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LISTINGS
BIBLE

**WANT TO HEAR THE
DIRTIEST, SICKEST,
MOST DISGUSTING
JOKE OF ALL TIME?**

(These guys want to tell it to you)

KIND OF BLUE
Paul Provenza and
Penn Jillette present
The Aristocrats



Crass act

A guy walks into a talent agent's office. [Censored] ensues. Punch line. A favorite filthy joke among comedians is the topic of the controversial new documentary *The Aristocrats*.

By **Jay Fernandez**

Photographs by **Roger Erickson**

Have you heard the one about the guy who slams his %\$#@ in a desk drawer before using it to &%#*% his daughter's &@%#? No? Well, has Bob Saget got a joke for you! In the hilariously profane new documentary *The Aristocrats*, Saget—that's right, Mr. *Full House*—and more than 100 of his peers, including George Carlin, Sarah Silverman and Gilbert Gottfried, tell their own versions of the filthiest joke known to humankind, a comedian's insider calling card that's been passed around backstage since the days of vaudeville. The movie's title is the highly

DON'T STOP ME IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE BEFORE Provenza (left) and Jillette say their movie is obscene, but the context is pure.

TANGLED UP IN BLUE

When the crudest comics open their mouths, infamy frequently follows **By Amelie Gillette**

LENNY BRUCE

THE CONTROVERSY: Between 1961 and 1964, the biting storyteller was arrested four times on obscenity charges for saying words such as *cocksucker* and even *schmuck*.

THE FALLOUT: Bruce's last arrest, made onstage at Greenwich Village's Cafe

Au Go Go in 1964, led to a long, drawn-out trial that bankrupted him. In the end, his act had literally become a reading of court transcripts—sometimes to little or no comedic effect. Bruce died in 1966 of a drug overdose.



GEORGE CARLIN

THE CONTROVERSY:

In 1973, NYC radio station WBAI played Carlin's "Filthy Words," a takeoff on his "The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television." The FCC cited WBAI for obscenity; the station

fought the charges all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in the FCC's favor.

THE FALLOUT: Carlin took the "Filthy Words" theme and ran with it, even compiling a seemingly endless "Incomplete List of Impolite Words."

WHOOPI GOLDBERG

THE CONTROVERSY: At a 2004 Kerry-Edwards fund-raiser, Goldberg made what *The New York Times* called "an extended sexual pun on the president's surname." Conservative Slim-Fast drinkers put down their shakes in disgust.

THE FALLOUT: Goldberg was no stranger to uproar, but this time she took a hit in her wallet. Slim-Fast dropped her as its spokesperson after campaigns to boycott its products. Nine months later, at the White House Correspondents Dinner, Laura Bush implied that her husband once masturbated a horse. Conservatives rolled in the aisles.



GILBERT GOTTFRIED

THE CONTROVERSY: While a presenter at the 1991 Emmy Awards, Gottfried decided to weigh in on the recent arrest of Paul Reubens (a.k.a. Pee-wee Herman)—by talking about masturbation. On the East Coast, Fox censors cut him off midact, while on the time-delayed West Coast, Gottfried's appearance was removed entirely.

THE FALLOUT: The clip was aired ad infinitum by news shows, ensuring ample face time for Gottfried. In 1992, he played the parrot Iago in *Aladdin*, spurring a lucrative side career as a bird voiceover artist (AFLAC duck, anyone?).



BILL HICKS

THE CONTROVERSY:

In 1993, Hicks taped a characteristically acerbic set for *The Late Show with David Letterman*, spitting venom at pro-lifers, former President George Bush and Billy Ray Cyrus. Network censors cut Hicks's entire performance from the show.

THE FALLOUT: Following a November 1993 profile in *The New Yorker*, Hicks became something of a comedy cult hero, and his act took an even more primal turn. But he died of pancreatic cancer a few months later.



RICHARD PRYOR

THE CONTROVERSY: For the first episode of his 1977 TV variety show, Pryor poked fun at NBC's standards-and-practices department. "You can see I'm naked and I've given up absolutely nothing to them," said Pryor, before the camera zoomed out to reveal his Ken-doll-esque body, apparently nude and emasculated (actually, he wore a body stocking). A battle with the network ensued.

THE FALLOUT: NBC never aired the skit, and Pryor abandoned his show after only four episodes. He tried hosting a TV show only once more, a kids' program called *Pryor's Place*.



improvised riff's punch line—and don't worry, knowing this does not ruin the gag.

Comedy vets Paul Provenza, who directed the film, and Penn Jillette, who produced it, pulled the project together using digital cameras and just \$20,000—but they've been contending with some high-profile problems as its release approaches. Facing a likely NC-17 tag, Jillette and Provenza—along with the distributor, ThinkFilm—decided to release *The Aristocrats* without any rating. Then, earlier this month, the huge AMC Theatres chain announced that it wouldn't let the vulgarity-laden picture sully its 3,500 screens. Irritated but undaunted, Jillette and Provenza explained, during a recent conversation in Los Angeles, that the essence of freedom sometimes involves some good ol' American obscenity.

Time Out New York: What do your mothers think about the film?

Penn Jillette: My mom's dead. His mom's gonna blow me during the film.

Paul Provenza: [Laughs] I've been very clear to her that this is not her cup of tea. Which of course made her angry that I would say something like that, because she's so supportive and loving. Years ago I hosted a children's show on Nickelodeon, and my mother has every episode of that. She assumed that she would just keep adding things to her collection. It's a very difficult thing to explain.

Jillette: My sister collects all the stuff that I do. Now, my sister has never in my presence said "hell" or "damn." I told her: "You're not gonna see *The Aristocrats*. As far as you're concerned, it's playing on Saturn. There's some obscenity." And she said: "I can try to ignore that and just go with what the ideas are. Are there words I haven't heard?" I'm going, "Yes...there are."

TONY: How did you decide whom you would ask to be in the film?

Jillette: It was people we knew. I don't believe in seduction. I made most of the phone calls to book some people, and if they said, "Let me think about it," I never called them again. So the

people that are in the movie, with a few exceptions, are the people who said yes before I finished the question. The biggest heartbreaker was Carson, who was a big supporter of the movie. It's his favorite joke.

TONY: Did you hear him tell it? You dedicated the movie to him.

Jillette: I never did, but many people in the movie had. You ever see him live? Johnny worked very dirty. When my sister and parents went to see Carson in New England, they all said, "He doesn't talk like he talks on TV."

TONY: "The Aristocrats" can't be the only joke that has that kind of improvisational structure. Are there other classics in the same vein?

Provenza: It's the only joke with that kind of structure that so many people *knew*. There are a few other jokes you can turn into something that's free-form, but nothing this well known.

Jillette: It's universal and unknown at the same time. It's like "Stella by Starlight." The whole idea came from a discussion of bebop. In

a very real way, it's a bebop film—and the jazz people that I know who have seen it get it much faster than the comedy people.

TONY: But the fact that the joke requires extremely imaginative filth must have been attractive too.

Provenza: The fact that it's the filthiest joke in the world and its intent is to be offensive we knew would be part of what made it really funny. And we weren't so naive as to think that it wouldn't raise issues, but part of the entire endeavor of examining the artistic process was allowing people in behind closed doors. So this joke was very much about that, and if you can't handle it, you can't handle it. Which is why doors get closed.

Jillette: I want to take issue with a word that Provenza used, which is the word *offensive*.

Provenza: I have been sloppy.

Jillette: *Offensive* has to imply some sort of intent. There's nobody in this movie that's trying to offend. The context around this is pure.

TONY: Why are you releasing the film unrated?

Provenza: The ratings board ran out of letters.

Jillette: From the very beginning I pushed hard for it not to be rated. The MPAA is an unelected, anonymous board that's making taste decisions in a free country. I believe that's morally wrong. If someone says to you, "We're trying to put together a censorship board that everybody will be part of, but it's voluntary," do you submit your shit to it? It is ball-less, backboneless, un-American and unpatriotic.

Provenza: We're not sucker-punching anybody. There is nothing about this movie that's coming from us—no advertisement, no interview, no review—that doesn't tell you right up front that it's full of obscenity, so what do we need a rating for?

Jillette: On July 4, the most patriotic thing you could do was say, "Fuck the MPAA," and tell the dirty joke. There's nothing more American.

TONY: Does AMC Film Group chairman Dick Walsh's decision to bar the movie deepen the meaning of the film for you?

Provenza: We didn't set out to make a political movie. The irony here is that our response to any of this is the same response you have when you're ten years old: "It's just a joke." We're not

we're ready if someone wants to have one.

Jillette: One of the things I dislike most in public life is the false martyr. Michael Moore and Mel Gibson—who I think are the same person, except for maybe thousands of sit-ups—do this false-martyr thing. I want to make clear that I am not being oppressed, I am not being silenced, I am not being hurt. As jokey as the movie is, this really is exactly what the founding fathers were talking about. [Walsh] gets the power to say, "I won't show your movie." And I get the power to say, "He's a stupid scumbag." That is precisely what Jefferson wanted.

TONY: You must have known that this movie was going to provoke controversy.

Provenza: We assumed it would. This joke itself, the reason it has remained an inside joke among comedians, is because when comedians tell it outside of a certain context and mind-set, they're met with blank stares and judgments. So, if anybody takes issue with it and it becomes politicized, you're seeing the joke—and the phenomenon of the joke—writ large. Comedians are the biggest champions of free speech in the universe. It's what we do every night. It's all we have.

Jillette: We worked four and a half years to make a movie that we think is beautiful and uplifting and funny. Walsh has spent his life getting power and money and not doing something creative, and with all of that, he can't stop a couple of goofballs with a funny idea.

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talking about a *Fahrenheit 9/11*, where we're trying to change the world. We made a decision to have fun the way we wanted to have fun and not hurt anybody, and if that has some sort of impact in a bigger-picture sense, we have to live with that. So we're not looking for a fight, but

The Aristocrats opens Friday 29.

GO VERB YOURSELF

Create your own version of the raunchiest joke ever with a DIY template for "The Aristocrats"

A man bursts into a talent agent's office and says, "Have I got a show for you! You're going to love it; it's a family act." The agent says, "I'm a little pressed for time here, but go ahead, tell me about what you do."

The man grins and says, "Great! Here's what happens: I come out on the stage and immediately start to VERB my BODY PART. Then my RELATIVE comes out and helps to VERB me, while I VERB her BODY PART. At this point, LIQUID is getting all over the INTERIOR LOCATION, so our PET comes out and VERB ENDING WITH S on the SAME INTERIOR LOCATION, at the same time my SAME RELATIVE is VERB ENDING WITH ING herself in the BODY PART and screaming, 'COMMAND!'

"Next, my ANOTHER RELATIVE brings out a ADJECTIVE MUSICAL INSTRUMENT and begins playing NAME OF SONG. While this is happening, NUMBER PLURAL ANIMALS enter and they start VERB ENDING IN ING my RELATIVE, which is great because my SAME RELATIVE made sure to VERB with a OBJECT.

"Okay, by this point the crowd is really starting to get STRONG EMOTION. Naturally, that's our sign to bring on the NUMBER OPPRESSED ETHNICITY PLURAL OF PROFESSION ASSOCIATED WITH CHOSEN ETHNICITY, who immediately begin to ply their trade while I VERB their BODY PARTS with my HOUSEHOLD OBJECT.

"The audience hasn't seen anything yet, because that's when the WELL-HUNG FARM ANIMAL VERB ENDING WITH S out onstage. A hush falls as the beast VERB DENOTING BODILY FUNCTION, ENDING IN S all over my RELATIVE as I recite passages

from NAME OF DANIELLE STEEL NOVEL. Just then, NUMBER midgets—not 'little people,' mind you, but honest-to-NAME OF POPULAR GOD OR PROPHET midgets!—burst out of the cake we've wheeled onstage and one of them VERB ENDING WITH S on his own BODY PART. From a certain angle, you can't even tell he has a SAME BODY PART at all!

"The midget's equally runty hermaphrodite friend comes along and inserts a cannonball in his/her BODILY FLUID-filled ORIFICE, causing his/her GENITALIA to blow off. A AFRICAN MAMMAL in a fez ACTION VERB ENDING WITH S in and gobbles up the exploded GENITALIA like a ripe banana and washes it down with a CONTAINER of its own BODILY FLUID. And here's where it gets interesting. The midget, the SAME AFRICAN MAMMAL, the hermaphrodite, all the assorted relatives onstage and two volunteers from the audience VERB the WELL-HUNG FARM ANIMAL while my grandmother—who's busy VERB ENDING IN ING the SAME WELL-HUNG FARM ANIMAL with the decomposed BODY PART of her dead father—picks up a BIG-BAND INSTRUMENT and VERB ENDING WITH S it. The ensemble showers the audience with LIQUID, after which they join hands for a show-stopping rendition of 'Deutschland Über Alles.' And that's that."

The ashen-faced talent agent, agog, asks the man, "What do you call this act?"

The man replies...



...“the Aristocrats!”