

Penn & Teller, the Magical Iconoclasts

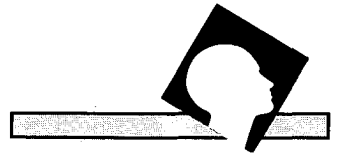
HENRY GORDON

Penn is the big guy who never stops talking. Teller is the little guy who never speaks—in public. Having dinner with this oddly matched duo is not dull. During the two solid hours I spent with them, the big guy consumed only a cup of coffee; the little guy never stopped eating, which probably gave Penn an excuse to ramble on. However, Teller did respond when questioned and made some cogent contributions during our discussion.

This increasingly famous duo were in Toronto to present their wild and wacky magical stage show, "The Refrigerator Tour," at the prestigious Royal Alexandria Theater. Fondly known as the Royal Alex, this house, which usually features legitimate theater and musical blockbusters, probably has never before rocked to anything like the zany antics of Penn and Teller.

I think that the last time a magic show hit the boards of this theater was when Doug Henning performed in the magic extravaganza that led to his appearance on Broadway and then to international fame. But to compare a Henning show with one of Penn and Teller's is like comparing watching paint dry to riding a rollercoaster. No hard feelings, Doug.

Penn Jillette, six feet six and thirty-five years old, has dabbled in juggling, magic, fire-eating, sword-swallowing, and unicycle-riding. His loquaciousness is matched by a sort of worldly wisdom gathered in his varied and seasoned career. Performing as a juggler on the streets of Philadelphia, and then working his way up the ladder of show business, Penn has paid his dues as an entertainer.



This increasingly famous duo are more than wild and wacky stage magicians; they are also staunch defenders of rationality and skepticism.



Penn Jillette and Teller (he's the little guy) on their Refrigerator Tour.

Teller, whose basic training as a conjurer makes him the real magic expert on the team, has subscribed to the magicians' tradition of using only his surname as a performer. He, too, got his baptism in showbiz as a street performer. An accomplished magician while still in high school, he later attended college and then taught Latin for four years. Eventually he made the big switch, to team up with Penn Jillette and begin his show-business career. Seven years older than Penn, according to his partner he does the major share of the planning for their very original presentations.

Apart from my interest in magic, my prime motivation for meeting with and interviewing Penn and Teller was

their skeptical outlook regarding the paranormal and their public pronouncements on the subject. On the stage, on radio and television, and in print interviews, Penn Jillette, as the spokesman of the pair, never fails to get in a few well-chosen remarks (broad-sides) on the need for skepticism regarding paranormal claims.

It occurs to me that Penn and Teller are powerful allies of all who support the cause of reason and rationality. First, their audience is predominantly young—according to the polls, the very population that seems to swallow too much paranormal poppycock. When they present the case for skepticism they are bound to change a few minds, and also inspire

a little critical thinking.

Second, the more prominent they become in the field of show business, the more influence their opinions have on the public. Ironically, when I asked Teller what he thought of Shirley MacLaine, he answered: "People who become famous for one thing are suddenly authorities on everything. . . . She's just another example of that." Now this is not to say that Penn and Teller consider themselves authorities on the paranormal. When I asked Penn what he thought of UFO claims, he said, "Everything I know about UFOs I learned from the pages of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER."

But when you consider that Shirley MacLaine's New Age exploits have attracted such an immense following because of her prominence in the entertainment field, I have no compunctions about Penn and Teller playing on the skeptics' team.

Penn, incidentally, likes to make it clear that they do not pretend to speak for CSICOP or other skeptical organizations. Their public image, he seems to think, doesn't qualify them as quite dignified enough for that. "It's important we stay as loose cannons," says the big guy.

On the subject of MacLaine, Penn is a bit more forceful than Teller, calling her a "credulous nitwit." "[She] is someone who is too rich, has too much time on her hands, and is not too smart. . . . With pseudoscience you can pretend to be talking about science. . . . Once you begin to buy into the first few premises it's all very easy after that," said Penn.

Teller has some strong opinions about the recent spate of books about UFO abductions: "It seems to me that when people are not good enough in the arts to make it on the strength of their ability, sometimes they slide over into apparent reporting, and this is a big problem. If you're not a good

enough novelist to write a novel about UFOs it seems to be very advantageous to claim that what you are doing is in some way real information."

Penn Jillette has some pet peeves about skeptics who avoid getting into controversies about pseudoscience and the paranormal and will not stand up for the skeptical side. He tells of gatherings he has attended where purveyors of psychic claims and New Age thinking lay down the "party line" and "many people who are clear-thinking . . . nod and smile and leave the room" without comment.

Of course it was a problem for a long time that men and women of science avoided getting engulfed in the morass of the occult—until many of them endorsed the strong statement condemning astrology, the statement that led to the establishment of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in 1976.

At my lectures and on television talk-show appearances I am often asked "What is channeling?" Penn Jillette came up with the most succinct definition I have yet heard, and I confess I intend to borrow it—with a bow to Penn, of course: "Channeling is just bad ventriloquism. You use another voice, but people can see your lips moving."

When three magicians get together, even though they are fellow skeptics, there's no avoiding the subject of magic. Readers would be short-changed if I did not refer to some of Penn and Teller's thoughts on magic and on magicians in general.

There's no question that these two entertainers have aroused the ire of many conjurers, particularly that of amateur magicians, because they have been known to expose some of magic's closely guarded secrets—and because of their attitude toward many of these amateurs. For example, when Penn is

asked why people take up the practice of magic, he answers, "They would like to have something over other people." This is a condemnation that certainly does not apply to all magicians, amateur or professional.

And the onstage revelation by Penn and Teller of some magic methods might raise the question: How would they feel if there was a public exposure of some of the more serious magical effects that Teller performs in their show, such as the very effective needle-swallowing trick initially made famous by Houdini? Penn claims that this has already been publicly exposed, and that it doesn't bother him. Perhaps he is right. People who are interested can walk into any bookstore or library and leaf through many volumes chock-full of explanations of the methods used by magicians. The point is, I suppose, that for Penn and Teller's show it works, and that's the bottom line—and a casual exposure is usually soon forgotten.

They do have a rationale for their exposures—and Teller is quite explicit on the subject. He feels that if someone performs a card trick, for example, and then tells how it is done, that teaches the public something about magical thinking and the trickery that can deceive people.

My only question on that score is: Where do you draw the line? Which secrets, and how many, can you give away without undermining the structure of a conjuring presentation, which, let's face it, is based on the principle of secrecy. Penn and Teller seem to keep these revelations within reasonable bounds. Others might be less circumspect.

The stage show itself, *The Refrigerator Tour*, is worth experiencing. Why the title? Well, the opening scene shows two human figures, Penn and Teller, writhing under a large sheet on top of a platform. Suspended over

the pair is a huge refrigerator, held up by two heavy ropes. Four hands emerge through openings in the sheet, and perform a quick trick with a couple of handkerchiefs. Then, suddenly, the ropes are released and the refrigerator drops with a crash, in a cloud of dust, on the figures below. There's a hush in the audience. Then Penn and Teller emerge unscathed. This sets the theme for the rest of the show, which proceeds at a furious and frenetic pace.

One of the wackiest effects they perform is a simple "card trick." A card is selected by a member of the audience and then shuffled back into the deck, and the cards are then spread out, face down, on a tabletop. Teller stands behind the table, brandishing a wicked-looking dagger. Penn asks him to stab through a card. He does so, then shows the card impaled on the dagger. Is it the chosen card, asks Penn? No, it isn't. Teller then furiously stabs card after card. No luck.

As Penn is talking he has one hand resting on one of the cards. Teller, with a fiendish grin, stabs right through Penn's hand! Penn raises his hand, screaming in pain, and yelling out obscenities. There is the dagger, penetrating his hand, with the card impaled on it. Blood is pouring down his arm. The kicker is this: Penn finally interrupts his invective to yell out to the audience "Is *this* your card?" It is.

You might say this is doing magic the hard way.

Penn and Teller are excellent showmen who despite their zany theatrical antics are serious people. Their opinions on rational thinking are well worth considering, particularly when, using the term *New Age*, they pronounce it as *newage*—rhyming with sewage.

Henry Gordon is a Toronto-based magician, writer, lecturer, and broadcaster.