

The documentary *The Aristocrats* showcases 102 fabulous comics – and one really dirty joke.

By Ken Tucker

Gilbert Gottfried deserves an Oscar for his performance in *The Aristocrats* – I’m not kidding around – and all he does is tell one joke for a very long time. In this gloriously filthy, ramshackle, endearing documentary cobbled together by stand-up comic Paul Provenza and magician-raconteur Penn Jillette, scores of comedians tell the same old dirty joke-one, we are told, that has been passed on since vaudeville like a secret handshake, told among pros after the civilian suckers have left their seats and gone home. The basic premise: A guy goes into a talent agency and says, “I’ve got an act you’ll want to see,” and he proceeds with a litany of hideous behavior that includes everything from incest to bodily functions to bestiality. “What do you call such a thing?” asks the flabbergasted agent. The punch line? “*The Aristocrats!*” Y’see, the funny comes from the juxtaposition of such grotesque crassness with the lighthearted, quaint name of . . .

Oh, I know: ‘tain’t funny on the page. But to see Gottfried tell (or rather, yell, full-blast) the joke – at a 2001 Friar’s Club roast of Hugh Hefner – is to witness (and I say this as a lukewarm Gottfried fan at best) a moment when a performer rises to the challenge of genius. More famous jokesters here (everyone is filmed in different, anonymous locations) include Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, and the Smothers Brothers. Some advance reviews have expressed shocked surprise that Bob Saget of the family sitcom *Full House* tells one of the most offensive versions, but that just proves that people pigeonhole performers and don’t follow careers: Saget always “worked blue,” as they used to say, in comedy clubs. For me, the revelations in *The Aristocrats* included an aging Larry Storch (his sitcom *F-Troop* reruns on TV Land, kids) mustering stores of energy to recite the sally in a so-corny-it’s-hilarious silly-Brit accent. A remarkable magician, Eric Mead, tells the joke with a deck of playing cards; a very bad ventriloquist massacres the joke with his dented dummy. A mime “tells” the joke; Steven Wright, as is his wont, deconstructs it while telling it. Although more than a few talented people tell dud versions of the joke (alas, my beloved Eddie Izzard!), the movie’s never boring because it has such speed and variety.

The film also does all sorts of ancillary things: It reminds us that Drew Carey is a tremendously charming fellow whose middling sitcom should not be held against him; that Bobby Slayton never became the star he should have been (never heard

of him? Thus my point); and that David Brenner and Kevin Nealon are actually worse comedians than Jackie “The Joke Man” Martling.

I love the fairly recent tendency among younger comedians to admit their admiration for the generations of comics that preceded them – I first became aware of it when the relative stripling Jeffrey Ross started devoting time to reviving those Friar’s Club roasts, enlisting comics youthful and ancient in the proceedings.

It’s such a pleasantly unironic, uncool thing to do: Instead of an Oedipal or Harold Bloom-ish revolt against the anxiety of influence, you freely concede that you find the battering-ram style of Pat Cooper or Don Rickles (both present here) tremendously enjoyable, or that watching an Alan King routine from an old Ed Sullivan Show is to witness a unique innovation in dapper smoothness. This affection – a love for all things stand-up – courses through *The Aristocrats* and is what keeps the obscenity of the joke from becoming oppressive.

Beyond that, *The Aristocrats* proves that sometimes you don’t have to be a great filmmaker to make a great documentary. Basically, all Provenza and Jillette do is point the camera and listen closely; when one comedian makes a throwaway jibe about Joe Franklin’s impossibly cluttered office-apartment, the directors have the wit and sense to cut immediately to Franklin’s abode, where the genial gnome delivers endearing non sequiturs (was Julia Roberts really once his secretary?). *The Aristocrats* is like the best home movie ever made, because the house is packed with such a huge variety of intelligent vulgarities who not only know how to deliver a line, but also can parse its meaning and its cultural implications. *The Aristocrats* refutes E. B. White’s famous aperçu about the process of dissecting humor: “Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.” As Gilbert Gottfried would probably bellow, “F--- the people and the frog!”

