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One-hander faster than the eye

Reviewed by Jason Blake
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LYING CHEATING BASTARD

Old Fitzroy, July 2

Until July 25

JIMMY GARCIA is every inch the winner: composed, cocky and immaculate. "I always win, always," he announces.

"Cos I never go against the percentages, I control the variables and I don't leave anything to chance. Ever."

Jimmy, aka "the Cricket", is a con artist. *Lying Cheating Bastard* is his story.

Recalling his childhood, Jimmy describes a fatherless boy with a vague sense of his gift for close observation and cold reckoning who falls in with a confidence trickster, Frankie. He is a natural and under Frankie's tutelage (David Ritchie's voiceovers conjure images of Obi-Wan Kenobi) Jimmy becomes one of the best operators in town. Shell games, three-card monte, blackjack and poker; he knows how to hold 'em, but does he know when to fold 'em?

Written and performed by James Galea, this one-man showcase combines straightforward storytelling and impressive demonstrations of mentalism and sleight-of-hand. There is also a

spot of piano playing and some pungent observations on the predictability of human behaviour, the power of suggestion and the callousness of the conman's art.

It keeps you on the hook, right up to the cliffhanger at interval, after which the plot (a sting on the high-rollers' room at Star City that doesn't go to plan) steals the show. From there, everything takes on the hyperbolic quality of a Hollywood crime caper with Jimmy's redemption, framed in a masterly display of the black art of card trickery, taking us out on the required high note.

Jimmy isn't a likeable character initially but Galea's performance is very winning and his card skills razor sharp. No matter how much he slows a trick down for us, it is impossible to grasp what he's doing.

Co-writer and director Nicholas Hammond's production is very slick, aided greatly by Jo Briscoe's glossy, piano-black set.