



INSIDE: THE FORM

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metro

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You won't believe your eyes

Magician James Galea puts his skills to good use playing a crafty conman, writes **Chris Hook**

HE MAY hate rabbits, but a chance meeting thousands of kilometres from home allowed James Galea to pull his latest show out of the hat. Two years ago, the young Sydney magician was performing his *I Hate Rabbits* show on a cruise ship near Hawaii.

Among those watching was veteran writer-actor Nicholas Hammond, who had taken his mother on the cruise as a birthday present.

"He came over and said, 'I loved the show', and I said, 'Thanks very much'," Galea recalls. "I detected an accent and it turned out he lived around the corner from me in Australia... so we had a drink and one thing led to another."

Galea had long been intrigued by Jimmy Garcia – the man who taught him magic – and it turned out he wasn't all he seemed.

"The things I'd be learning as magic, dealing aces from the bottom of the deck, stealing watches, I'd be doing it as entertainment and he'd be doing it for real," Galea says. "I only found this out a few years ago, but after finding it out it seemed like a fascinating story."

Hammond agreed and the pair wrote *Lying Cheating Bastard*, a one-man show starring Galea and directed by Hammond.

It follows the story of Jimmy Garcia, a conman who becomes one of the best. The audience joins him on this journey, with Galea's illusionist abilities being used to good effect as Garcia learns his craft. But Garcia eventually meets his match and learns the whole truth of what he does and the effect it has on others.

"I'm always interested in that moment at which someone does decide they're going to go astray, so I thought, 'Why don't we explore that in a show?'" Hammond says.

"But it's a show that has a positive message because by the end you realise that is absolutely not the right way to go."

Despite Hammond's many showbusiness achievements over the 35 years he has been in the industry – including penning *Secret Men's Business* for the ABC and playing Friedrich von Trapp in the film *The Sound Of Music* – *Lying Cheating Bastard* does mark a couple of firsts for the veteran. It is his directorial debut and the first play he has written.

"I've wanted to direct for some time, but I wanted to direct under the radar, I didn't want to start with a movie or major television show," Hammond says.

"I love the theatre and I wanted to have a go at writing a play and I wanted to have a go at directing and, instantly, I loved it."



Fascinating: James Galea uses his illusion skills to play conman Jimmy Garcia

Picture: Bob Barker

theatre

Review: Lying Cheating Bastard

Old Fitzroy Theatre, cnr Cathedral and Dowling Sts, Woolloomooloo; today 8pm, until July 25, adult \$35, conc \$25, beer, laksa and show \$40, 9380 5553, oldfitzroy.com.au

LIGHTS, camera – card tricks. It's the magic of theatre, and a piece of theatre that depends heavily on magic. Or at least, the sleight of hand often passed off as magical power.

In *Lying Cheating Bastard*, the tricks are the string holding together a tale of Jimmy "Cricket" Garcia's rite of passage to become Australia's slickest conman.

Loosely based on the life of Garcia, James Galea – best-known for his card-sharp turns on television – developed the play in tandem with director Nicholas Hammond, and it is intriguing and entertaining.

The interlocked versatility of Jo Briscoe's set and Matthew Marshall's lighting design turns the small stage into a luxury apartment, sideshow alley, warehouse, casino and bathroom. And depth is added by the recorded supporting voices of Arky Michael and David Ritchie.

A cracking pace is set by the narrative, with a clever halfway cliffhanger guaranteeing everybody will return from the bar after intermission.

Galea is engaging – and willing to put his money where his craft is, offering an audience member a chance to win \$1000.

With his skill, it seems unlikely the cash is at great risk, but that has never stopped a world populated by punters who, as he points out, are victims of their own greed rather than the con itself.

But he also points out that in poker "you play the man, not the game". And in the end, that's what Galea needs to do.

The card tricks and games are flawless. And his rapid-fire, smooth delivery is just what you'd expect of his character.

But there are spots of introspection that needed a change of pace and tone to make them resonate more soundly.

The end is something of an anti-climax, relying on the "King St" trick that has become a signature piece for Galea. It's excellent sleight-of-hand, but too slight a narrative device to close the tale.

Karla Pincott