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BY KEVIN BLAKE

There are two moments in my life that, when I look back, feel like the universe had been pointing me toward my own true north. Here is the first: when I was twenty-two I travelled to London from California to see Derren Brown's Show "Svengali." At that point to me Derren was basically Jesus, so when I caught a frisbee during his show and he asked for my name, my life was complete. And when by some unbelievable coincidence I managed to get coffee with him the next day, and he said that he had seen a clip of mine online, I couldn't believe it. And when he continued to say I was good and should keep performing, it felt like I had been ordained an apostle, instructed to continue to spread the good word of Magic. This was an earth shattering moment in my life. I was wandering aimlessly in a post-collegiate void with no employable skills. I was in doubt of myself and my talent. Then, when I opened myself to the universe and asked for direction, boom. My biggest hero told me I should be a magician. It was destiny. (Years later I recounted this fateful story to Derren and discovered for him it was far less significant: he couldn't recall it.)

The second turning point in my magical life, a moment that has proven much more important, was when I met James Galea.

I had known about James, of course. I had seen the viral clip of his story deck "637 King Street" and his appearances on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" and clips of the Discovery Channel show

POOF!

Secrets of a Magician

AUTHOR: KEVIN BLAKE



Kevin Blake gives gets a no-holds-barred interview with James Galea. **WARNING: this contains language that may offend.**







he starred in, "Breaking Magic." All these accolades said to me: James is a successful magician. But what they didn't reveal to me is what actually sets James apart, and what ultimately became the backbone of his revolutionary, one-of-a-kind show "POOF! Secrets of a Magician," which debuted to a sell-out season at the Sydney Opera House in January - is his piano.

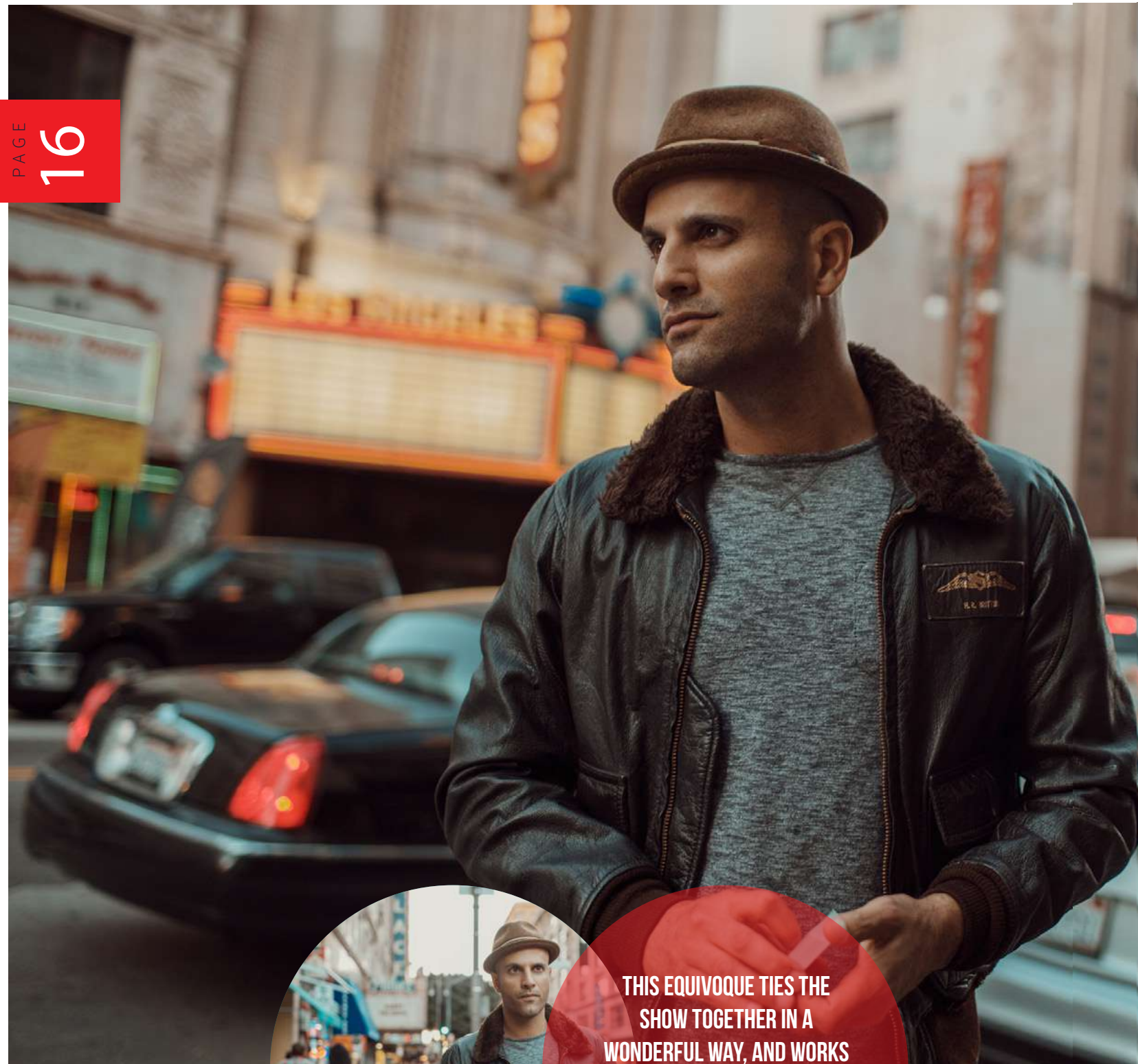
I first saw James' piano skills on display in his wonderful comedy-song-turned-short-film "The Magician." If you haven't seen it, go watch on YouTube. I'll wait.

Shame on you if you didn't. Watching "The Magician" moved me in a way that only music can. I was impressed by his proficiency at the piano, but more so at how well, and how hilariously, he captured what it feels like to be a magician. I feel a comparison approaching:

it was as if Tim Minchin or Bo Burnham wrote a song about the melancholic absurdity of what it is to be a magician.

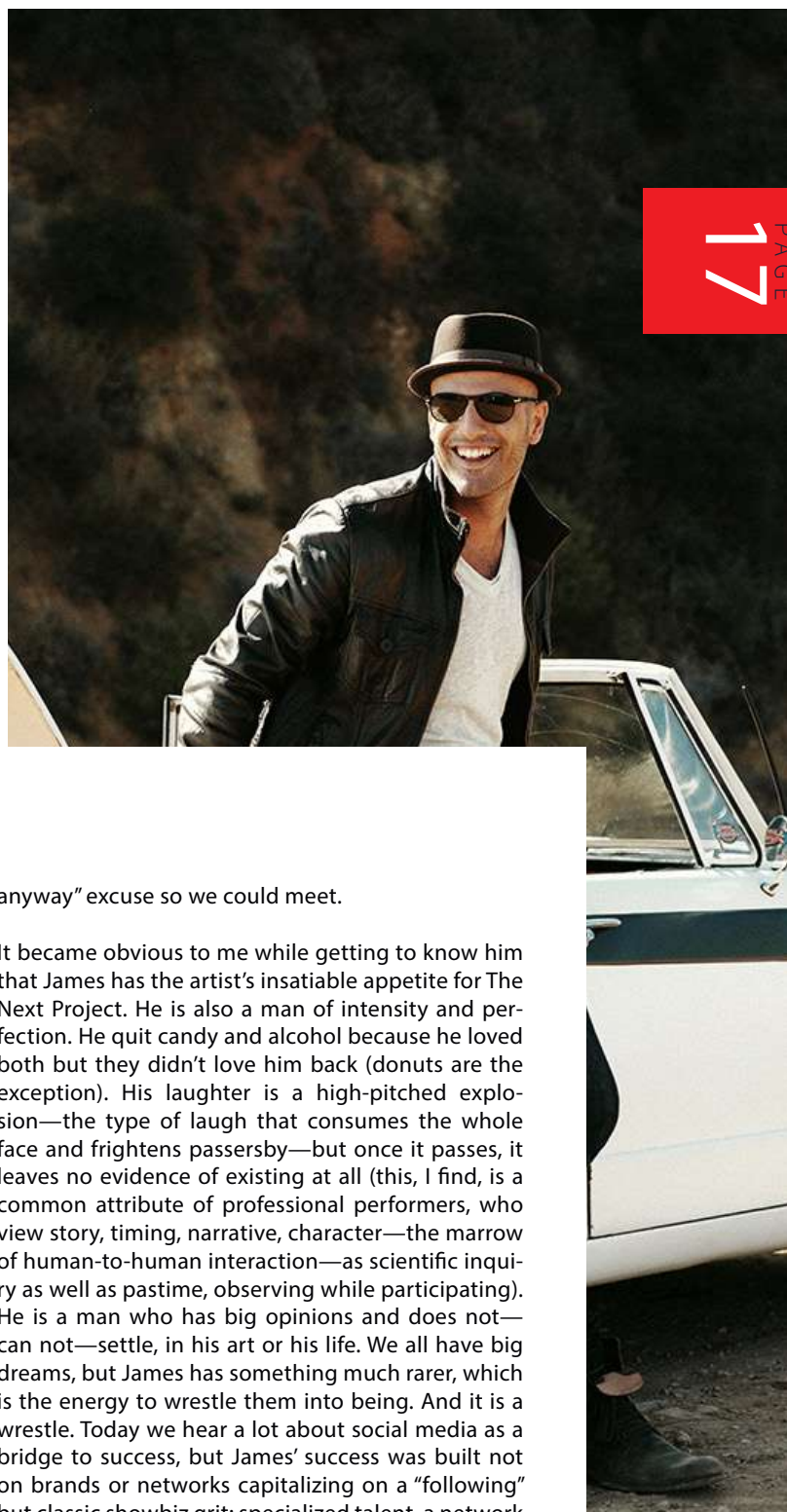
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqdT-j3n5aI8>





THIS EQUIVOQUE TIES THE SHOW TOGETHER IN A WONDERFUL WAY, AND WORKS PERFECTLY AS A COROLLARY TO THE LIFE OF A MAGICIAN.

"FOR ALL THAT MAGICIANS HUFF AND GRUFF ABOUT SECRETS, FOR ALL THE FUROR IN YOUTUBE COMMENTS, FORUMS, AND DURING CARD-TABLE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE 'STATE OF OUR ART' WHERE SECRETS ARE SO FINDABLE, THE TRUTH IS THAT THE SECRETS OF MAGIC ARE NOT DEEP SECRETS."



"IF I REALLY COULD DO MAGIC..."

(Words & Music by James Galea)

*Do you really think if I could do magic
I'd be spending Sunday afternoon's making fucking
dog balloons
For your shit kids*

.....

*I wish I had real powers.
Not have to rehearse for hours
If I knew what you were thinking, I wouldn't be here
alone drinking
You'll come to this conclusion, you'll see it is no illusion:
Reading minds, magic tricks and escapes
Are just a hoax, a fraud, a cheat and it's all fake.*

*'Cause if I really could do magic, I mean if I really could
do magic.
I mean not a rabbit-hat trick,
No strings, magnets or elastic.
If I really could do magic it would rock!
'Cause I could give myself more hair and a bigger
cock!!!*

When I shared the video on Twitter, I tagged James, he saw, and we got to messaging. I found out he was performing his show "I Hate Rabbits" in Sacramento. This being only a short drive away from San Francisco, where I live, I made the "I'm going in that direction

anyway" excuse so we could meet.

It became obvious to me while getting to know him that James has the artist's insatiable appetite for The Next Project. He is also a man of intensity and perfection. He quit candy and alcohol because he loved both but they didn't love him back (donuts are the exception). His laughter is a high-pitched explosion—the type of laugh that consumes the whole face and frightens passersby—but once it passes, it leaves no evidence of existing at all (this, I find, is a common attribute of professional performers, who view story, timing, narrative, character—the marrow of human-to-human interaction—as scientific inquiry as well as pastime, observing while participating). He is a man who has big opinions and does not—can not—settle, in his art or his life. We all have big dreams, but James has something much rarer, which is the energy to wrestle them into being. And it is a wrestle. Today we hear a lot about social media as a bridge to success, but James' success was built not on brands or networks capitalizing on a "following" but classic showbiz grit: specialized talent, a network of hard-won relationships, and relentless work toward a well-executed vision.

While watching his show in Sacramento, I remember—sorry James—being disappointed. What I saw was a wonderful, funny, and expertly-performed pop-magic show. But that point in my life (young and

dumb) I hadn't developed respect for competency, not yet having it myself. If a magic show didn't have unexplainable illusions, if it didn't plumb the depths of human emotion and provide a perfectly sound narrative arc, if it used a Harry Potter book test, I was disappointed. I was often disappointed. That night when we had a drink and a chat after the show, I asked him why he didn't play the piano in his shows. A magic show with comedy songs about being a magician? I mean, c'mon! I was surprised to find him reluctant. He had thought about it, but didn't want to do it unless it would be great. I thought it was already great! "It's not there yet," he said. He had other things brewing.

We kept in touch. He would share living-room-demos of the compositions that would eventually feature in "POOF!" and I would share the story of a gig here, a show there, as you do. He invited me to work backstage on his production "Band of Magicians" (whose alumni include Justin Willman, Justin Flom, Stuart MacLeod and Ben Hanlin) for its New Zealand tour and I watched him create his own TV series "BEST TRICK EVER" which aired on ABC Australia while writing a scripted comedy series in the background.

And yet, for all he has done, for the six years I have known James I have always gotten the sense that he hadn't lived up to his

own incredible standards. He has created so much, but that march, from idea to execution, is treacherous. Casualties occur: the dreamy, nebulous hope of an idea, its extraordinary potential, its personal emotional hues—so much can be lost in an idea's journey to being. I can see, in my head, Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps*, but I cannot paint it. It is so wonderful to see James' vision of "POOF! Secrets of a Magician" come to life because it feels like a perfect moment: when ambition, talent, team, and opportunity collide into a brilliant starburst.

But what is "POOF! Secrets of a Magician"? It is a raucous, hilarious, and very, very explicit 'magical' (a portmanteau of magic+musical). Including songs such as "Are All Magicians Gay?" and "All Psychics are Cunts" along with incredible magic, it is a joyous celebration of the absurdity of a life of a magician, and, equally importantly, a joyous celebration of being queer. Certainly one of the most unapologetically flamboyant things to grace the stage of the Sydney Opera House, "POOF!" features magic tricks, rainbows and unicorns, a choir singing expletives and a conga-line of dancing penises parading across the stage, only to splodge white confetti over the audience.

James is originally from Sydney, Australia, but now resides mostly full time in Los Angeles—and who is also, if you haven't yet picked it up, gay—opens "POOF! Secrets of a Magician"

" GROWING UP, I NEVER SAW ANY REPRESENTATION BY GAY MAGICIANS. I KNEW THERE WERE SO MANY OUT THERE, BUT NONE WERE OUT."

with a cross-Pacific insight: "The word 'poof', in Australia, is short for the word poofier - it's like calling someone a faggot. In America, 'poof' (pronounced pouf) is the most magical word in the world! There should be a middle ground..." This equivoque ties the show together in a wonderful way, and works perfectly as a corollary to the life of a magician.

"Magicians," Galea explains, "are very comfortable hoarding and keeping secrets. While perhaps necessary for a magician, it's terrible for a human being. Having to hide who you are, as a queer person, out of safety or otherwise, is horrible."

This insight brings strength to the narrative of the show. For all that magicians huff and gruff about secrets, for all the furor in YouTube comments, forums, and during card-table conversations about the 'state of our art' where secrets are so findable, the truth is that the secrets of magic are not deep secrets. There are no secrets in magic—not the secrets of card tricks, not secrets of the latest electronic mentalism gadget, not even the secrets to legendary illusions like the vanishing elephant, Copperfield's Flying, Penn & Teller's Bullet Catch, or the Indian Rope Trick—that can compare to real secrets. Real secrets are those that drive fear, or shame, or hate (sometimes all). Real secrets put magic secrets to shame.

"If you shine a light on your secrets instead of hiding them in the dark, they lose their power. And when they lose their power, they can become beautiful, they can become...magic," Galea says. "That is, quite simply, what the show is about."

"Growing up, I never saw any representation by gay magicians. I knew there were so many out there, but none were out. And the one who was openly gay, I found out years later wasn't gay at all! It was just an act to get laughs. Pretty weird.

So, maybe subconsciously you think that it's something that shouldn't be highlighted - and at worst, hidden."

(That's where Are All Magicians Gay? came from)

When James first put on "POOF!" in his friend's living room, for a group of 25 friends sat on every available surface and the floor, he definitely didn't imagine that three short years later it would end up at the Sydney Opera House. And

it almost didn't. In fact, when it was accepted for the Sydney Festival, it was originally slated for a much less prestigious venue. Then he got a call from the festival just 16 days before opening night. At first, he thought they were pulling the plug on his show entirely. "I thought they had seen the choir singing the 'cunt' song," James recalls. He had recently uploaded a clip to Instagram of the choir he was working with for background vocals to bring "All Psychics are Cunts" to life, which is exactly what it sounds like: a choir singing "CUNT! CUNT! CUNNNNTTTT!!!" In falsetto. "I thought they were going to tell me I can't do it. But they were more than supportive."

So when instead they asked if he wanted to move to the Opera House, he thought it was a bait and switch, or something too good to be true. "You have all these other amazing artists in this international festival. I genuinely didn't understand. Why me? Thinking about it now, it's terrifying, but at the time I was excited." As exciting as it was, it was also a lot more pressure, and only two weeks to take the show to the next level. "It was like going from the cellar to the penthouse. A tent to the greatest theater in the world."

Thankfully, James has that quality, so rare in magicians (aren't we often an isolated, insular bunch?) of knowing that you can't go it alone. Over the years he has learned to surround himself with a wonderful bunch of collaborators. While the main foundation of "POOF! Secrets of a Magician" is undoubtedly James' brilliant writing, music, comedy, and magic, its architectural flourishes and ornamentation—its molding, tracery, and stained glass that lifts it from church to gothic cathedral, if I may continue a metaphor to its death—came from his collaboration with an equally talented cast of behind-the-scenes characters. The show's director, Wayne Harrison (Absinthe Las Vegas, Slava's Snowshow, Tap Dogs), worked closely with James over several months as a dramaturg, and then to transition the show to the Opera House.

"There is an expectation in audiences when they go to a tent that's different from when they go to a show at the Sydney Opera House" says Harrison. "You want to make sure your production value is of a high enough standard to satisfy the expectations. You don't want to look like a fish out of water—you want to



look like the show was designed for the space." According to Wayne, that meant spending some more money, but that was just the start.

Unlike most magic shows, "POOF!" is musical. Orchestrations and additional music were composed by the great Max Mueller, who took James's compositions and created the beautifully magical musical world of the show. According to James, Max Mueller was "completely instrumental" to the show. James apologized for the unintended pun, and continued: "From the first file he sent, I was like 'Yep. That's exactly what I wanted.' He made my songs

sound amaaaazing." Max Mueller composed the opening orchestral overture, the backing for James' original songs, the transitions, original compositions to support the magical effects, and even the little musical stings that announce the arrival of a prop or the opening of a box. It was important to James that they all live in the same "world" musically. Together, they make the show feel cohesive and fluid in a way that musicals do, and magic shows do not.

"It was so much fun working with James because he wanted the music to be really forthright in the story as opposed to wallpaper," says Max over a transcalifornia telephone wire. "Today people are afraid of



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The fact that James doubted the mainstream appeal of “POOF!” is incredible to me. While there may be a storybook trope of the artist that doesn’t believe in him or herself.



PHOTOS: Photos taken from the show *POOF! - Secrets of A Magician*, while at the Sydney Opera House - Australia.

music being too narrative driven, but with James’s show, that was the point. It’s moment-to-moment composing with layers to be as colorful as possible—you can’t do that with a drama, for example. It was campy, obviously, but I loved that there was a genuineness about the childlike aspects of it, too. The wonderment in the story felt genuine.” Max continued: “An orchestra is a big human Rube Goldberg machine that uses its technique to work together in service of story,” Max says, “And James is a really, really good storyteller.”

The show was also brought to new heights visually by the contributions of Adam Franklin (Magic For Humans, Best Trick Ever, The Chris Gethard Show), a Los Angeles director and filmmaker with whom James has collaborated extensively for a decade. Franklin directed the hilarious video backdrops for James’ com-

edy songs, including one that is an example of James’ perfectionist mentality. Franklin remembers: “We had a last minute idea that the video behind should feel trippy, like a warped perspective. It’s hilarious; James has been working on the show for years, and then two days before the show opens, we realize it can be better, so we’re dressing in penis costumes with our dancers on a green screen stage. That same day we put the video together, and it turned out great. The audience loved it.”

Other essential roles were filled by lighting designer Peter Rubie, production designer Jonathan Hindmarsh, stage manager Josh Sherrin, associate producer Ben Palacios, and consulting magicians Mark Mayer and Adam Mada.

The fact that James doubted the mainstream appeal of “POOF!” is incredible to me. While there may be a storybook trope of the artist that doesn’t believe in him or herself, I find

that in the real world most artists, especially performers, believe in their art more strongly than anyone else. I mean, we have to—how else could we get through our worst performances and keep at it? Personally, I have seen (both from first and third person POV) magic tricks fail with such energy and speed that I could hear, in the pauses between the scramblings, the magician’s inner monologue communicating a clear desire to self-euthanize. It is surprising that James, whose belief in his own vision has resulted in a CV that makes me weep with jealousy, would doubt a musical magic show. To me, it was the one show I absolutely knew would be a success.

His uncertainty about “POOF!” seemed to come from a rare expression of vulnerability: the show is dependent on non-magical elements that James has never presented on stage. Take away our tricks, and what are we?



For James, that answer had to still be amazing. But apart from the courage to play an instrument on stage, it takes courage to be honest with our audience. To tell your real secrets. To present yourself how you actually are. To share openly that “these aren’t real tricks” or that “I’m gay” or that “I used to be a failure” or that “I once accidentally set fire to a duck” (all true for James, the last one which provides the absurd climax of the show) is a leap of faith for a magician. For all we express our love of the artistry, the dexterity, or the psychology of magic, the true real Secret is that most of us became magicians not out of a desire to master an esoteric performance art, but out of a youthful wish to be loved, to be accepted, to be more than we are. “POOF!” is so powerful because it is honest; it shows the audience James exactly as James is, former clown nose and all.

“I feel like if we shine a light on the secrets—the things that you think define you, and let them out, they lose their power,” James says, “and they become magic.”

I must agree.

You’d better hope James brings his show to Netflix, or a town near you on a tour, because this show is not to be missed. It’s a wonderful,

uplifting show that accomplishes a truly rare thing in art, and especially in magic: it reveals its secrets, to grand applause.

END

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JAMES GALEA

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