



Photos courtesy Penn &amp; Teller

In their show at the Rio hotel in Las Vegas, magicians Penn & Teller perform a quick four-handed cups and balls routine. Then they do something even trickier: Explain to the audience exactly how it's done.

# Tricky business

**Penn & Teller are having a ball (and cup) exposing the secrets of magic. Or is their exposé simply an illusion?**

BY ALEZA FREEMAN

Vegas.com

**R**evealing the secret behind an illusion is typically frowned upon in the world of magic.

So how is it that Penn Jillette and magic partner Teller get away with breaking the rules?

The truth is: They didn't always.

"We pull that off because we became successful," admitted Teller. Both magicians are also best-selling authors, Broadway veterans and stars of the Emmy-nominated series "Penn & Teller: B\*llsh\*t!" (which premieres its seventh season on Showtime Thursday at 10 p.m.). "When we were first out there and nobody knew who we were, magicians were furious."

Early on, one magician even went as far as to take a swing at Jillette.

"He was angry that we were exposing the cups and balls," said Teller, "so we had a friend of ours go into our lobby at intermission and perform the cups and balls in the normal fashion. The audience was completely baffled, even though they had just seen our exposé of it. So, when we expose something, it's something we've invented and in no way hampers anyone else from performing a trick."

In their show at the Rio hotel in Las Vegas, the duo performs a very fast four-handed cups and balls routine like nobody has done it before.

"When you watch it, it's like listening to a

## Penn & Teller

**Where:** Rio Las Vegas  
**When:** 9 p.m. Sat. - Wed.  
**Info:** 1-800-LAS VEGAS

barbershop quartet and trying to concentrate on the tenor and the bass and each of the melodies at the same time, your mind is knocked all over the place trying to keep up with it," said Teller. "It's an intricate and beautiful intertwining of both of those experiences."

That type of routine, he explained, is very different to compose than the typical illusion.

"But because we find the conflict between how something is done and how something looks to be such an interesting topic, we've invented a series for several pieces with the idea we would both show the effect and the method," he said.

Not showing how a trick is done is a sound artistic rule. As Teller explained, it's generally more interesting to see something that looks amazing than it is to see how it's mechanically produced.

"Usually the way an effect is produced is not very attractive, it's not very pleasing, it's not very artistic," he said. "It's more like saying, 'Oh, you were able to play that beautiful musical passage because you sat in your room and practiced scales for hours.' That's not very pleasant, and that's normally the case with magic."

When Penn & Teller are creating a new illusion, many of original props are built out of the roughest plywood. That's because working a magic idea is very different from working on a song on a guitar, said Teller. On a guitar, he said, the only thing that's going to change are the notes and how you play them.

"A piece that involves screwing around with reality, which is what magic pretends to do, means you have to kind of invent a new guitar every time you invent a new piece," he said. "That invention goes in many, many layered phases sometimes over the course of years, and it involves building an initial model, and then testing that and rebuilding and rebuilding. You do it in drafts, like you do a story."

As a consultant to many great magicians, magician Johnny Thompson worked on an effect for Penn & Teller using an animated red ball, along with another magician named Mike Close.

Led by Teller, the red ball practically dances on stage. With the rhythmic way it jumps and moves around, taking on a life of its own, Thompson said it's impossible to imagine how the illusion is done.

"We would watch it in rehearsals and it fooled us, and we know what he's doing. That's how brilliant it is," said Thompson. "They have an opening line and they say 'Here's a trick that's done with a piece of thread,' and you think, are they telling us the truth or are they putting us on?"

Just explaining how a trick works is not a Penn & Teller bit. What is a Penn & Teller bit is creating the interesting experience that shows both the illusion and the workings of the illusion as a whole separate problem.

Teller's favorite example of this is a trick in which he was locked inside a glass box.

Jillette would then tell the audience that Teller was going to escape from that box. If they wanted to know how the trick was done, they should keep their eyes open. If they wanted to be amazed, they should keep their eyes closed. The choice was theirs.

"It tells you as an audience member more about what you're going to go to the theater for," said Teller. "Are you going to be astonished or are you going to try and figure things out? Both are perfectly fine motives. That piece was an acknowledgement of both of those motives."

While more people kept their eyes open, Teller said the people he respects most kept them closed.

"Both are valid choices but it takes a tremendous amount of discipline for someone to say, 'I'm cool enough that I'm not going to take the easy way,'" he said. "I know one person who saw the show three or four times, and kept his eyes closed every single time. You've got to admit, you've got to be a very cool person to do that."

## Teller talks

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 we're 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 we're 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."

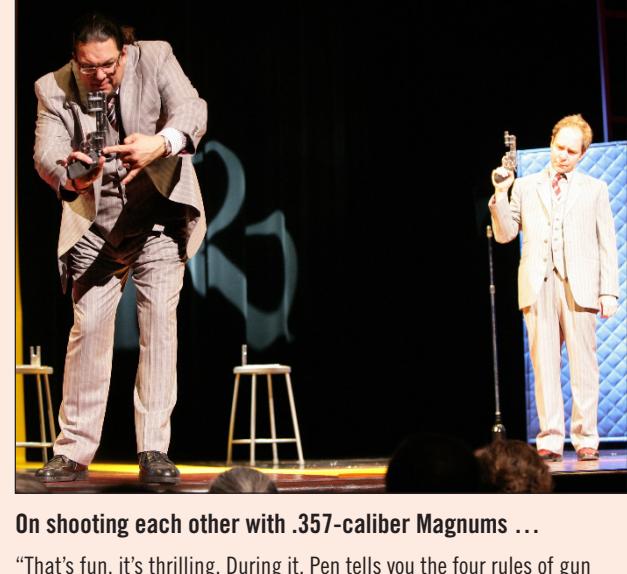
"Evidently there's something about the collaborations we do that speaks to people and that's important too, because you could have all that other stuff and if what comes out of it doesn't connect, then it's useless."

### 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 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."



Magic partners for more than 35 years, Penn Jillette, left, and Teller, create an interesting experience for the audience when explaining how an illusion is done.