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Teller talks

Interviewed by Aleza Freeman

It's Penn Jillette who does most, if not all of the talking in the magic show Penn & Teller at the Rio hotel in Las Vegas.

But the quieter half of the duo actually has a lot of things to say:

On being the quiet one ...

"If it needs to be talked about, it's Penn's job. If it needs to be acted upon, it's probably my job, although that has blurred over time. It's just a different set of skills, a different way of communicating. Oddly, my mentor used to say about our show, that it's a show about Penn told by me as a narrator. That's one interesting way to look at it. It's just entirely different stuff."

On more than three decades of collaboration ...

"The major things are the same things that are important in a marriage. We're both very reliable. Neither of us drinks, does drugs or believes in God. So were totally responsible for our own actions, and in the course of the 35 years neither of us has missed or been late for a show. So the bottom line is we're two people who can rely absolutely on one another. Our partnership is a very simple 50-50 split ... and there are no arguments about that. That was true from the beginning. Our theory is that on any given project one of us is going to work harder than another, and that's going to change from project to project, so it will all even out in the end.

"The most important thing is that the two of us didn't start out as friends and that the friendship is not the principal element of our working relationship. It's not like a couple friends got together and thought, 'Oh boy, we're such good friends that we should work together. Won't this be fun?' because a lot of time when working, the phases are not fun, and there are disagreements. When you have two people who have such strong artistic opinions there are going to be disagreements all the time, and they are not going to be expressed in genteel terms. They're going to be expressed in terms like 'That's a really stupid idea. That's the most boring, unoriginal thing I've ever heard,' and were just used to that, so we don't have to handle each other with kid gloves. We don't have screaming matches, we are always polite and we never hit, but we disagree with great intensity. That just comes with the territory and we've come to expect that.

"Evidently there's something about the collaborations we do that speaks to people and that's important too, because you could have all that other stuff and if what comes out of it doesn't connect, then it's useless."

On the show ...

"I like that we can go the whole range from political stuff, like our crazy flag burning, to absolutely brutal, blood thirsty, gore fest stuff that makes every person with a Mohawk in the audience happy, to really the most gentle and refined kind of moments. I'm pleased

with that not because it sells, but because that's what I like in a show.

"Only rule we have, is what goes into our show is what Penn and I both agree that we like.

"One thing we always agree on is that we intend for the audience to understand what we are doing. We're not trying to leave people out, and we're not trying to bluff our way. We intend for people like ourselves. The audiences we get are bright, and we treat them that way, and they do understand."



On little explosions ...

"My feeling is that any work of art should either make you laugh or send shivers up your spine, because each of those things is a sign that there's some sort of little explosion happening in your brain. It's the kind of explosion that happens in magic. What happens is, what you see collides with what you know, and that collision gives off that little explosion."



On shooting each other with .357-caliber Magnums ...

"That's fun, it's thrilling. During it, Pen tells you the four rules of gun safety, which we appear to be violating. But you know, if we were really violating those rules, we would be dead every night."

On performing for kids ...

"As a rule, kids are a little less capable of appreciating magic than adults, because you have to have a certain amount of experience with the world to be amazed. You kind of have to know how physics works before defying physics. So kids usually experience it in a different way, they kind of experience it as fiction based on the sensations or images.

"Magic is a very wonderfully grown-up form that some kids are able to comprehend. Mind you, there are some great magical performers who have learned how to work for audiences of children, have learned how to tailor material so that kids can comprehend it and get a kick out of it. That's an awfully difficult task. My hat is off [to them].

"I do love having kids in the audience though. If you have an intelligent 8-year-old who knows better than to try and go home and catch a bullet in his teeth, chances are he or she will enjoy it."