

INTERNATIONAL MAGIC MAGAZINE

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JAMES CIELEN

Where has he been?



JAM  
MAGIC'S BEST-  
**CIE**

BY STEVE



JAMES  
KEPT SECRET  
ALEN  
HOCEVAR



**H**e is amazing! James Cielen, a young magician from Winnipeg, Canada, known for his outstanding dove act, was quickly becoming a rising star in the late 1980s. At the age of 22, Cielen was awarded the highly coveted Gold Medal International Award of Excellence in Stage Performance by the International Brotherhood of Magicians. The Gold Medal recognizes exceptional ability in stage magic. It is the most prestigious stage magic award in IBM competition and is rarely awarded. In fact, prior to Cielen, the Gold Medal had only been awarded on two other occasions.

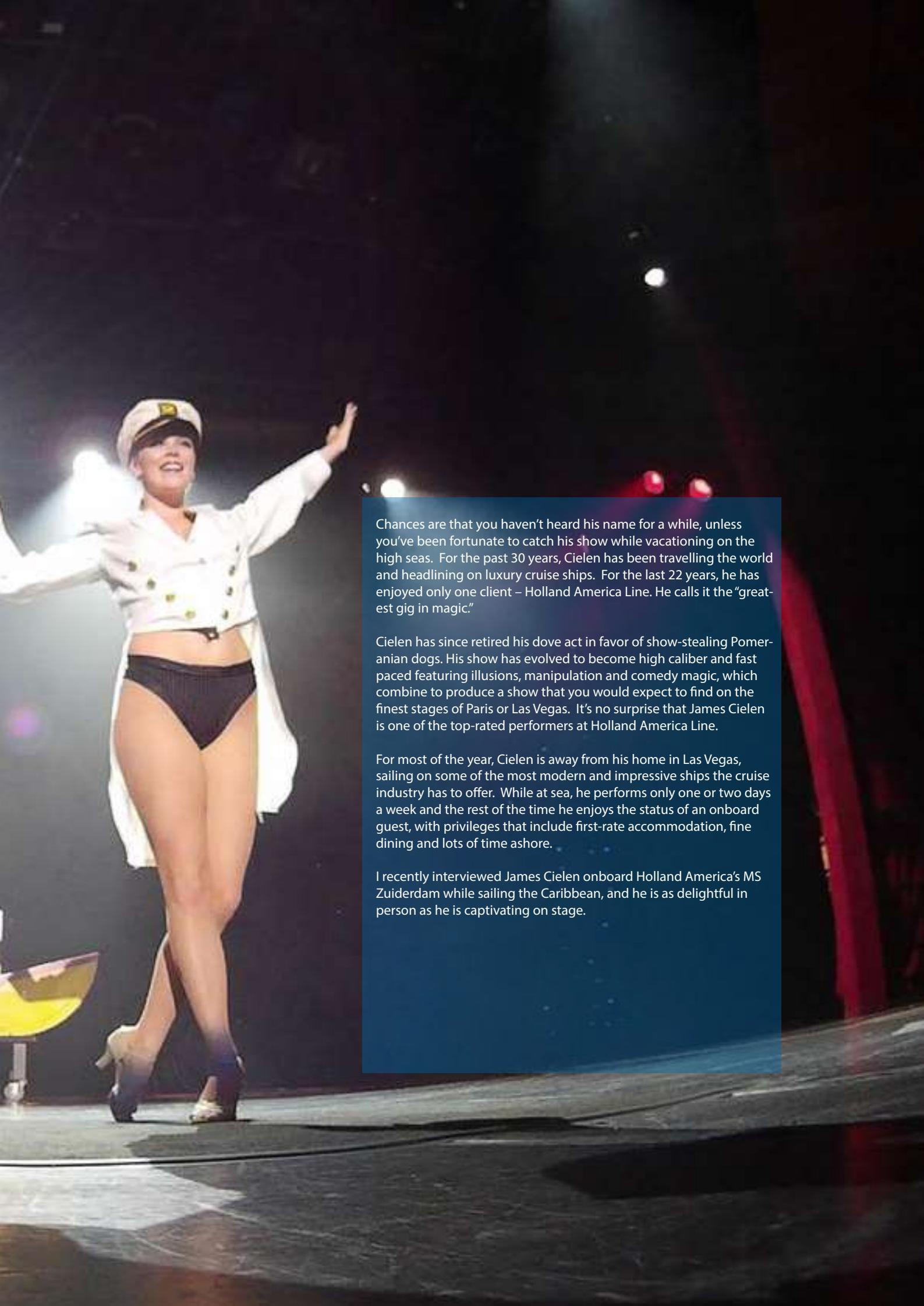
The following year, Cielen was once again honored for his magical artistry. This time as the recipient of the People's Choice - Siegfried and Roy's Gold Lion Award at the Las Vegas Magic Seminar.

Cielen was suddenly in demand and went on to perform around the world, including on numerous television shows and appearances at several major magic conventions. At the same time, he was featured on the covers of both the IBM and SAM magazines. Cielen was even featured on a Magic Hands Stars of Magic poster. Not bad for a kid from Winnipeg in his 20's.

However, after just a couple of years of short-lived notoriety, Cielen seemed to drop from the magic scene. So, what ever became of James Cielen? Did he disappear?

Well, James Cielen is a little older now and, although still performing, he is one of the best-kept secrets in the world of magic.





Chances are that you haven't heard his name for a while, unless you've been fortunate to catch his show while vacationing on the high seas. For the past 30 years, Cielen has been travelling the world and headlining on luxury cruise ships. For the last 22 years, he has enjoyed only one client – Holland America Line. He calls it the "greatest gig in magic."

Cielan has since retired his dove act in favor of show-stealing Pomeranian dogs. His show has evolved to become high caliber and fast paced featuring illusions, manipulation and comedy magic, which combine to produce a show that you would expect to find on the finest stages of Paris or Las Vegas. It's no surprise that James Cielan is one of the top-rated performers at Holland America Line.

For most of the year, Cielen is away from his home in Las Vegas, sailing on some of the most modern and impressive ships the cruise industry has to offer. While at sea, he performs only one or two days a week and the rest of the time he enjoys the status of an onboard guest, with privileges that include first-rate accommodation, fine dining and lots of time ashore.

I recently interviewed James Cielen onboard Holland America's MS Zuiderdam while sailing the Caribbean, and he is as delightful in person as he is captivating on stage.

# INTERVIEW WITH JAMES CIELEN

By Steve Hocevar



**Steve Hocevar is a corporate magician from Vancouver, Canada and recently spent a week cruising Caribbean where he was able to get an exclusive interview with James Cielen.**



**James you are originally from Winnipeg, Canada. Is that where the magic began for you?**

Cielen: Yes, it did. My Father was a fireman and each year the fire department would have a staff Christmas party for the children. My Dad was a rather gregarious fellow and a great public speaker and, as a result, he would MC the show each year. Every Christmas party always had a different magician performing, and after the show my Dad would take me back stage to meet the magicians. I would show them my tricks and they would correct me (laugh). They would show me what I was doing wrong and then show me better ways to do things.

**Did seeing your Father on stage influence your desire to become a performer?**

Cielen: As a kid, seeing my Dad on stage - talking in front of a huge audience - in a big old Vaudeville theater, convinced me that I could walk on stage and talk. It was no big deal for me to go on stage.

**Was your Father a magician?**

Cielen: He was not a magician. He had been in broadcasting a little bit and had a great speaking voice. He was a fireman, but he could easily walk on stage and be comfortable in front of an audience. I really believe I inherited that ability from him.



**Seeing all these magicians each year at the fire department Christmas party, did that influence you to start buying magic tricks?**

Cielen: I read a lot of magic books. I would see the magicians and try to figure out the tricks and by the time I was 10 years old, I was actually meeting all these magicians. As I said, my Dad would bring me back stage and that definitely had an influence on me.

**So, at 10 years old did you consider yourself a magician?**

Cielen: I was doing shows for my school. So, I suppose at that point I did. That was my first performing experience.

**Was there a magic shop in Winnipeg?**

Cielen: No, we there were no magic shops in Winnipeg back then. I had to get my effects by mail order from Mickey Hades Enterprises in Calgary or Phil Matlin's Perfect Magic in Montreal. Also, often the older magicians in town would sell off their old props. I got a lot of props made by Owens and Thayer, before I ever knew their value thanks to Richard Haldane, a well-informed local magician.

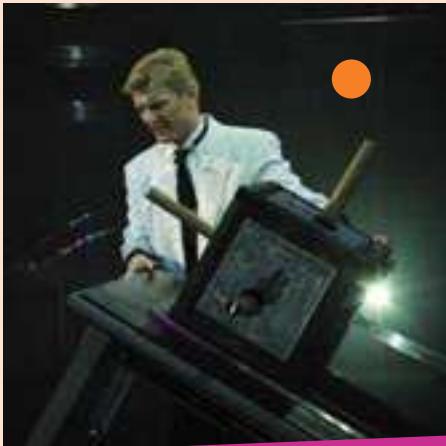
*"Vanishing out to sea doesn't always work. We met 20 years ago, accidentally, in a parking lot, in Shanghai China. What are the odds of meeting in a city of 24 million people? Ironically, we lived only a few miles apart in Las Vegas. Since then James and I have been great friends and I always look forward to sharing magic and stories of our world travels."*

**Greg Gleason**



#### **What about a magic club?**

Cielen: Oh yeah, we had a magic club. Actually, there were two magic clubs in Winnipeg. I joined when I was very young. I don't think they wanted to let me join because I was so young, but then they saw what I could do and allowed me to join. I think I was 14 years old. Now, I am a life member of both the IBM Ring 40 and the SAM Magic Circle Seven Assembly.



#### **You went on to University and still continued to perform?**

Cielen: While I was studying at University, it was nonstop performing. I was performing close up magic two hours a night, six nights a week at a hotel that catered to corporate guests. There were lots and lots of gigs and I would be performing and developing my act with the birds everywhere. It didn't matter if it was a proper theater; I was doing the bird act in people's houses.

#### **At the same time, you were studying at University?**

Cielen: Yes, I managed to get through the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Commerce degree with Honors, specializing in marketing.

#### **While you are in high school, you were getting lots of gigs and honing your skills...**

Cielen: By the time I was finishing high school and going into university, I was doing 150 shows a year. In high school, I would make \$700 - 800 in a weekend.

#### **Did you have an agent at this time and, if so, how to you find him?**

Cielen: Yes, his name was Len Andree. He had been an established entertainer in Winnipeg and had started his own agency. I can't remember how Len learned of me, but I think he called me up with an offer for a gig. My parents told me to work with him because they considered him to be a great entertainer. So, I did and after that first show, he started booking me for everything you could imagine. Any corporate event coming through town would call his agency. So, I was kept busy doing tons of shows.

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#### **Who were some of your contemporaries back then?**

Cielen: We had people like Mel Stover, Brian Glow, Steve Chmara and Dean Gunnarson. Mel would travel all over the world to conventions and come back and tell us about new effects he saw and the different guys he had been hanging out with. If I was working on a new move, he knew what the move was. He couldn't necessarily do it, but he could help me to do it, because he had seen the guys who did this stuff and he was very well read.



#### **Who was your competition in those early days?**

Cielen: There were certainly other local magicians. I was doing escapes and my friend Dean Gunnarson was doing some escapes. I was also doing sleight of hand and Dean was doing birds. We kind of flipped flopped and then he really went heavy into the escapes and I got into birds and kept going that route. Dean ended up working for another agent in town, and he would work all the bars and nightclubs with the escape act. I went on to working more corporate shows with the Dove act.

## FEATURE

"James is one of my favourite performers and his bird act is simply one of the best I have seen. I watched him over and over when I was working on my act as inspiration and a mark of the level I needed to get to. Truly a gold winning performer." **Greg Fewin**



### Let's take a step back, how did your bird act evolve?

Cielen: When I was young I attended a lecture on bird magic at a magic convention. I was exposed to the basic methods of it. When I was in high school, I saw Lance Burton perform on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. I said to myself, "I can do that." I went out and bought some birds and promptly found out that I couldn't do that. But, after working at it for a long time, I put together an act with colored birds.

In 1988, your star starts to rise as a professional magician. You were awarded the IBM Gold Medal International Award of Excellence for what you are now famous for, your bird act...

Am I correct, that the Gold Medal had only been awarded two times prior to your win?

Cielen: Yes, Lance Burton was awarded it in 1981 and Howard Hale in 1985.

The next year, again for your bird act, you win the Siegfried and Roy Golden Lion Award for the People's Choice...

Cielen: Yes, that was in 1989 at the Steven's Desert Magic Seminar held at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas.



### Do you remember where you first performed the bird act?

Cielen: It was for the Magician's Society of Winnipeg at their annual show. They would sell tickets to the public and we performed in a small theater in the city.

### In the six or seven years that you were developing your bird act prior to winning the Gold Medal, who were your influences?

Cielen: Lance was always a big influence and I have to include Johnny Thompson (The Great Tomsoni), he was so perfect with his dove productions.



### At what point, did you decide that you wanted to take your bird act to compete at the IBM convention?

Cielen: I had attended an IBM convention three years earlier and I saw the type of acts that would be there; I knew what I would be up against. So, I think the summer of 1987 was when the colored birds started. I was doing shows with colored birds for lay audiences. Although the Gold Medal show was for magicians, the act had been originally created for lay people.

### At some point, you decided that you didn't want white birds and that you wanted colored birds. How did that come about?

Cielen: I had spent time at the beach and I developed a dark tan and thought that I would look good in a white tuxedo. It then occurred to me though that white birds would not show up well against a white jacket, so I needed colored birds. I sat down at the table and starting making notes on what types of tricks I could do with colored birds. I was just brainstorming and came up with the effects that I did in that show.



#### **And you go on to take the prize...**

Cielen: To my surprise, because Brett Daniels and Jonathon David Bass were both competing and they had first and second from the preliminary judging. Then in the evening judging, half of the theatre was lay people, the wives of the magicians. They're the people I work for and so the audience reaction that I am going to get is a legitimate reaction, it is not magicians looking at methods or things like that. You can't take the attitude that they are magicians; they are going to know how it works, because a lot of them don't. They might have a basic understanding, but not the nitty gritty.

#### **You go the IBM convention and what happens?**

Cielen: Well, I didn't think I was going to win. I saw Brett Daniels (laughter), well I thought that's the guy that's going to win. He made a parrot appear and he was doing great bird magic. I saw him perform and thought, for sure, he was one of the guys that would win. Oh, yeah. He was a great act. When they announced the six finalists, my name was on the list and I didn't expect it at all. One of the other performers was from South America and I really enjoyed his show. He told me the things that impressed him the most about my act and then he gave me some really great advice. Basically, he said that if you don't think that you are going to win then go out and take chances, because you are not going to win anyway.



The thing was, all my birds flew away and then flew back to me; that was really impressive. He said, "Throw all those birds far and let them fly back to you, because it is really neat." My attitude was that I was not going win, but there was a lot of people here and I was going to have a great show and have them remember me so that next time I come back, I would have a bit of a following.



My first thing was to do the color changing birds and don't just toss them out 10 feet. I would throw them as far as I could, like pitch them out over the audience and through the beam of the spotlight in the theater. Go for distance, which I did and the bird came back. As thecame back, he didn't come back directly to me. He had turned and flew up to the apron curtain above the stage. He was fluttering up there and the audience could see him up there. They could see the bird had turned color from white to blue. They reacted to it, but you know in their minds that they are thinking the poor guy's bird didn't come back. Then the bird saw me, flew down, and landed on my hand. The reaction was incredible. At that point, I could have done anything else. It didn't really matter.



**So, that's where it starts and 27 years later, you and I are sitting in one of the lounges onboard the beautiful Holland America Line cruise ship ms Zuiderdam. How long have you been with Holland America now?**

Cielen: The first five years at sea were with various cruise lines and I have been with Holland America Line for the past twenty-two years.

**You have been performing on cruise ships nonstop without a break for almost 30 years...**

Cielen: Yes, with the exception of a few weeks vacation each year.

*"James has always been one of my favorite magicians! He's a great thinker. Every time we talk, I learn something! A great act!"*

Chip Romero



**Along the way, you decided that you no longer wanted to live in lovely Winnipeg, Canada and decided to move to Las Vegas...**

Cielen: There is a lot of snow in Winnipeg. It seemed that every time I would go home from the warmth of the Caribbean, there would be a snowstorm with freezing temperatures. I would spend the week shoveling snow. Then I would go away again, only to come back to another snowstorm.

I always wanted to live in the United States, but early on no one was able to direct me in that regard. Any immigration people I talked to would say that it was not possible. I mentioned this to my friend Greg Frewin, as he had immigrated and was working in Las Vegas at the Flamingo Hotel with the Rockettes. He told me, "no problem," and said to talk his lawyer. The lawyer looked at my various awards and said that I would qualify, because, to be able to come in as a performer, you have to be in the top 3 percent of your field. The awards were basically saying I was among the best of what I do. So, I got my green card and moved to Las Vegas and had a house built. I am now a dual Canadian-American citizen and have now been there for 20 years.

**Since you started performing on cruise ships in 1991, how has your act evolved for that particular market?**

Cielen: When I first went on ships, I had my bird act. Now, the birds were what magicians knew me for, but in my local market I had performed lots of talking material,

comedy magic and audience participation effects. So, I had all kinds of material to perform along with the birds. I eventually started adding larger effects including illusions that are still a staple of my show today.

**When you started travelling internationally with birds was that a hassle for you?**

Cielen: It could be. When I lived in Canada, I had to drive into the United States first, rather than fly. I then had to go to a nearby airport to fly wherever I had to go. That was just the easiest way to get around some of the hoops they made me jump through with veterinarian certificates and quarantines. I did travel internationally with them to places like Portugal, Switzerland and Japan, and I would do whatever the paperwork and things necessary to get into those countries.





*James has a comprehensive knowledge of magic that few can match. There's a reason why he's been steadily booked for nearly 30 years everywhere in the world! This guy knows his stuff!"*

**Jeff McBride**

*"James has always been the most generous person when it comes to sharing knowledge. He is one of the main reasons I started doing bird magic. James is a huge inspiration."*

**Darcy Oake**

## FEATURE

### **When you started performing on cruise ships did you have enough material?**

Cielan: In the act that I was performing before I went to the ships, I would do about 8 to 10 minutes with the birds to music, followed by stand-up magic. I did a lot of talking and interacting with the people. I had several talking routines and then would do the final 10 minutes of the show to music. I did that for many years, I could do 30, 40 or 45 minutes shows. That was fairly common for me. By incorporating the birds with what I had been doing, I had plenty of material for cruise ship audiences.

When I first started on cruise ships, I found that there were a lot of slots that you had to fill. Sometimes you had to do a 20 minute act in one lounge, and then a night or two later you would do 15 minutes, and this could be followed by 30 minutes on another night. I had to be pretty versatile.

In 1991, I was on Sky Princess and I was required to do two shows that were 30 minutes maximum, because you would split the bill with another variety performer. However, on one occasion the other act did not show up so, I was asked to do a full 60 minute show. At this point, I realized that I didn't have the material for that long on a large stage. I felt myself losing the audience in that particular situation. It was a good learning experience, I didn't bomb or anything, but I knew it wasn't as good as it should have been.

### **What lesson did you take away from that?**

Cielan: I needed to figure out a better structure for the show and find some other material to make it a much more rounded show for that environment – for that size of stage. I started developing other things. I started to go into bigger illusions to do on those stages. Within a couple of years, I was no longer just doing those 30 minute shows. At the time, I was still with Princess Cruise Lines and I started doing two different 45 minute shows with illusions, birds and comedy magic.

Even when I came to Holland-America Line, I was doing as long as an hour and 10 minutes. It was exhausting. Luckily they didn't need an hour and 10 minute show. I was just doing it because I had the material, and I eventually cut that back down. But, I had lots of effects to be able to do a long show.



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*His flawless execution and brilliant approach to routining helped mould the way I create the pieces that go in my show.”*

Chris Funk



**How do you deal with the fact that many cruise ship passengers are repeat passengers and may have seen your show before?**

Cielen: From early on, when I was performing in my local market of Winnipeg I would always have repeat shows. So, I would keep a list of all the effects and illusions that I was doing for my clients, so that the next time I would perform for them I could do different material.

On the ships, I rotate material, work on something new, bring old tricks back into the show and just changing it up. You will still do your “hits,” so to speak. If you are a singer, you are going to do hit songs and it’s the same for me the show. I am still going to do some of my favorite things and change up all the other stuff, constantly refreshing the act.

**You are doing a lot of large illusions in your show...**

Cielen: I have been doing lot of different illusions. About a year ago, I took all the illusions that were in the show and put them in storage. I pulled out one illusion from 15 years ago and added two other new ones into the show. I am travelling with five illusions right now, of which I am going to do three of them in the show this week.

**This might come as a shock to our readers, but you are not doing your bird act anymore...**

Cielen: A couple of years ago, when was on stage I would have four or five illusions in the show, as well as comedy magic, the birds and dogs. At some point, I thought I don’t need the birds anymore; it was such a small portion of what I now do in the show. The show is way bigger than a few minutes of birds at the beginning of the show. So, I retired the birds from the show.



#### **The birds are gone from the show, but you are still using live animals...**

Cielen: About 14 years ago, I started working with dogs. I put a little dog in the show and he would steal the show. After the show, the people wouldn't talk about the birds; they would talk about the dog. I trained him to do all kind of stuff and came up with all kinds of tricks to with him. At one point, it was almost a dog show and not a magic show it seemed, so I had to tone that back to make sure it was still a magic show.

#### **Have you had different dogs over the years?**

Cielen: I have had a lot of dogs that are retired. It is not the type of dog that makes the show. It is the right dog and the right way of interacting with the dog that makes the show.

#### **Aside from your strong stage presence, your effects, your material, a big part of your show is production...**

Cielen: Yes, a big part of the show is production. When I first started, ships were much smaller with smaller stages. As the years progressed, they started building much bigger ships and they would put me on those ships. They had much bigger theaters with larger stages. The

newer theaters had much fancier and elaborate lighting and sound systems. That is the reason my show had to get bigger and I developed into illusions.

We are working in theaters that are so technically advanced that they have better lighting systems than the Las Vegas theaters do. We have state of the art equipment and mechanical moving stages with lifts and the ability to fly things in and out. There are some great things in these theaters and sometimes we will program the lights for the show, hours upon hours of programming, but the final design looks beautiful on stage and helps enhance the show.

#### **So, James now we know where you have been for all these years...**

Cielen: Basically, I was hired to come on these cruise lines and the only way somebody was going to see me is to take a cruise vacation. It has been constant work where I am working 10 months out of the year. I could be working more if I let them book me, they will book my entire year. So, it has just been constant performing.

#### **Do you intend to stay performing on cruise ships?**

Cielen: I think this will be it. My life has been at sea and this is what I expect to be doing.

#### **James, thank you for kindly sharing your life and career with our readers.**

Cielen: My pleasure.



