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## ‘If you look like Penn & Teller, you have to have the best magic trick ever seen’

*‘Houdini used deception to help people recognise the difference between fraud and reality’*

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Besuited magical duo Penn & Teller consist of one large man who talks a lot and one smaller man who is silent. It seems fitting then that when I ring the latter in Las Vegas that I’m greeted by silence. I wonder if he’s just staying in character until I realise that I’ve been given the wrong number. When I eventually talk to Teller (he uses one name, like Cher) I’ve less time than planned. Luckily when I call his more loquacious partner, Penn Jillette, he talks for longer than expected and with many swearwords.

Since the 1970s, Penn & Teller’s act has lampooned showbiz flimflammy while being simultaneously confounding in its own right. They’re outspoken atheists and libertarians (both are HL Mencken fellows at the Cato Institute) and their TV shows have debunked charlatans (Bullshit!) and championed a new generation of magicians (Fool Us). Most recently they’ve collaborated with Mischief Theatre, creators of *The Play that Goes Wrong*, to create *Magic Goes Wrong*, which runs in the Bord Gáis Energy theatre from May 10th to May 14th.

Teller’s magical origin story is a sweet one. Stuck at home at the age of five due to a heart ailment, he was watching the TV puppet show *Howdy Doody* when he saw Clarabell “a clown who did magic and never talked” advertise a magic set. He ordered it and it made an impression. “For the first time in my life, I got an inkling that what seemed to be happening didn’t have to be real. You could see something, and it could be false and not just true.”

Penn Jillette’s formative experience with magic was less inspiring. He saw the mentalist Kreskin on television “selling this ESP kit as science. I’m not from a wealthy family. My parents were very supportive of my interest in science, so they said, ‘Okay, let’s buy you this Kreskin kit’... Every night, my parents and I, we did this stupid f-cking ESP kit and I took it seriously. [Later] I happened to pick up a book by [Joseph] Dunninger and I saw a trick, very similar to the trick that Kreskin had done on television, which he had claimed was an experiment. And my reaction, please keep in mind that I was 12, was really strong. I was very humiliated in front of my parents. I couldn’t believe this man wasted my parents’ money . . . So my grades rather dramatically went from very good to flunking . . . I was inconsolable, some would say to this day.”

### ‘Liars and cheats’

Young Penn Jillette *hated* magic when he met Teller. “Magicians were the people who came on TV and got in the way of me seeing The Who and Led Zeppelin,” he says. “I thought they were liars and cheats and I loathed them. When [James] Randi and Teller both told me, ‘You can do magic while being honest.’ I said, ‘No, you can’t. You seem like nice guys, but you’re involved

in an immoral enterprise' . . . So Teller and I had this conversation that's now been going on almost 50 years, about can you do magic without insulting the audience, without being cheesy and actually enter a conversation with the world about how you ascertain truth . . . I realise it's laughable that a 67-year-old man could still be thinking about something that happened to him when he was 12 . . . but it intellectually laid a foundation. I don't want children coming to my show and thinking that I lied to them."

Teller, who is seven years older than Penn, was a Latin teacher before pursuing his magic career. What was Jillette headed towards? "Probably prison," he says. "I was a very good academic. [But] I broke my parents' hearts and did not go to college . . . I left high school on a plea bargain and just lived out on the streets. I hitchhiked and I slept rough. I hopped trains. All the stuff that Bob Dylan says he did and didn't, I really did . . . I was juggling and telling jokes on the streets and in bars with rock and roll band . . . And then I went to Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Clown College."

How did the duo's quiet guy/verbose guy dynamic develop? "Teller was working silently when I met him," he says. "I'd been working in bars and streets very, very aggressively and very loudly. We already had those things in place."

### **'Criminal purposes'**

"We were heavily influenced by both Houdini and the Amazing Randi," says Teller. "Both of those people used their knowledge about deception to help people recognise the difference between fraud and reality. I think that if you're in magic you're constantly a little bothered by seeing people use your artform for criminal purposes . . . For a while it was really fashionable to call magic 'illusions'. That's not what magic is. Illusions are what you see when you go to an exhibit of optical illusions or to a movie theatre . . . Part of the fun of magic is this constant inner conflict that you feel while you're watching, because you're looking at something, and you know it can't be happening that way, so it engages you in a weirdly almost unpleasant way . . . I think there's a very enjoyable friction and resentment that's part of any great magic trick."

Jillette says: "David Blaine will tell you that the magician's job is to distort reality permanently . . . When you come to see Penn & Teller, you should not leave the theatre believing anything that I know not to be true."

Has a moral position always underpinned their work? "If you don't have a moral position, I don't see how you do anything," says Teller. "How do you write Macbeth? How do you write Hamlet? And magic deals with the most fundamental thing that we do. You can't make any other decision in life until you first decide 'What is really going on?' [It's] the question that magic explores. If you don't really know what's going on, and you step off the sidewalk without looking both ways, you might get hit by a bus. In magic if you get fooled by something, you go, 'Oh, wow, that was cool.'"

They've always been politically outspoken. "We were using the Bible with derision when we were off Broadway in the 1980s," says Jillette. "We've always been free speech absolutists. We've always been . . . inclusive. We started Broadway Cares for Aids in the 1980s . . . In that way, we're progressive, maybe fiscally more conservative. We were very strongly anti-Trump . . . The number of people that said to me over my life that I took this stuff too seriously, and that it

was fine to not worry so much about ascertaining the absolute underlying truth. I say to those people, ‘Okay, here’s what we get: January 6th, motherf-cker. That’s on you.’”

### **Mystical belief**

Jillette has a particular take on why we should preference verifiable fact over mystical belief. “If you say that Trump won the election in the United States, or if you say a copper bracelet stops your arthritis or that there is a personal God that watches over you, and I say, ‘Well, I haven’t seen any evidence of that, can you prove that to me?’ And you answer back. ‘I don’t need to prove it . . . I feel it in my heart.’ [That’s] saying ‘F-ck you. I will not share the world with you’ . . . If I say to you, ‘I believe that the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second.’ And you say, ‘How’d you get that?’ And I go, ‘I just kind of feel it.’ . . . That’s saying, ‘f-ck you’. But if I say, ‘Here are the experiments that we’ve done . . . Here are the papers. Here’s how you can go through it to be able to teach yourself.’ That’s just saying, ‘I love you.’ That’s saying, ‘I want to share the world with you.’”

He notes that the duo put their “finger on the scale very heavily” with their TV show Fool Us, in which they challenge new magicians to confound them. “The producers cannot book someone on the show who’s lying to the audience because we will rip them a f-cking new asshole.” They’ve also tried to diversify the field away from the straight white men who have dominated it for so long. “Teller and I have always worked hard to support people in magic who don’t look like us. If you look like Penn & Teller . . . you have to have the best magic trick that has ever been seen to get on the show.”

### **Cameo roles**

Penn & Teller are icons nowadays. They make regular cameo appearances on TV. My godson is impressed I’m talking to them because Teller was on The Big Bang Theory. My wife is more interested in the fact that Jillette played “Drell” on Sabrina the Teenage Witch. He laughs. “Nell Scovell, the writer and showrunner was a good friend of mine . . . Her goal was to have Drell never say anything that she hadn’t heard me say privately . . . So when Drell says something like, ‘Ah, the problems of teenagers are so interesting’ it’s actually stuff she heard me say.”

Why did they decide to work with Mischief Theatre? They were “kindred spirits”, says Teller. “The Play that Goes Wrong contained a magic trick that fooled us both . . . Magic on TV can never be great because there’s always a screen between you and what you’re seeing . . . When something like that happens in the same room with you, there’s a weird kind of explosion that goes off in your brain because you see something that you think is happening and you know simultaneously that it can’t be happening.”

Jillette is effusive about their collaborators: “I’ve played guitar with Lou Reed, I knew Richard Feynman, I’ve been on stage with Debbie Harry, I knew Andy Warhol. and I’ve never been in a room with people more talented, more hardworking and more skilled . . . It was f-cking like watching Miles Davis perform. He’s recording Kind of Blue and I’m in the room. This’s why I got into showbusiness.”