

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## **Penn Jillette's New Tricks**

### **The Penn & Teller co-star on his new movies, meeting his fans and the secret of his success**

By Alexandra Wolfe

December 6, 2013

Penn Jillette is running late. The hotel elevator is stuck, and though he's the co-star of the long-running magic show "Penn & Teller," he doesn't know any tricks to get it moving again. At 6-feet, 7-inches tall and more than 300 pounds, he makes a noticeable entrance when he finally arrives in the restaurant downstairs.

After squeezing into a small, two-person banquette, he says, "I'm going to have the exact same thing as you, so we'll have the exact same bodies." But he adds cheese and bacon to his burger and requests "no vegetables, please." He's hungry, he says, after spending a half-hour dancing in his room while filming a video for a song by a band called Half Japanese. "I tore myself away from the song, which made me more frustrated with the elevator," he says.

The song, called "Make Penn Bad," was inspired by Mr. Jillette's fundraising strategy to produce a new movie, just one of his current projects that go beyond his career in magic.

This weekend, Mr. Jillette will release his latest film, "Tim's Vermeer." It's a documentary about his friend Tim Jenison, a software company founder so obsessed by the talent of the 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer that he attempts to create his own Vermeer-like painting.

Mr. Jenison is one of Mr. Jillette's many acquaintances outside his own industry. Also known for being an outspoken atheist, libertarian and science enthusiast, Mr. Jillette asked Mr. Jenison over dinner one day to talk to him about anything besides show business. Mr. Jenison told him that he had figured out how to paint like Vermeer using a mirror device he had invented. (There is no record of Vermeer ever having used such a thing). Mr. Jillette immediately saw the makings of a documentary. He produced the film and his partner Teller directed.

It isn't the first time that Mr. Jenison has sent his friend in a new direction. Twenty years ago, Mr. Jillette says, he was an "out-of-the-gate liberal" when Mr. Jenison talked to him about libertarianism. Mr. Jillette—who is now a fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank—says he is "further right than the right and further left than the left."

He relishes surprising people with his seemingly paradoxical views. He has been on the cover of High Times, a magazine dedicated to marijuana and psychedelic drugs, but has never used drugs. "No God

and no drugs," he says. Still, as a libertarian, he says he would both legalize heroin and abolish public schools.

Mr. Jillette, 58, admits to being "badly educated." Born in Greenfield, Mass., to a mother who was a secretary and a father who was a jail guard turned coin dealer, he decided at an early age to become a juggler. Then, he says, "I did the worst thing I could do." Instead of going to a regular university, he attended the two-month-long Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College, graduating in 1973. The next year he met Raymond Teller (who legally changed his name to just Teller in the early '80s).

After spending a few years juggling and doing magic tricks at carnivals, Renaissance festivals and trade shows, Mr. Jillette and Teller launched their show in 1981 with the hope of performing for 100 to 200 people a night. By 1987, they had made it to Broadway.

Today, their nightly shows in Las Vegas attract a crowd of over 1,000. Their comical act, sometimes infused with political satire, consists of illusions, gags and shocking stunts, such as Mr. Jillette running over Teller in a truck and leaving him unscathed and the pair catching bullets in their mouths. They perform in Las Vegas and tour around the country. Both have branched out into radio, film and television, including a series (with an unprintable name) that debunked various myths and ran on Showtime from 2003 to 2010.

Mr. Jillette credits his success as a magician to a lack of competition. "Magic in general is not a very valid art form," he says. "My real love is music, but I said, 'If I go into music I'm competing with Bob Dylan ; but if I go into magic, I'm competing with Doug Henning, ' ' the late Canadian illusionist.

Now he and his wife and two young children, named Zolten Penn and Moxie CrimeFighter, live in Las Vegas in a house he calls "The Slammer," an expansion of an A-frame structure filled with prison-themed décor. When he isn't performing in Las Vegas, Mr. Jillette spends time in New York and Los Angeles working on his film and book projects.

Lately he has been crowdfunding online to finance a movie called "Director's Cut." The film will be a dark comic thriller—a movie within a movie about an obsessed fan. To get the film made, real fans can give money and in return have their names featured in the final credits (\$20), attend a private hot tub party at Mr. Jillette's home (\$3,350) or have Mr. Jillette officiate at their wedding (\$4,200). He even sold his own ponytail last month for \$25,000.

Crowdfunding has also helped him to understand the psychology of sports fandom. Thanks to his size, high school football and basketball coaches always encouraged him to play, but Mr. Jillette refused to cut his hair, as required by the teams, so he never had that experience. "I'm always fascinated by the use of the first-person plural talking about sports," he says. He used to be bewildered when a fan crowed, "We won last night!" He wanted to ask: "What do you mean 'we' won last night? What did you do?" But now that he has experienced the same adrenaline rush of team spirit through crowdfunding, he gets it.

His fundraising website features cameos by celebrity friends, including actors Ben Stiller and Neil Patrick Harris and magician David Copperfield, who appear in short "Make Penn Bad" videos to promote Mr. Jillette's bad-guy role in "Director's Cut." (The band Half Japanese sent in their version—the one he had been dancing to earlier in the evening—unprompted.) Still, he says, "the actual idea of the movie is

intellectual." It will be a psychological thriller. "'Psycho' is fascinating philosophically," he says, "because the point of 'Psycho' is that everything that's bad happens because of love."

With "Director's Cut," Mr. Jillette hopes to replicate the success of "The Blair Witch Project," a movie he thinks became popular in large part because of Internet fan groups. He's taking the extra step of inviting his biggest fans (who pay thousands for the privilege) to his house. "I was a little scared by it, but now I'm seeing the people who are buying these things, and they're people I'd invite anyway." Mr. Jillette says a lot of entertainers act as if they don't like their own fans, whereas he feels the opposite way. "If you like the stuff I do, my chances of liking you go up," he says, laughing. So far his strategy is working; last month the movie passed its fundraising goal of \$999,972 by over \$100,000.

Mr. Jillette's success in show business still surprises him. Talk to some celebrities "and they will tell you they should be more famous than they are," he says. "Talk to me and Teller, and we should be less successful than we are. We are both waiting for the market correction."