



Film Review: The Aristocrats *The Hollywood Reporter*

By James Greenberg – 05.2005

The Firesign Theatre used to do a bit about Dial-a-Dirty-Joke. A guy on a bad acid trip would dial a wrong number and get the dirty joke instead.

Well, that's what "The Aristocrats" is like. It's a nonstop dirty joke you can't escape from, told by more than 100 of the greatest comics in the world. The only thing to do is sit back and laugh until it hurts. Obscene, disgusting, vulgar and vile, "The Aristocrats" might be the funniest movie you'll ever see. Audiences are bound to flock to theaters to see what all the talk is about, and later the film is destined to become a classic video item. The film, acquired at Sundance by ThinkFilm, is being released without an MPAA rating.

"The Aristocrats" is not an easy movie to talk about, but here goes. The premise is simple. Actor/comedian Paul Provenza and his pal, magician/comedian Penn Jillette, had the bright idea to do a kind of home movie with their friends all telling the same dirty joke. Sort of an Olympics for comedians without the heavy lifting. And the joke to tell was clearly the Aristocrats, a staple of comedians' private reserve since vaudeville days.

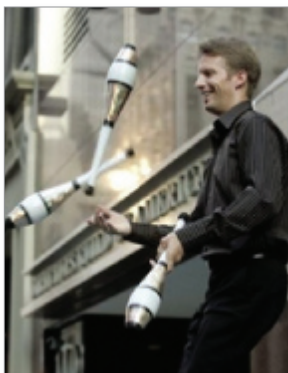
It has to do, more or less, with a couple going into a booking agent's office. He says, what's your act? and they say we go on stage and take off our clothes. And he says, what are you called? and they say, we're the Aristocrats.

That's just the basic framework upon which the comics take off with the most scatological ramblings you can imagine about what really happened on that stage. Nothing is off limits: racism, bestiality, incest, sodomy and defecation. As they push the envelope, they're like kids at play, delighted with their toys. Provenza, who directed, and Jillette, the executive producer, shot more than 100 hours of video over three years. And what they've assembled is a priceless collection of American humor.

In the course of telling the joke, Drew Carey or Jon Stewart or Whoopi Goldberg or Robin Williams riff on the nature of comedy and how to deliver a joke. And, of course, they all do it differently, so it never gets boring. Hank Azaria does a Polish version, Eric Idle does it with a Scottish twist. Someone even tries an Amish version.

So why is it so funny? George Carlin, who is sort of the eminence grise here, loves the whole idea of the joke because he gets to go after people's danger zones, inventing every sick act and getting away with it. A lot of the humor is misogynist, and all of it is politically incorrect. But in a strange way, it's liberating, even cathartic, to say the worst things you can think of and make it funny.

There's two guys juggling, a mime, a pregnant woman, a ventriloquist and a guy doing card tricks, all telling their version of the joke. Two comics tell the joke with their infants on their lap -- good thing they can't understand a word.



But the most respected rendition, the piece de resistance of dirty joke telling, has to be Gilbert Gottfried's bravado rendition at a roast for Hugh Hefner at the New York Friars Club just weeks after Sept. 11, 2001. In his high-pitched voice, he just goes on and on, heaping one obscenity on another. Hefner himself looks a little squirmy on the dais, but the other comics are falling off their seats.

The Aristocrats joke is an old showbiz phenomenon that unites the fraternity of comics; it's like a secret handshake. The film feels like we're getting to watch something we shouldn't be seeing. Provenza invites us into these people's homes where we can almost see their dirty dishes in the sink. It's a relaxed and naturalistic atmosphere and everything is very low tech. They shot with a couple of consumer DV cameras using mikes, visible in every shot, that you could buy at Radio Shack. No lights, no makeup.

Director: Paul Provenza; Producer: Peter Adam Golden; Executive producers: Penn Jillette, Paul Provenza; Music: Gary Stockdale; Co-producer: Ken Krasher Lewis; Editors: Emery Emery, Paul Provenza.