

Expletive Repeated

Film Has Whoopi, Robin,
But Not a Distributor;
Making Stir at Sundance?
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One of the most unusual movies at this month's Sundance Film Festival seems like it should be a sure thing: It features some of Hollywood's most beloved comedians, from Robin Williams, Whoopi Goldberg and Phyllis Diller to Jon Stewart and Chris Rock. Its filmmakers include Penn Jillette, half of the magician-comedian team of Penn & Teller. It is already getting buzz, thanks to a short clip starring characters from "South Park" that's going around the Internet. Still, the movie has yet to find a distributor.

The problem? The film includes a joke that's so extremely off-color it is rarely told in public. Another problem: It's a documentary that consists of nothing but the telling, retelling and discussion of the same joke.

Funny business: Drew Carey, Tommy Smothers and Whoopi Goldberg, among many other comics, appear in the documentary 'The Aristocrats.'

"The Aristocrats" is named after an anecdote that has existed since the days of vaudeville and involves extensive improvisation -- the raunchier the better. Comedians have passed the joke on over the years, mostly in private, with comic Gilbert Gottfried causing a stir in 2001 by telling it at a roast for Playboy founder Hugh Hefner. The documentary, which Mr. Jillette produced with stand-up comedian Paul Provenza over a four-year period, includes interviews and footage of some 100 comedians. It is, according to its makers, a deconstruction of the joke, as well as a meditation on stand-up comedy and censorship.

Mostly Under Wraps

The film raises a number of questions: How did comedians, including some known for acts clean enough for network television (Bob Saget, the Smothers Brothers), agree to participate in such a risqué film? Why did Sundance agree to screen it? And will the film find a distributor -- and theaters that will show it?

For now, the movie's contents are mostly under wraps. The joke's premise is clear, though: A family approaches a talent agent, hoping to pitch its performance act. They offer to demonstrate their routine, which turns out to be extremely sexually explicit -- and the comedians describe it in as foul-mouthed and taboo-breaking terms as possible. At the end of the joke, the stunned impresario asks the family for the act's name. Their nonchalant answer -- and the punchline of the joke -- is "The Aristocrats."

Neither the filmmakers nor Sundance is doing any pre-festival screenings, which is unusual. The producers hope the film's premiere will provoke an enthusiastic reaction that will generate a scramble for distribution rights. Sundance, which runs from Thursday to Jan. 30 in Park City, Utah, is considered the most influential film festival in the U.S., and such acclaimed recent documentaries as "Super Size Me" and "Capturing the Friedmans" premiered there. This year, "The Aristocrats" is one of 16 films entered in competition in the documentary category; the grand-prize winner is chosen by a panel of five judges.

Sundance Director Geoffrey Gilmore says that an unusual film such as "The Aristocrats" would normally be given a midnight screening slot, and not put in competition for one of the major prizes. But when festival executives saw it this past summer, they sought to have the film submitted in competition. That move, however, blocked "Aristocrats" from entering other festivals, since Sundance requires that films in competition also have their official premiere in Park City. So it was withdrawn from a planned summer showing at Scotland's Edinburgh International Film Festival.

Mr. Gilmore says he was impressed with "The Aristocrats" because it took audiences to a "comedian's world we haven't seen before." It is not simply a gag film about a dirty joke, but a work with a "real sense of purpose" that "asks real questions about taboos and moral values," he says. "It has no nudity, no sex, but it is one of the most shocking films people will see. It's not going to be everyone's cup of tea."

Hopes for the DVD

Whether or not the film's Sundance exposure yields a distributor, the film's producers say they're pinning their hopes on the DVD market, where small or specialized films can sell millions of copies. That would be more than enough to allow the producers to recoup their investment: "The Aristocrats" had a five-digit cost, since the film was shot on a high-end home videocamera. The comedians -- others credited with appearances include Drew Carey, George Carlin and the editorial staff of satirical newspaper *The Onion* -- agreed to appear without payment. (One exception, Mr. Jillette says: The late Buddy Hackett insisted on being paid, and so the filmmakers never shot footage with him.)

But even if "The Aristocrats" is acquired for distribution, there is the next challenge of getting theaters to book it. If an independent distributor picks up the film, it's likely to show it without a Motion Picture Association of America rating. Many of those distributors aren't members of that trade group and so they can release their films without a rating. That doesn't exactly make "The Aristocrats" a must-play at the Peoria multiplex. "There's probably a market for it in Santa Barbara, but probably not in Colorado," says David Corwin, president of Metropolitan Theatres, a chain with theaters in both markets.

Despite the filmmakers' low-profile strategy, word of the film has slowly spread. Already, there's been wide Internet distribution of a clip of the joke interpreted by characters from the popular, expletive-laced cartoon show "South Park." Mr. Jillette says "South Park" creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone created the clip for the film; Messrs. Parker and Stone couldn't be reached for comment.