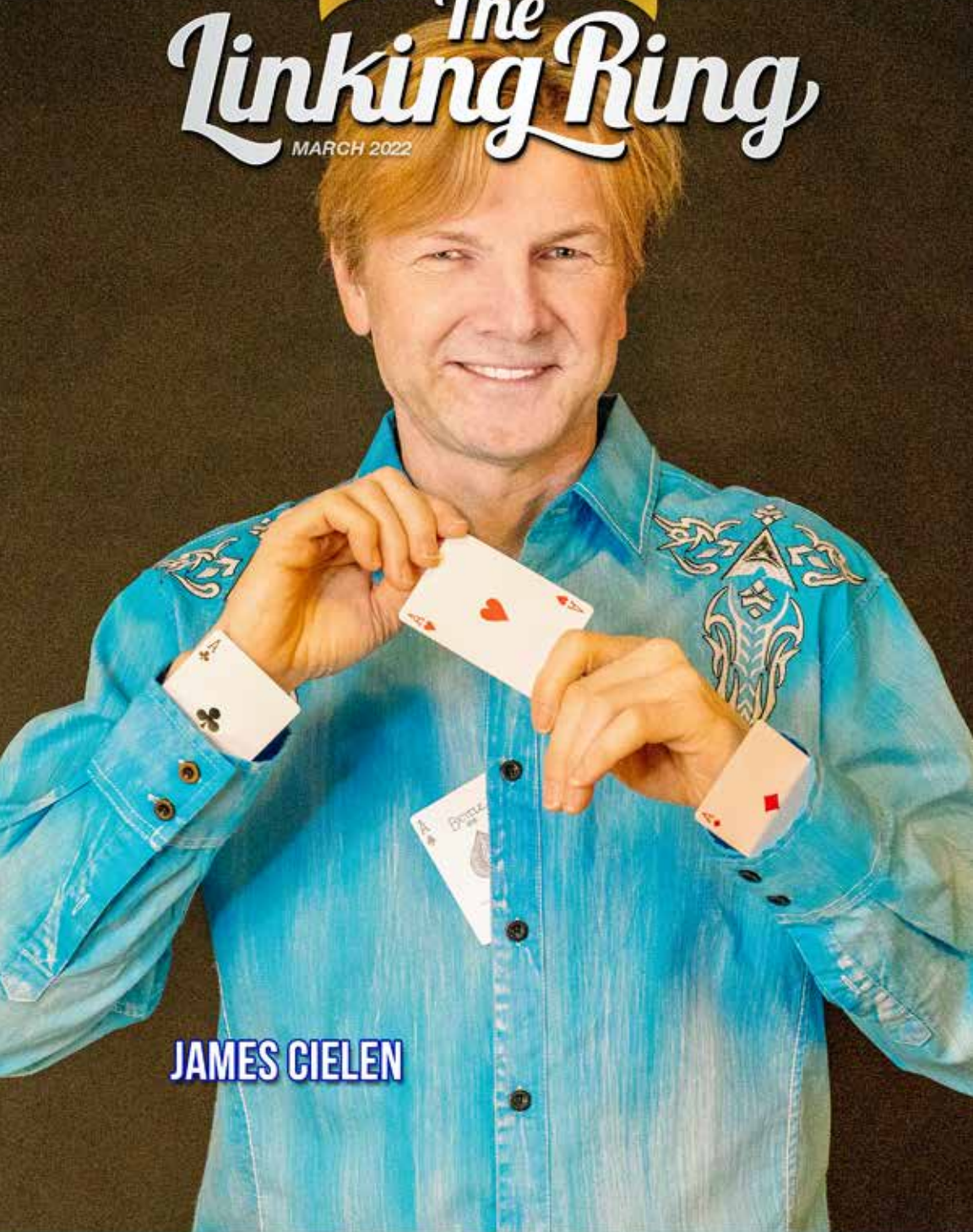


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JAMES CIELEN

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ONE OF MAGIC'S BEST-KEPT SECRETS

By Simone Marron

Although the magic world is quite small and many magicians are familiar with its members, a cross section of our magic family has achieved successful careers with a degree of anonymity. One such magician is I.B.M. member and Gold Medal Winner, James Cielen.

For the past thirty-three years, James has spent about ten months annually performing on cruise ships. With so little time spent on land, he has not become widely known within the magic community. Who is James Cielen?

He was born in March 1966 in Winnipeg, Canada, coincidentally also where the I.B.M. was founded in 1922. His father was a fireman and his mother was a piano teacher. From the ages of five to twelve, he played the piano until he convinced his mother to let him stop. Although he continued to attend piano recitals, instead of creating music he performed magic. James believes that playing piano helped to develop the necessary dexterity for his sleight-of-hand.

James grew up in Winnipeg as the youngest of six — four brothers and one sister. “Being older, they could all do things better than me,” he recalls. “When I started doing magic, I could do something they couldn’t. It got me a lot of attention and gave me confidence.” The Cielen family always supported his career choice.

Cielen started performing magic around the same time he started playing piano. “I performed my first trick in kindergarten,” he says. “It was a trick from a cereal box. My dad had to read the instructions for me because I couldn’t read yet, and he taught me the trick so that I could perform it in the classroom.”

By the age of ten, he was reading all the magic books in the library that he could get his hands on and performing shows at his school. Within two years, he was getting paid to do birthday and holiday parties. He learned about structuring a show, and with the help and advice of his parents, he soon learned how to talk in his act and make his performances more interesting about himself and his stories and not just the tricks.

James’ school curriculum included a student-initiated project. “We were to create a course outline, and if it was approved, we could get credit hours,” he explains. “I did two different courses on magic, creating routines so I could learn a new manipulation stage act. I had to put in the hours of practice and was graded on my work.”

After graduating high school, James went to the University of Manitoba and followed in the footsteps of many other magicians, including Michael Ammar and Mark Wilson, in deciding like them to study business. He graduated in 1988 with a Bachelor of Commerce Honors Degree.



On stage with the Linking Rings, 2005.

One of Cielen's early inspirations was Doug Henning. His parents pointed out to James how Henning would talk and use his showmanship to make a routine interesting. This led James down that path. James also credits the influence of Michael Ammar, Richard Ross, and Norm Nielsen as he continued to develop.

In the early 1980s, Cielen joined his local I.B.M. Ring 40 in Winnipeg. "I was fourteen years old, and that was the youngest they would allow admission at that time." There, James met and was influenced by many of the local magicians including Steve Chmara (who inspired his sleight of hand), Brian Glow (who led James to learn about the business and promotion side), and "a great thinker in magic," Mel Stover (who taught him the Magic Square, puzzle cards, and splitting cards – effects that were "way ahead" of their time).

Then, Cielen saw Lance Burton on *The Tonight Show*. "I went out and bought



James Cielen, 2017.



James working on Holland America with his Pomeranians, Nala and Simba.

birds because I figured I could do that,” he says. “Then I realized I couldn’t do that! I didn’t give up, however, and worked at it and eventually got good enough that the bird act gave me a career. I had previously seen lectures on bird magic, so I already had a basic understanding. Seeing Lance inspired me to pursue that path.” He continued to work hard on his act and perform a lot of shows for the public.



Japan, 1994.

In 1985, Cielen attended the I.B.M. Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, as well as FISM in Madrid, Spain. He wanted to see the level of the competing acts. In 1988, he went to the I.B.M. Annual Convention in Boston and found himself competing in the preliminaries against big players like Brett Daniels, Nathan Burton, Jonathan David Bass, and Joe Devlin.

“The contest went on all day, and I was one of the last performers. I liked what Brett Daniels did with his birds, and I thought he was going to win. There were a lot of birds. There were birds all day long, and by the time the hundred fiftieth bird appeared, it was not that impressive. There was only a small audience to play off. They had thinned out because it had been a long day, but despite that, I made the finals.”

Another contestant, Carlos Zea, told James that an advantage he had was that all his birds could fly. Zea suggested that he take a chance and make them all fly in the Gold Medal contest final. He told him that it was worth taking the risk, even if they didn’t all fly back to him. James didn’t believe he was going to win anyway, so what did he have to lose?



1990 Promotional piece highlighting James winning the I.B.M. Gold Medal.

“In the Gold Medal contest,” he explains, “the difference was that I was performing in a big theater filled with people, and I was able to feed off that. The act had been evolving for more than two years, and it was created for lay people, which accounted for about half of the 1,500 people there that night.”

Past International President Jerry Schnepf commented to Cielen that when he performed in the afternoon and evening contests, he was like two different people. Performing for lay people is where James was in his element. This time, he was the first to perform. He stood out from the other acts – dressed in white tails instead of the then traditional black. His birds were colored to match the silks. He flawlessly produced each bird, and he took the risk of throwing them out after he produced them. He ended the act with a beautiful silk fountain with a giant pigeon production and the dove cage vanish. The risk paid off as all the birds returned to him, and he was awarded the rare and

coveted Gold Medal. It was only the third time it had been given out. Lance Burton had been the first. He then went on to compete in the Desert Magic Seminar with Brett Daniels and Jonathan David Bass, and once again he walked away with the big prize, the Siegfried & Roy Gold Lion Award.

James credits these wins for his career success. He explains, “Those were the big wins for me. Now I had some credit to my name, and I was getting hired because I was a gold medalist. Although the Gold Lion Award was a second stamp of approval, the Gold Medal was the one that people understood.” Cielen started using the “International Brotherhood of Magicians Gold Medal Winner” in all his promos and introductions and still uses it to this day. He adds, “The Gold Medal has been tremendous for me. I’ve ridden on it for all these years. People want to know you’re good.”

In 1991, James competed at FISM in Lausanne, Switzerland, and although he did not win an award, he was the only bird act hired to perform at the following FISM in 1994 in Yokohama, Japan.

Cielen was offered a lot of contracts, many of which he was not able to accept due to the volume of work he already had, but one contract he did accept was with Ron Wilson, who booked him on Royal Viking and Norwegian Cruise Lines. He tells us, “I enjoyed the cruise work, but there was not enough because Ron was booking many other magicians as well. I decided it was time to go out on my own,



James with his sons, Tyler and William, August 2019.

and I got hired and started working for different cruise lines.”

He began to develop new material. In addition to the birds, he already had a lot of close-up magic and patter. When he was not booked at sea, Cielen developed a customer base on land and was constantly creating new magic for repeat performances.

James was now working ten months out of the year on the ships, performing on large stages, and he gradually put more effects into the show and moved into illusions. In 1998, he received his U.S. Green Card. “Getting the Green Card was largely due to the Gold Medal,” he explains. To qualify he had to be in the top three percent of his field. The classification was “distinguished merit and ability.” Being able to credit the International Brotherhood of Magicians and the Gold Medal put him on that level. James is now a dual citizen of both Canada and the U.S.

After receiving his Green Card, James packed a truck with his belongings and moved to Las Vegas. From there he was

working nearly exclusively for Holland America Cruise Line. They kept his schedule filled, and he added more illusions. He worked for them for twenty-five years and broke the record for any ship entertainer working exclusively for one cruise line on a permanent basis. He jokes, “I felt like a mob lawyer – one client!”

James made the cruise ship his home. He explains, “I didn’t treat the cruise ship like it was a hotel room. It was my apartment, and I moved in. I lived there many years, and I took a lot of space backstage, making it my own little workshop. I took my tools and refurbished illusions. I utilized my time extremely well.”

For several years, after Cielen was married, he cruised with his wife and sons. They had two cabins where they lived with the birds and dogs which were all in the show. Once the kids reached school age, his wife and kids left the ship and returned only during the summer and holidays.

James has two sons – William, fourteen, and Tyler, sixteen. Tyler loves playing guitar and is in a band. He is already taller



The Celebrity Apex theater during the show.



James levitates his son, William, in 2019.

than his six-foot-one father. William, who has skipped two school grades, is getting close to his dad's height as well. When William used to come on the ship during the summer, he was part of the show. "He is a good performer," says his father, "and he performed in *The Nutcracker* as Fritz in beautiful theaters for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal." His brother Tyler was always more into the technical side, and he would come on the ship and film the shows. Cielen is extremely proud of both of his children.

One time, James had flown off the ship to see his ill dad. In his absence, a lifeboat outside their cabins caught fire. Everyone had to evacuate, and his wife took the kids and dogs but couldn't take the birds. "The birds were fine, but it was getting harder to travel with them, and that was a sign that it was time to stop traveling with the birds and move on to something else."

In 2010, while cruising the Mediterranean, one of the dogs fell ill. James had to

leave the dog in the care of a vet in Rome. The vet's daughter fell in love with the dog and almost didn't want to give him back. The dog was extremely tame and trained to do all kinds of things, but he recuperated and eventually returned to the ship.

James trained the dogs to do various tricks in the show, and the audience reaction was incredible. They cared about the dogs. He had two toy poodles for many years, and then two chihuahuas, followed by two Pomeranians, Simba and Nala, which he still has. The Pomeranians could sneeze on command and scratch on the floor like wind-up toys. One of the poodles would walk across the stage on his hind legs, do pirouettes, and walk all the way back to the music of "Swan Lake."

At the beginning of 2020, James had a packed schedule as he was working for three different cruise lines – Holland America, Celebrity, and Seabourn. In March 2020, one of the cruise lines told him they would pay him to stay home as



Left: Mouth coils on the high seas, 2021. Right: James' snowstorm on the Celebrity Equinox.

there might be an issue with him getting off the ship if they flew him out there. The next cruise was with a different cruise line, and they told him the same. After that, the world shut down, and borders closed. He flew to Canada because that's where his kids were. All his contracts got canceled, and all live performances stopped. He adds, "One good thing that came out of Covid is that I got to spend lots of time with my kids."

Then, a couple of months turned into many more, and it became obvious that the Alaska cruising season and fall seasons were not going to happen. "I had to find something else to do. I had previously created a magic set to sell on the ships for back-of-room sales. I had created in-depth instructional videos to teach the tricks, and I could see how successful they were. I made the decision to turn to online teaching and discovered that I could create a series of classes to teach magic, primarily to eight to twelve-year-old kids." It was a safe place to learn, and the platform used

was very protective of the students and streamed through Zoom.

Although it was slow starting, before long it picked up momentum. As the classes were highly interactive, some had to be capped at eight or nine people so each participant could easily be seen on one screen. Some more advanced classes had to be capped at four people so that each student could receive individual attention. As the five-star ratings rolled in, the classes became more and more popular, and James was teaching all day, starting at 6 am. It was a homeschooling platform, and most people were learning from home during this time, so there was a huge market. The magic classes were an elective that the children could choose to add to their regular curriculum.

James explains that the classes varied. "Classes were not just about magic tricks, but they taught the kids how to have confidence when talking to people. We looked at the psychology behind the trick and misdirection and why the trick worked

and fooled people. We also taught why certain lines were funny, how to make comedy timing work, and how to accept audience reactions and not step on their own applause. It was as much about all the extras as it was about the magic.

“Other classes would just be trick after trick, but with explanations as to why the trick worked. If the students understood why it worked, they were more likely to do the moves correctly and not let bad habits get in the way.” He also found that kids who played musical instruments were able to pick up sleight-of-hand skills much more easily.

Cielen is left-handed, so he had to learn every effect with his right hand to teach the kids more efficiently. He would mirror-image the screen to make it easier for students to follow his actions. When teaching more complicated effects that James did not learn to do right-handed, he would flip the screen, if necessary, and miscall the hand he was using to make it simpler

for them to understand and learn. That was a learning experience for him.

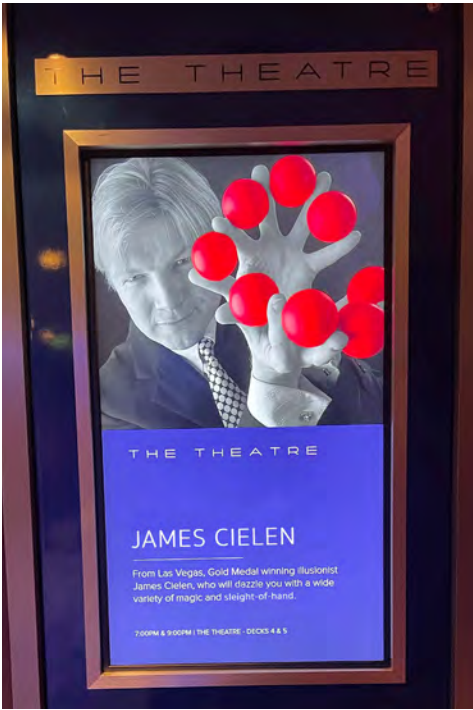
James estimates that, during the pandemic, he has taught over 2,500 kids, and he is still doing some classes now between his ship engagements. To date, he has received over one thousand five-star reviews.

During his career Cielen also had several television appearances. One was a performance during his time at FISM in Japan which aired on International CNN and was seen around the world. He also appeared in many other Japanese broadcasts and made a few appearances on *The Statler Brothers Show*, doing close-up magic and the bird act, and *The Magic of Canada* special. (You can view the video from this 1994 special at bit.ly/CielenMagicofCanada.)

Many years ago, while performing for a Magic Olympic television show in Japan, Shimada, a judge, told James that he had the most potential of any of the acts there, but he had to simplify what he was doing



Left: James celebrating his twelfth birthday with his siblings. Right: James as a mime at twelve years old.



The marquis outside the theater advertising James's show on the Celebrity Silhouette.

and not make mistakes. This was an eye opener for Cielen. “I interpreted that in two ways – either you dumb it down and make it so easy that you can’t mess it up or you practice it to the point that it is easy. You look for the things that potentially might not work and you fix them and practice until it is second nature. It was great advice, and I’m glad he took me aside and told me that.”

Now, James does fewer illusions on the ships, and he has returned to his roots and first love – close-up magic. He has mastered the art of performing close-up magic on the stages in the large ship theaters using cameras and advanced technological displays at the back of the stage. With his lovable and endearing personality, the audience loves everything he does and begs for more with consistent standing ovations. Cielen’s show is constantly evolving. He

is a true professional and plans to continue working with the cruise lines for as long as they will have him.

Being on ships so much, James has seen a lot of shows of all genres and learned from them. He tells us, “On one ship, there was an Elton John tribute. The performer was a hilariously funny and talented guy. There was also a funny comedian and a talented juggler. We all filmed each other’s shows and helped each other, and the quality of our performances got better and better over time. Sometimes, that takes you out of your comfort zone, but sometimes, you need that. We were on the ships for months at a time. It was an incredible time of growth.” The brainstorming think-tank proved to be a very positive experience for all of them.

So much time at sea has kept James from performing many land gigs. “For me, this was the path that I chose to stick with. There were times that I thought that this gig would stop, and I wasn’t going to have work, so I wanted to take as much as I could. I get to perform for audiences and share with them what I do. We can do stuff that other people can’t, and we get to brighten people’s days and leave a lasting impression. It would be a shame not to leave that mark.”

Cielen shares the advice he would give to magicians starting out: “We see a lot on YouTube and social media, and there are some incredible tricks being done. That’s not going to give you a show. It could give you a YouTube channel, but there is a lot of competition. For me, it was always about learning to talk to your audience and making your routines and stories your own. You don’t want to just perform to a camera for thirty seconds; that won’t give you a career. It’s great if you can create your own tricks, but there is a lot of material out there, so try and come up with your own interesting and entertaining presentation.”

On reflection, Cielen emphasizes that the stamp of approval that came from winning the I.B.M. Gold Medal was life-



Dove production on Holland America's Zuiderdam, 2004.

changing. "It gave me opportunities that I never would have had. Without it, I would probably have been the local magician in my market. It's what got me out of Canada and into the States. It opened the doors for me. It doesn't matter that I won it all those years ago. It's relevant today that I'm a Gold Medalist. That is the way they introduce me on stage. It made my career. I don't know if I would have been doing this as a career without it." James continues, "I chose to go to business school because of 'show business,' but without the Gold Medal, magic may have turned into a sideline for me. I probably would have moved into engineering."

James has many videos online, and you can see one of his cruise ship performances from 2006 at bit.ly/CielenGoldMedal.

You can also watch various video and promo montages on his website, www.jamescielen.com/video_reel/.

Now that cruising has restarted, James is once again spending most of his days on the high seas. He already has contracts for all of 2022, and he is hopeful that this will continue for many years to come. Next time you take a cruise, look for the ship magician. It just might be James Cielen. You will not regret having the opportunity to see this likeable and very entertaining performer.

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