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THE FACE

ROSEMARY NEILL
meets
JAMES GALEA
MAGICIAN

WHAT does James Galea have against rabbits? "Nothing at all," he says, flashing an impish grin. The 27-year-old magician explains that his latest show, *I Hate Rabbits*, isn't an attack on fluffy bunnies; rather, the title signals his determination to break free of the warmed-over clichés associated with magic routines. "There are so many misconceptions about what the clichés of magic should be," he says.

Whether they pluck rabbits from hats or saw their assistants in half, he believes magicians set up too many barriers between themselves and their audiences. "You're saying to someone, 'You can't do what I do.'"

Reflecting his determination to take stripped-down routines to his gen Y peers, Galea's on-stage costume is essentially the same as his funky street clobber. When we meet, he wears a trilby, skinny jeans, T-shirt, "blinged up" watch with 150 diamonds, and sneakers with gold studs and toe caps. The aim, he says, is to come across as approachable. "I want to keep it as completely open as possible. My show is stand-up comedy and a magic show combined. It's very edgy, and I like to use the audience."

He is about to perform an encore season of *I Hate Rabbits* in Sydney before taking the show interstate next year. Audiences will see him make coins move seemingly of their own accord, steal people's watches and their money.

He describes himself proudly as a "card shark" and, during this interview at his local cafe at the unglamorous, traffic-laden end of Sydney's Bondi, he performs a trick that has me scratching my head for hours. He asks me to silently choose a card from a deck that is sealed in an envelope. Sure enough, the card he extracts is the one I chose. So he's a mind reader, too?

"I don't believe in magic and I don't try to convince people that it's real," he explains. "I let the audience know that I will create the illusion that it is real."

In *I Hate Rabbits*, he uses a three-storey screen to enlarge the objects he works with so everyone in the theatre has the best seat possible.

Galea is a winning mix of bravado and youthful candour. With an air of high seriousness, he reveals he is attempting to insure his hands with Lloyds of London for \$1 million: "They're the people who did Jo-Lo's butt, so we're in good hands," he says.

This conjurer has scaled some of the summits of the magic world. He has performed at Flamingo casino in Las Vegas, where his name was engraved on a plaque. It was a step up, he jokes, from having his name scribbled on a piece



Picture: Amos Altman

CLOSE-UP

Big break: Going to star in my own show in Japan when I was 18.

Career highlight: Doing a sell-out performance of *I Hate Rabbits* at Sydney's Enmore Theatre; working in Los Angeles.

Favourite entertainer: I'm a massive Frank Sinatra fan.

Guilty pleasure: There are plenty to choose from! A cheeky martini; shopping.

of cardboard at his previous gig. In 2006, he headlined at Hollywood's Magic Castle, which claims to be the world's most famous club for magicians. "That was really an exciting moment, one of the boxes ticked," Galea says. The castle is an enchanted place: it houses a bookcase that opens if you say "open sesame", and a piano that plays itself.

At 18, he performed at James Packer's first wedding (in 1999). In the same year, he starred in his own show at an isolated hot springs resort north of Tokyo. Although he had only a smattering of schoolboy Japanese, he learned his entire routine in that language, right down to animal noises (barks and clucks are pronounced differently in Japan).

Galea lived in Los Angeles from 2005 to 2007, and spent part of that time developing a television show the US networks ultimately didn't want. However, he has flirted with a new format and is talking to ABC management about a possible program fusing comedy and magic.

For years he made a cushy living performing on cruise ships. When we talk, he is poised to sail to Fiji: "It can be the best life in the world. I work one night a week and for the rest of the time sip cocktails and have fun."

But he says his epiphany came while performing on a cruise last year. He received a call from the ship's captain informing him that an elderly man he had called up on stage the previous night had died. "I was worried it was my fault," says Galea, but the captain reassured him the man's family wanted to convey how he had enjoyed his moment in the spotlight.

Cruises attract seniors, and Galea has worked with ships' performers who have seen audience members die during their shows. "You start having these conversations and your friends say, 'Dude, where are you working?' I don't mean any disrespect at all, but at that point I thought, I want to reach a broader group of people."

He did just that earlier this year, with a sold-out performance of *I Hate Rabbits* at Sydney's Enmore Theatre. He was chuffed that the audience was comprised largely of people under 30. Next year, he is to star and tour in a play he co-wrote with actor Nicholas Hammond.

It's called *Lying, Cheating Bastard*, and is primarily a one-man show about a lethally charming con artist.

Galea will put his tricks to use in the play, which will also focus on how people who are conned are often victims of their own greed.

"There is the old maxim 'you can't cheat an honest man', and this is true," he insists.

Galea grew up in inner Sydney and from his early teens was obsessed with magic. "I didn't

like schoolwork at all. My brain wasn't meant to do school stuff."

His Maltese immigrant parents were initially unimpressed with his career choice. They hadn't upped sticks and settled halfway across the world for their son to make a career out of card tricks.

"They're very wog-oriented," he says bluntly. "Oriented towards family, you know, go to university, get a career. It [performing] just seemed so foreign to them. The second I started making money from it, they were fine. But they didn't want their son to be a starving performer. Now they come to all the shows. It's great."

His apprenticeship in magic was unconventional, to say the least. He says that from the age of 14 he was taught by a magician who moonlights as a card shark; a shady figure who cheats in high-end poker games with thousands of dollars at stake.

"I use the same techniques as a professional card shark, but I do it for entertainment rather than for real," Galea says.

The magician is big on audience participation, even though he encounters jokers who want to trip him up. He makes mistakes "all the time" but has taught himself how to improvise and conceal them.

Much as he loves working a crowd, he concedes that performing solo is exposing. "There's a point when you're out there with a T-shirt, jeans and a pack of cards and you know you'd better be good or you will fail miserably."

I Hate Rabbits is at the Sydney Theatre, December 4-6, touring to north Queensland, the Adelaide Fringe and Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2009.