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“The Extraordinary Other”: Todd Robbins in Conversation with Madelon Hoedt

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ABSTRACT

Todd Robbins is a New York City based performer who has spent decades specializing in arcane forms of popular entertainment, offbeat amusements and intriguing deceptions. Todd is renowned for his work in Coney Island and the sideshow, magic, circus, ragtime piano and traditional jazz, medicine shows and burlesque. In his own words, he has spent “a lifetime immersed in popular entertainment and dark amusement.” Recently, Todd appeared in the acclaimed off-Broadway theatre show *Play Dead*. He can currently be seen on the Investigation Discovery channel's new series *True Nightmares*.

Reproduced here is an interview conducted with Todd Robbins by Madelon Hoedt via Skype on June 22, 2016.

KEYWORDS

Interview; sideshow; freak show; physicality; perception; danger

From your perspective, what do you consider the role and the meaning of the performer's body to be, in any kind of magic performance?

The physicality of the performance of magic is what gives it its true power. When you watch someone like David Blaine perform, it is so removed from any sort of presentation and any kind of intellectual approach that all that is really left is the physical presentation. With David, he embraced a very enigmatic quality with what he does, so that people then have to kind of make up their own mind. They are not being hit with ideas other than the overall concept of what he is doing, and that is expressed in a physical way. It is important, because ultimately it is one body interacting with another body and even if it is a high concept that you are doing, storytelling or anything like that, there is still a physicality to it.

The other side of it is, so much of magic, when it is very strong and effective, it has to do with the physicality of the act; sawing a woman in half, levitation, and things like that are all basically body magic. They take the principles that we know from everyday experience and that we have experienced with our own bodies, and present something extraordinary that is beyond our everyday experience. So much grand illusion is like that. You may see someone like Channing Pollock plucking birds out of the air, that is one thing, but doing something on a large scale, making people disappear and reappear, for example, that is ultimately a body trick. If it is done, it can be very amazing, because we just cannot imagine being in that situation, and if we were up there, how is this possible, because that could never happen to us, to our bodies.

Taking that specifically towards the sideshow, what would you say is the meaning of the performer there?

I think the instance of "performance", especially entertainment, is the experiencing of something extraordinary, but in a positive way. Whether this be another form of entertainment, like dance or acrobatics, or even singing, there is a physical quality to all of those. With sideshow, there is also a physical quality because there is no deception: it is exactly what people think it is, and yet it is beyond what people believe is possible. To some extent, this changes the relationship between the audience and performer, and how they are perceived.

This is purely anecdotal, and I do not really have anything to back this up other than a lot of experience and observation on my own part, but there is a particular way an audience relates to a sideshow performer. Especially with women, I find that there is something very empathetic about the way they experience the kind of performance we do. Instead of looking at this and going, "Wow, that fire is hot, I imagine that fire is hot; that is going in the mouth, that is an amazing thing", it is as if I am taking a burning torch and shoving it into their mouth, or taking a nail and shoving it up their

nose, or I am making them eat the glass... They are having an experience not unlike what I am going through, or what they imagine that I am going through. I do find this interesting, that some people really react to this and that there is a certain subjectivity to them in the way that they experience it as there is no objectivity or distance there. They are not sitting back; they are actively participating, and even though they might not be verbally expressing anything, or doing anything other than sitting there and watching, they are taking it in on a much deeper level.

Unfortunately, in this day and age, people will often dismiss sideshow performance. They do not believe in it: "Oh, you cannot eat glass. That is impossible." The interesting thing about it is, when I say, "How do you know that; where did you get that information from?", they do not know how to respond: "Well, it is just... You cannot eat glass." So I ask them: "Okay, and why do you know that? Why do you know that it is impossible to hammer a nail into your nose? It is possible, I am really doing it, so why are you dismissing it?" I want to know what it is inside their heads that creates that wall that I cannot get through, where they are convinced this is impossible. They see it being done and yet they dismiss it as a trick. So much of what I do as a performer in the sideshow is proving the reality of it. Now, getting back to David Blaine, it is kind of interesting in that he will mix up trickery with real feats. He wants people to question everything, because the irony of it is that they will often come to the right conclusion based upon the deception. They are able to tell what is and what is not a trick, as opposed to what I do in the sideshow, where everything is dismissed, and everything is a trick. They have two very, very different responses to a similar kind of thing.

Is it a recent idea that people see this type of performance as fake? Have perceptions changed, would you say?

Yes, I think it is getting worse. For some reason, people seem to be more self-centred now. There is something about the selfie generation where the world revolves around them, so if they do not think they could eat glass or eat fire or shove a nail in their nose, no one else could. Right now, I am working on some new material and it is something I need to consider; I am getting more in people's faces, and saying, "You want it to be all about you? Well, this is going to be about you, but you may not like this." We will see how that plays, because there is a different dynamic now. Whereas we used to try to embrace the extraordinary and go and see a circus where you would see amazing performers doing remarkable things... Even to the animal acts, it was about this extraordinary relationship between the trainers and the animals, but those perceptions have changed. I think it is getting more difficult when people have just heard things and think they know things.

As a result, you have to really break down the fourth wall and take it to them. Just the other night I saw Harrison Greenbaum performing at the Magic Castle in Hollywood. He is a very talented stand-up comedian and magician, and he was, I think, studying law at Harvard, before deciding in his senior year that he was going to be a full-time magician. Because of this, so much of his routine is about what he could have been doing, but no, he is doing this instead, and in the process, he gets very angry and in the face of the audience. He is also very quick-witted, so whatever he is getting from the audience, he is going to riff on it. All of that makes his performance very immediate and whether you intellectually understand or not, you get a sense that this is a unique experience, that what is happening here is being done for you at this moment, and it is very vibrant because of that. You find the same thing in the sideshow stuff, which is what I love about it, because so much of it plays upon people's perception of what is possible. If it is done right, and you can really reach them, and you can frame it in the right context, not only in presentation but also in venue, you can reach people. All of a sudden they break through and they are filled with wonder. That is what I have always gone for with this kind of stuff, because the gross-out factor is there, you do not have to work at that; it is the wonder that is important.

Returning to this idea of changing perceptions, is there a difference in how people see the born freak and the made freak?

Yes, and again it is about fighting the perception, or rather misperception of these performers. So many people believe that all circus animals are abused, and all sideshow freaks are exploited and abused, and it is simply not true. Are there examples of it? Yes, but not the majority. It is interesting, when I did a show for a college up in New England, the students, they all had this idea that sideshows continue to exploit people with disabilities. I tried to explain to them and told them about some of the performers: Percilla and Emmitt Bejano work for themselves. Johann Petursson, the Icelandic giant, worked for himself. Al and Jeanie Tomaini work for themselves, so who is doing the exploitation there? To give you an example, a number of years ago I was having dinner with Ward Hall, the last of the old carnival sideshow guys who is now in his nineties, and he said to me, "I like to think of myself as a smart man, but I am the biggest sucker and chump ever. All these years, during the 50s and 60s especially, I was hiring my freaks, and what I was actually doing was giving people with disability an income, and I could have gotten funding for that." His position has always been that these people do not need charity, that they need to be celebrated, but then he realised he could have gotten subsidies because the majority of the people he was hiring were disabled. I think that is a very interesting way of looking at it.

At the core of it, though, I think there is still a discomfort there, of seeing someone with disabilities in general, and then when people see them entertaining, and the reason they are entertaining is because they were born different, it makes people feel weird. Yet we have no problem watching reality TV shows that have a pseudo-educational quality as we follow around the life of someone who weighs 600lbs, or someone who is a dwarf couple, or too tall, or whatever... All of those programmes are a freak show; it is exactly the same thing. These days in the sideshow, there are only a handful of people who have disabilities that are performing, because the traditional venues, carnivals and circuses and amusement parks, are not hiring. It is too bad, but it is really difficult now to make a living as a sideshow freak, whereas if you are a sword swallower, you might be able to go off and do other things.

It is also the context of where these things came from in terms of sideshow; so many people embrace the social context of the carnival, or if not, a fantasy carnival, a dark carnival, a "Something Wicked This Way Comes" Ray Bradbury kind of carnival. A lot of that came from Jim Rose, and it has got this kind of dark quality to it and it is entertaining and fun, because there is something inherently creepy about a carnival, this nomadic thing that shows up to entertain you and take your money... Some people embrace that kind of thing, and likewise, I have sort of embraced the tradition of the sideshow. Before that, when I first started doing it, I always wore a suit and tie, carrying a Gladstone bag with all the props in it. Back then, I did not talk about the sideshow and its traditions, because for me it was more about why I was doing it and why I was doing it for *you*, which influenced the performance dynamic and the material. It was not until later that I really started to embrace the carnival side and the heritage of it. That still works, and now I keep returning to that: I pick from the heritage and my background in working in sideshows and places like Coney Island, but it is only part of it now; it is not the overall dynamic and performance context that I do it in.

Picking up on that idea of the dark carnival, what do you think the role of danger is in all of these, whether that is the perception or the reality of danger?

It is very important, I think, for an audience to understand the danger of what is being done, so that they can appreciate the skill that has overcome that danger. If they sense there is danger, but they do not sense there is skill, then they will just want you to stop, because they will be afraid that you will hurt yourself. That is the problem with a number of sideshow performers that I see that have, who do not have that much in the way of performance skills, who may really struggle with this. By contrast, there are people who are doing extraordinary things, Aerial Manx being a good example, and I look at him and I get scared, because it is amazing what he is doing, but it is so dangerous. I have never met him, but a number of times, I have said to him and about him that there is no good reason for anyone to be doing what he is doing but I am glad

he is, because it is extraordinary. Yet there are some people who are now emulating him, and it scares the daylight out of me, because it is so very perilous, and there is no way an audience is going to understand how dangerous it is in their hands of these performers. Ultimately, it is about that understanding.

We have already touched on this in some ways, that relationship between the performing body and the audience body within the sideshow. Can you elaborate on that, on the empathy and the need to get close?

I do not quite know what it is... There is an invisible barrier because it is an intellectual one, and when I say intellectual, that is not synonymous with intelligence, it is just a mental processing of the information that is coming to them, and making judgements and assumptions, and you have to get through that. One way to get through that is by breaking down traditional performance barriers, to move away from the stage and the darkened comfortable theatre and taking it out to the street where it has an immediacy, where it is unexpected, or to a more intimate venues where you do have a one-on-one contact with the people. Even though there might be a group there, it is more about this being between you as a performer and that single audience member. When you can reach them and create that rapport, then you have a chance of really doing something memorable.

Do you think there is the ability for the body of the performer to influence the audience body in that way?

Oh, sure; they are the tricks of the trade, which is, we naturally pick up on the physicality. It is an ideo-motor response, but taken to do a greater level, not just for use with a pendulums and Ouija boards and contact mindreading. Yet it goes beyond that and moves into performance skills, because if you are talking about something and you have good posture and you carry yourself well, there is a confidence that comes out of you, without having to puff yourself up. Someone can just walk onstage and instantly get people's attention; we may refer to it as charisma, but it has a very physical quality to it. Someone's physicality is giving you clues as to what is going on emotionally and mentally with the person before they say anything.

On the other side of that, there are a lot of things you can actively do to encourage this. For example, if you are juggling and you are doing something very difficult, if you hold your breath, it creates tension in the audience, because they will know something is off. They will not know you are holding your breath, but they will pick up on that on a very non-intellectual level, that there is something wrong; it makes them antsy and it raises their tension, so that when you complete that trick, there is more of an impact. You can do something similar with tension: if you start doing

something and you really tense up as you are doing it, it gives more gravitas to what you are doing, because it does not have that freedom and relaxation to it. Little tricks like that can be used that reach people on a non-intellectual level.

Personally, I have to be careful, when I am talking to people... At 6'4", I am a tall guy, and I have to understand that my physicality can be off-putting. Though I may be relating to someone on a certain level, I can be, not dominating, but potentially intimidating, and people pull back because of just my physical size. As a result, I will do certain things; for example, I will intentionally break the line of my body when I bring someone up on stage and ask them a question. I can cock my head, which takes me out of the dominant and into the more submissive. This also allows me to play against that, so I will appear less intimidating, only to tell them to "stick their hand in the goddamn box", because I seem so nice and yet what I am saying and what I am asking them to do completely contradicts that. This then creates some anxiety and it becomes entertaining to the audience because they are seeing this dynamic onstage of these two people, where one of them seems like a nice guy but could be malevolent and maybe wants to hurt people, or take himself down and everyone else with him. I can use my body to create this duality for them.

One last question, just to round things off: what kind of body would you say is ultimately presented in the sideshow, and why?

It is the extraordinary other. It is the outlier who is remarkable; the ability, the skill that has been developed means nothing unless it is put to good use and purpose, and hopefully the higher the purpose, the more important and beneficial it is. For such a performance, you need context; it does not have to be didactic, but you need to figure out why you are doing what you are doing. Why does it appeal to you, and why do you feel it is important? That is what you need to convey to an audience, and then all of a sudden, it lifts everything up out of amusement and entertainment into art. I think that is a very good thing, and I think there is no reason for any of it to be pretentious; I think it is all about valuing your fellow human being and the body has a lot to do with that, where understanding the physical dynamic is very, very important.

When performance works, magic or sideshow or whatever, it is so wonderful and it touches people on a very deep level. Unfortunately, I see so much magic that, though it is skilled as performance, it is inherently trivial and it breaks my heart. When you are a performer, even if you are doing something for free, what you are asking for is the attention of people. You are really asking for their time and that is the most valuable thing of all because it is a finite quality. When you are spending time, you are spending the greatest currency there is, and when you are asking someone to spend time with you, taking in what you are doing, it better be the best way they could spend that currency, the greatest value they could have for that purchase. It is

important to understand all elements of it and put that back into your work so that it is not just amusement and trivial.