

# The Aristocrats - By Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza

Contributed by Lee Poirier  
Tuesday, 30 August 2005

(Reviewer Rating: 7 out of 10) The Aristocrats is the culmination of three years of footage collected by Paul Provenza and Penn Jillette. The film is focused on the origin and evolution of a single joke with the punch line -you guessed it- "The Aristocrats". It's done in a documentary style, interviewing huge numbers of well known actors and comedians to get their thoughts on the joke, humor in general, and in some cases, their version of the joke.

I believe the purpose of this film, through interviews I've heard with Penn Jillette about the project, is three-fold. First, to share this joke with the world, since it's been an industry- insider-only thing for many years. Second, as an exercise in free speech, challenging the status quo who would stifle this film, but celebrate films with brutal depictions of war and violence. And finally, because he's fascinated by the mystique of it all. The joke that could never see the light of day, that is, until Gilbert Godfried got booed at a Friar's Roast for a 9/11 Joke ("Too soon", they shouted), to which he resorted to "The Aristocrats" a slap in the face for those who booed.

Though you do hear the complete joke several times throughout the film, because of the difference in comedic styles and perspectives, it doesn't become trite. From a fantastic first person rendition by Sarah Silverman, to Dick Smothers trying to explain the joke to his brother (an "Aristocrats" virgin), to a version by a mime. Yes, a mime.

I loved so many aspects of this movie. Just being able to watch a lot of these comedian's in their natural, relaxed state was worth the price of admission. It's a rare thing to feel like you're not seeing some staged interview or canned and safe responses to the same droll questions. And the minds they have in this movie are some of the sharpest in the country. I completely support the iconoclastic nature of this film. The more we challenge our traditionally acceptable standards of decency, the better, as long as we do it in an intelligent way. And it doesn't get much more intelligent than this. The only negative criticism I have is the camera work. I don't care if the entire film was on cheap film stock and shot in the dark (which isn't the case), but it seemed like the director thought it would be visually boring just having a bunch of talking heads, so the camera angles switch obtrusively and in some cases move around for no obvious reason. All while a stationary documentary subject is being interviewed. It wasn't necessary.

This sort of humor might not be your cup of tea, and if that's the case, you probably won't enjoy the flick. I found the film intensely interesting and satisfying, and would highly recommend it to anyone with similar interests.

{mxc}