

# PLAY PENN

by Michael Giltz

Penn Jillette, the tall, talkative, and slightly menacing half of that magical duo, Penn & Teller, is chatting politely from his parents' home in Massachusetts. "There is nothing wrong if during this conversation I picture slitting your throat or beating you senseless," he insists amiably. "That's none of your business."

While I might beg to differ, the implication is that Jillette would never actually do such a thing—not an entirely convincing statement from someone who makes his living dangling his partner

over a bed of spikes or nearly drowning him in a tank of water. But the idea that it's perfectly healthy to think about such nasty unpleasant things is at the heart of Jillette's new play, "Recreation," currently on stage at Currican.

The play is set in a Memphis strip club, where James, a thirtyish customer, flirts casually with Amber, one of the exotic dancers. As they chat, we see vivid reenactments of the violent fantasies that pass through James' mind.

But to Jillette, that's not the scary part. "Even though there are images of murder and torture and bondage and s&m all the way through it, the only really dangerous thing that happens in the whole show is that one person asks another person if they

want to go out to lunch the next day," he says. "Which, as we all know, is a moment of humiliation where you are really taking a chance. Thinking about killing someone, you are completely safe in your head. While actually asking another human being, 'Would you like to see me

some more?' is the most terrifying thing a human can do."

In a way, Jillette asked that very thing of Teller more than 20 years ago. This unlikely pair met in college, staged some distinctly unusual revues, and struck gold with "The Asparagus Valley Cultural Society," a show they mounted with a third partner that ran in San Francisco for two and half years. Little did they know then, they might one day become the longest-running active part-

*Continued on page 44*

Dean Bradshaw and Kelly McShain in "Recreation."  
Photo by Jeffrey Dewhurst.



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*Continued from page 12*

nership in showbiz. "When Bob, of Bob & Ray, died, we got a big bump up. Now all that's left is the Smothers Brothers."

Although they spend considerable time on the road together, they rarely socialize outside of work, and encourage each other to work on outside projects. Yet while Jillette enjoys the ability to stretch his talents, he knows where his real strength lies.



"I guess this isn't the best thing to say in an interview where I'm pimping something without Teller," he says. "But no matter how good this play is—and director Mike Willis and the cast are doing a tremendous job—the stuff that I do and do well, I just do better with Teller."

But even that, Jillette says, cannot compare to life's greatest achievement: A demolition derby. "Every time I see an auto thrill show, I think, why the f— are we doing theatre? You just want to take Al Pacino and slap him, and say, 'Al, this is what theatre is about. Not that Eugene O'Neill stuff. Get your Chevy up on two wheels, Al. You wasted a lot of time at the Actors Studio.'" ★

Penn Jillette (seated); (standing, left to right): Andrew Totolos, Kelly McShain, Dean Bradshaw. Photo by Jeffrey Dewhurst.