



AWARDS

# Magician? Performance artist? Mostly, Derek DelGaudio examines secrets and identity



“I made something that you can’t describe intentionally,” says Derek DelGaudio of his Hulu show “Derek DelGaudio’s In & Of Itself.” (Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times)

By RANDEE DAWN

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Derek DelGaudio is a man of many hats: magician, playwright and performer, storyteller, “rouletista” (a word from his Hulu show [“Derek DelGaudio’s In & Of Itself,”](#) directed by Frank Oz). But even as DelGaudio lays himself bare in his “Amoralman” memoir or in the personal histories featured in “Itself,” which ran on stage in L.A. and off-Broadway for 560 performances, describing his one-man show can be as elusive as the secret to making a gold brick disappear.

Having just returned to his home base in New York from the West Coast after shooting scenes for the Steven Soderbergh thriller “Kimi,” [DelGaudio](#) spoke with The Envelope to talk about identity, being seen and putting yourself outside the circle.

**I saw “In & Of Itself” four times off-Broadway, but I never could describe it properly. What’s your shorthand?**

It is impossible. That is by design; I made something that you can’t describe intentionally — that was part of what I wanted to achieve. The closest I ever got was, “It’s a theatrical existential crisis,” which is accurate but doesn’t give people enough to go on.

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**You were reliving painful experiences with every performance. How difficult was that to do over and over?**

It was difficult physically and emotionally taxing to do that every night. But my connection to the work deepened as it went on. The deepening came in understanding my relationship between self and others. We are so busy fighting to be seen, we forget to see others. The simple act of seeing someone as they see themselves — even in a theatrical context — was a gift to people, and that was astounding to me.

**In your memoir and stage show, themes recur about identity and secrets — interesting for a guy who immerses himself in illusion. Is it too simplistic to trace your focus on these areas to discovering your mother’s secret — that she was gay — when you were a boy?**

It could be that simple. It could be a mixture of things. Believing I had to keep secrets at an early age obviously contributed to it. But there are other elements that are ... “superficial” is not the right word, but those are the results of a narrative and personal history. But I do think there is something deeper at play I’m unable to put my finger on.

**I’m still angry at the kids who threw things at you when you were in school, which is something you talk about in “Amoralman.”**

I didn’t realize how much power there was in being comfortable with being outside a circle. It scares people to know someone is OK not being part of that circle and doesn’t have any interest in being part of it. One thing that’s not clear from the book or the show is that I wasn’t a loser; I wasn’t bullied as much as one might think. I was

able to engage with the world. I just didn't want to.

### **Have you ever thought, “If I know all the moves, no one can surprise me again”?**

There is a sense of you can't be deceived if you know how it's all done. That's clearly not true. Even the act of thinking you can't [be deceived] is a deception, thinking you have control over a situation or things like that. There was a delusion — and still is — that if you practice hard enough, things become real. That delusion is what drove me in a sense of a belief in the impossible, that there has to be something more than what we see and touch and hear and feel. I'm going to find it and if I can't find it, I'm going to create it.



Derek DelGaudio in “In & Of Itself.” (Hulu)

**The show came during a period when a lot of powerful individuals put a lot of effort into making us question facts. Do you think there's any connection the success you had with "Itself" and this part of the zeitgeist?**

The subjectivity of truth is the crisis of our time. We've invented technologies that have made a problem that's prevalent through human history exponentially worse. And we did not think about it; we gave everyone a microphone and a camera and said, "What do you have to say?"

It's great we're getting to hear voices we've never heard before because of these technologies, but we're also giving monsters platforms and letting them create different realities for us to exist in. The last four or five years have exposed on a massive scale people waking up to the fact that "Oh, there are people who just flat out will deny your reality and impose theirs onto yours." And when enough people adopt that reality — it becomes real.

**At the end of "Itself," the audience stood up, and you were magically able to tell them the card they chose before the show started — which is meant to represent a core piece of their identity. You said things like, "You're a teacher," or "You're a good Samaritan." But sometimes you said, "You're *my* so and so." Why the small semantic difference?**

No one has ever asked that of me. There was never an intellectual choice — it would just happen sometimes. I would have a genuine connection to the person where they were there for me as much as I was there for them. Like they were reminding me of something in that moment. They were gifting me with whatever it was they were.

**I hate to use this phrase, because it's very corny in this context but ... what's up your sleeve next?**

You are so fired for that one. No, no, you're allowed one. I'm writing now. It's just a

story — I’m trying not to let the medium dictate it, I’m trying to let it tell me what it wants to be. But I’m excited about the prospect of surprising myself.

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