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National Good Weekend

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'We're like the pollinator and the pollinated': the blooming friendship of a florist and a cellist

By Nicole Abadee
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Saskia Havekes, 54, is the owner of Sydney's Grandiflora florist. James Beck, 47, is a cellist and founder of musical ensemble Sydney Art Quartet. Their friendship blossomed over a shared appreciation of beauty.



Saskia Havekes and James Beck: 'I love working with Saskia: like me, she gets down and dirty with everyone else to get the job done.'

Saskia: I first met James in 2000 on set at the Brandenburg Orchestra in Sydney, where I'd been asked to provide buttonholes. I was attracted by his darting eyes and nervous energy. I got to know him properly in 2010, when he moved into the Macleay Regis [an apartment block in Sydney's Potts Point] where I have my shop. He started dropping in most days for a chat or to order flowers. He'd always pick the most precious thing in the shop – usually something I'd set aside for another order – but he had to have it straight away. I liked that cheekiness.

We started to talk about personal things – family and friends and music – and soon became intrigued by each other. In 2011, James asked me to work with him on a dinner at Government House. I wanted to use four-metre living poplar trees, with the tables built around them. It was an insane idea, but James liked it and we made it happen. He was good at dealing with officials – so dignified, with impeccable manners.

Meanwhile, I was trying to manage the tree man – it was very *Fawlty Towers* and we had a lot of laughs. We also taught each other a lot. James is a perfectionist, fastidious with details, like the time sheet and making sure the tablecloths touch the ground. I'm more pliable.

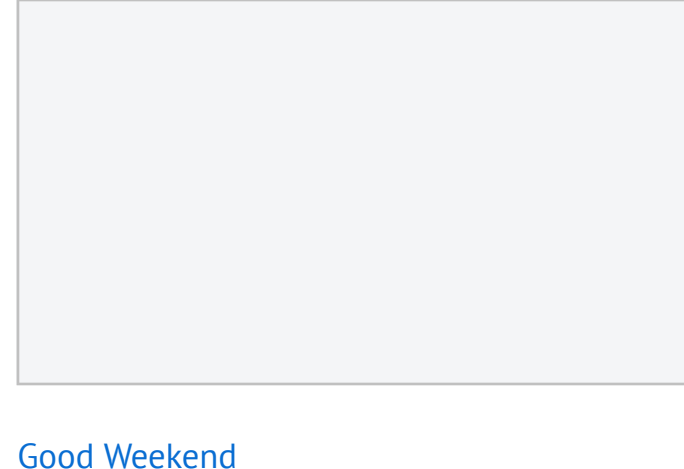
One of my favourite memories of him is from Valentine's Day, 2012. It was 2am and we were working like mad in the garage next to the shop, trying to get orders done. James turned up with the most elegantly presented tray of coffee, with pretty cups and home-made banana bread. That was exceptional, and touched my heart.

In February this year, James and I did *Remember Me*, a concert series where he matched each of Grandiflora's six perfumes with a piece of music by the Sydney Art Quartet. Audience members were given a piece of paper with a perfume sample as they listened. I knew James had been dying to perform in a garden again after lockdown, so that's what I created in a private ballroom in Woollahra: filling it with trees and plants of all sizes.

A day before the show, James told me he had a surprise: "I've commissioned a piece of music for you by [leading Australian composer] Elena Kats-Chernin." I was blown away, just so touched; James knew that I've always loved her music. It was so generous, such an incredible way of showing his appreciation of all that we've done together. I shed a tear when I first heard it.

"James and I share a passion for beauty. I admire the way he has dedicated himself to music, as I have to flowers."

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James and I share a passion for beauty. We both strive for the best and try not to let people down. I admire the way he has dedicated himself to music, as I have to flowers. I love that we are so honest with each other: one of us can say, "That's not going to work" and there will be no hurt feelings. We know each other so well; he's like a brother. I know I could call him at 3am, say "I'm stuck", and that he'd come to my aid.

I always wanted to learn more about music, while James wanted more flowers in his life. We're like the pollinator and the pollinated, forever fulfilling parts of each other. Flower and music addicts.



Saskia and James on the subject of Valentine's Day. Music: The Sleeping Beauty by Tchaikovsky (arr. Rachmaninoff for piano 4 hands) performed by Marco Solini & Salvatore Barbano.

James: I'd heard about Saskia before I met her. When I moved to Sydney from Perth in 2000, my then-partner told me, "There's really only one florist in Sydney." I was living in Elizabeth Bay, so I used to stop by Grandiflora for a flower fix. I was initially intimidated by Saskia because she was an artist doing something totally original, but when I eventually found the courage to speak to her, I was struck by her beauty and her warmth of character.

Once I'd moved in to the Macleay Regis, I started to drop by most days for a chat. Saskia and I talked about everything: music, flowers, art, architecture, what was going on that week. I always had one shoulder to the wall, so I could slip out of sight if a celebrity walked in with a problem that needed fixing with one of Saskia's magical bouquets. One Friday afternoon, when the shop was almost bare, a well-known man who'd behaved badly turned up, needing flowers for his partner. Saskia teased out what she was like and wove something out of thin air.

We've worked on several projects. When you're an artist, working together is an expression of your friendship because it's not just a job, it's part of your DNA. So it's a compliment, but also an honour and a responsibility. I love working with her: like me, she gets down and dirty with everyone else to get the job done.

In 2017, we collaborated on The Flower Whisperer dinner and concert at the Yellow House, a former artists' collective [also on Macleay Street in Potts Point]. I wanted to create an event celebrating Saskia because she's an artist and I felt that wasn't being recognised properly. She is the Flower Whisperer.

She was so generous, bringing in other people to help; it was a great collaboration. There were some tricky relationships to manage, but Saskia was as cool as a cucumber; she gave me the confidence to stand my ground and know that it was all going to be okay. That event really forged our friendship.

Lockdown was difficult for us both: so much work dried up. I visited her in the shop most days and one day we decided to make a podcast. Saskia said: "Let's just talk about music and flowers". That's how *Cross Pollination* was born. We record the episodes in the shop and it's heaps of fun – all very spontaneous.

At first it was just us, but then we started including other creative people from our neighbourhood, like [former arts festival director] Leo Schofield. Doing the podcast together has shown me a different side of Saskia. She's an incredible communicator, a great reader of people who brings out the best in everyone.

Saskia is like a sister to me. Recently she has been consoling me as I have a friend who's very ill. Saskia knows how to listen and to just sit with you. Knowing she's there gives me strength. It's an honour to have such a talented friend.

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