been without its trying moments: in his short film *The Magician*, Galea ponders the lot of the conjuror skilful enough to have some audience members convinced they are “really magic”. “I wish I had real powers, not have to rehearse for hours,” he sings. “If I knew what you were thinking, I wouldn’t be alone here drinking.”

It’s an amusing conceit, but it captures a strain of melancholy that will be familiar to any artist who has put in improbable amounts of effort to make their performance look effortless.

His recent television series, *James Galea’s Best Trick Ever*, betrays less angst about his career choice. It focuses instead on the more joyful and social aspects of life as a magician. In the two-part series Galea travels

Australia and the United States, doing tricks for punters on the street and meeting up with sword swallowers, glass eaters and real-life card sharks. It’s an easy watch, with a loose concept carried by Galea’s enthusiasm for the craft in its various forms and punctuated by his hearty laugh.

He tells me he loves the immediacy of theatre best, though. “There’s something that you just can’t get on TV,” he says. “I think people are so used to seeing stuff on their phones when they’ve just got 20 seconds to spare. But when you’re taken in by a performer, and you’re getting to see that live, it’s pretty special.”

His new stage show – also titled *James Galea’s Best Trick Ever* – sees him play host to a quartet of fellow magicians. He’s relishing the camaraderie and the chance to talk shop. “It’s a pretty lonely art form usually,” he says of magic. “It’s not like dance or musical theatre where you’re collaborating from the get-go, so it’s wonderful to be able to work together.”

Is there a sense of community among magicians? “Yeah, there is. It’s like: ‘Oh my gosh, you have to see the newest thing I’m working on.’ You don’t have to explain why you can’t have this there or that here; you finally get to have a shorthand with people. We’re all just sitting and watching magicians, nerding out and talking magic.”

Galea is a veteran of the stage; his career has straddled magic, cabaret, comedy and theatre. *POOF!* brought many of these elements together. Before that, he told the story of a mentor who turned out to be putting his magical skills to nefarious ends in *Lying Cheating Bastard*. He also curated and co-starred in the critically lauded *Band of Magicians* shows and toured widely with his solo work *I Hate Rabbits*.

With the latter, he didn’t so much arrive on the scene as loudly barge onto it, all swagger and energy. While some critics didn’t find the show as groundbreaking as it claimed to be, it established Galea as a stylish magician eager to set himself apart from the musty trappings of magic acts past.

He first took up magic at 14 when he was studying acting at the Australian Theatre for Young People. Galea’s tutor, Julian Lewis, showed the class a simple trick. Galea asked to learn it and started practising to make it look slick. He hasn’t stopped since. Hours of practice followed, often eight a day. He’d walk around school rolling coins or handling cards.

Galea started out following the mould, earnestly acquiring a pair of wingtip shoes, a tuxedo and a top hat. He cut an unlikely figure as he wore them on the bus to his early gigs. “It wasn’t until later that I realised it’s just weird for a 14-year-old to be wearing a top hat. I was like: ‘What are you trying to be? Just be yourself.’”

He soon swapped the old-style get-up for V-necks and jeans. For the new show, he’s blasting the lockdown cobwebs away with a big theatre show and is reaching for the sequins. Still, the decision to eschew the gootier trappings of magic signalled the beginnings of a move to a more authentic performance that saw him grow increasingly comfortable with weaving personal elements into his work. A gifted technician from

early on – he was Australian close-up magic champion in his early 20s – he levelled up when he began embracing the art form’s potential for storytelling.

His flair for fusing narrative and trickery reached a new peak with his “673 King St”, the story card trick where a shuffled deck of cards are dealt and seem to sync up with the story the magician is spinning. The trick has proved his key to the kingdom, but initially he didn’t even know if it was any good. “I remember showing a friend,” he says. “I’d shown her so many things, but that was like no reaction I’d ever got in the past, so you go: ‘Okay, there’s something there. That’s giving me hope.’”

At that stage, he admits, his process was largely intuitive. Just as a comedian has a finely tuned antenna for which specific beats of a joke get laughs, he would pay close attention to where the “oohs” and “ahhs” were in honing a routine.

Galea performed the finished product on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* with a veteran’s panache, but it also served as a reminder of how easily a live magic act can be derailed. Rewatch the clip and you’ll notice a stray card almost gets left on the table. If Galea hadn’t caught this in time and returned it to the deck, he could have been the unwitting star of a litany of “Magician’s EPIC FAIL” on TV style YouTube clips.

“You’re freaking out,” Galea recalls of that near miss. “But you’re also on live TV, so you’re trying to remain calm. When you’re young, I think ignorance is bliss. You need so much confidence and bravado to get through some of those things because some of it’s quite terrifying, but I was never scared.”

The bones of “673 King St” may be old, but Galea’s spin on it is inspired. He drew on Bill Malone’s legendary “Sam the Bellhop” routine, itself an iteration of a genre of tricks that may date back to the 19th century. Galea’s dazzling delight of hand here serves a distinctly Australian vignette of a nerves out with chance meetings, conniving friends and gambling wins, with a couple of inspired comic hairpin turns along the way.

There’s something analogous to music in the way the best contemporary magicians reshape and rework effects that date back generations. Just as there are only a finite number of chord progressions that hit the ear in a pleasing way, there may be only a relatively small set of foundational tricks from which to expand on. Galea, who started playing piano at age three and believes that training provided the finger dexterity needed for close-up magic, has thought long about these parallels.

There are so many hit songs where you’re like: ‘Oh, right, that is the same as another song’, but it touches you differently, whether it’s the story or the person doing it, and that’s the great thing about magic too. Different magicians all have different takes on all the same effects, and the winners from that are the audience.”

James Galea’s Best Trick Ever is a kind of artistic cousin to *Magic for Humans*, a show created by Galea’s erstwhile collaborator Justin Willman. Both programs have a humanistic view of magic, with a desire to uplift as well as amaze. They can be bracketed

with *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* – which has quietly become one of the warmest reality shows going – as part of a new wave of feel-good magic shows.

There’s something delightful about seeing people getting their groceries or walking their dog and unexpectedly finding themselves the one-person audience for a Galea trick. There are even moments of unexpected poignancy. One of his favourite responses came when he did a mentalism trick for a woman on the streets of Blacktown. He asked her to think of an object that meant something to her. She thought of a circle and he duly guessed it and drew it for her. Clearly moved by the feat, she told the camera crew she was “proud” of Galea.

“It was the sweetest thing in the world,” Galea says. “It was just genuinely the most amazed I’ve ever seen a human being. Oh my gosh! It makes me emotional even thinking about it. I think magic has that power that other art forms don’t. That’s a really special thing to be able to give someone and to be able to share with them, you know?”

The weirdly emotional pull of magic may be the key to its survival in the information age, when its very foundation of secrecy would seem to be under threat. Now anyone can go on their phone and almost instantaneously locate any number of tutorials laying bare the secret mechanisms of magic. But, by and large, people don’t. They want to be tricked, to have that dizzying feeling of having seen something inexplicable.

So, can Galea watch other magicians without trying to figure out how they’re doing it? “Oh, yeah, I love it. I go complete ‘muggle mode’. I much prefer to just sit and enjoy.” As the producer of a magic variety show, he needs to do more than sit and enjoy, however. He needs to be across logistics, timing, every detail of how his colleagues’ tricks are done.

“It’s the great paradox of being a magician,” Galea says. “You get into it because you loved that feeling when you watched magic for the first time. Then, to be good at your job and create that magic and wonder, you’ve got to learn how to do it, which takes away all the magic and wonder. So that’s the saddest part about it as well.”