

An Interview with World-Famous Magician and Sideshow Performer Todd Robbins

We met Todd Robbins at the very small, very crowded Caffe Reggio on MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village—a block and a half from Washington Square Park—before walking three doors down, past Mamoun's Falafel and The Comedy Cellar, to the Players Theatre where, later that evening, Todd would be MCing a show he co-produces called Monday Night Magic, the longest-running magic show in New York. Todd is one of the nation's foremost experts in magic, as well as in circus sideshows, as well as in con artistry, as well as in ragtime piano. In his own words he "has spent decades specializing in arcane forms of popular entertainment, offbeat amusements and intriguing deceptions." He produced and co-wrote with Teller of Penn & Teller the Off-Broadway hit Play Dead, authored The Modern Con Man: How to Get Something for Nothing, and was featured in the documentary American Carny: True Tales from the Circus Sideshow. Todd is also a huge fan and supporter of the National Police Gazette—current incarnation included—but particularly the period that covered the era in which he is most interested, during which Richard K. Fox was our peerless leader. We settled into a Players Theatre dressing room and began the interview:

There are a lot of descriptions next to your name. Tell us what it is you do do.

What I do do is I've kind of made a career and a lifetime pursuit of archaic forms of popular entertainment. And the *Police Gazette* has always been right there in my life from the earliest days

because it's been a great resource for chronicling back in the day. Of all the things that I'm interested in these days the *Police Gazette* was interested in those days. So it's been great to go back and see the various illustrations and little articles, very breezily written articles about the



Todd Robbins hammers a 30-penny nail into his head.

various things that were going on—the theatrical happenings and musical happenings—because I'm also a ragtime piano player. The *Police Gazette* in 1900 had a big ragtime piano-playing championship, as they were very well known for the various competitions that they sponsored. And it was won by a man by the name of Mike Bernard who was the musical director of Tony Pastor's vaudeville theatre down on 14th Street. And how he came to fame was because of Richard K. Fox and the *Police Gazette* when he won that award. Then he traveled around the country winning various "cutting contests" as they call them, the ragtime piano-playing contests. But the big one was this first one that happened in New York City here, sponsored by the *Police Gazette*.

How long have you been into magic and sideshow-type things?

I got started when I was about 10 years old. I grew up in Southern California in a suburban area, Long Beach, California, just on the outskirts of Orange County. It was a new area, new suburban tract housing. And it was all clean and safe; and it was quiet. It was a place that persistently insisted that this was not a way of life, but the way of life. You don't need to ask questions because this is nirvana. But it was not the most exciting place to grow up as a kid. I was looking for things that had character, because everything was so manufactured there. So a magic shop opened up in our neighborhood when I was 10 (continued on next page)

Paul Juser and The City from Another Universe



The Vampire of Doom City Part 2

In 2008, the local news reported that Bambi Madden had been buying beer when she disappeared. An annual candlelight vigil began in front of the gas station Bambi never arrived at. Strange graffiti appeared across the front of the church facing the home of Bambi's sister. The short message claimed Bambi died in police custody. Below the message was a phone number for Calvin Harris, an Owego automotive hustler who's wife disappeared equally mysteriously on a certain day in September of 2001.

I'd been following a Binghamton graffiti artist I named "the Preacher." He ran a circuit of the Triple Cities gluing crude religious slogans on walls and signs, declaring, "You steal rainbows from children when you sell drugs!" Talk of thugs, drugs, and bug spray arranged in bad rhyme and misspelled to the point of nearly unreadable. Some dabbled in a garbled pidgin Spanglish. It would have been the work of a harmless nut but for the latent racism in the lined paper torn from notebooks and traced numerous times in shades of highlighter.

Most assumed this was the work of the old man at the Oakdale Mall with the Bible verses written on his hats and jackets in neon glow-paint, but I didn't believe it. That little old man used his jackets, hats, sweatshirts, and pants to silently evangelize to rebellious teenagers in

heavy metal T-shirts since the first day I could drive to the Oakdale Mall on my own, windows down to let Slayer answer his challenge for me. The Preacher operated in the dark. Fog would still be on city streets when I bicycled through to find the glue still wet. The little old man at the Mall was so frail he needed help to use his walker. There was no way he and the plump woman in similarly decorated sweat suits were sneaking through abandoned and debris-strewn industrial zones in the middle of the night affixing posters to dumpsters.

I bicycled along the bus routes at dawn, camera bag flapping behind me. I'd stop at mailboxes, electrical poles, and store windows to snap a photo and move on. In winter I walked, but the Preacher covered a huge amount of territory, and he was prolific. After seeing the Bambi Madden graffiti in the newspaper, I swung through the North Side one morning to capture a message I'd seen from my car the day before.

The ice factory on Front Street has legends of its own. It's the last bastion before civilization gives over to highway and the wilderness beneath it. The ice factory sits like a fortress atop the flood wall on the west bank of the Chenango River, its walls riddled by cannon fire when the city was sacked in 1987. Rumors of bodies in basements persist, but cannot be confirmed. The ice factory sits at the bottom of the Front Street exit, and became a billboard for the artist I named the Vampire, for the cartoon face that accompanied his messages. It had tiny eyes, a bristly scribbled mustache, and big bloody teeth.

I recognized the handwriting when I saw the messages on the news. It was nearly identical to an artist called Swayze. He was a punk kid that favored political rants. His most prominent piece was "This guy died for money," scrawled across the back of the Skirmisher at Confluence Park. I believed him also to be "Geraldo Rivera," a series of tags I'd first discovered on a boarded window at the corner of Liberty and Robinson, near the highway exit.

I knew Liberty St. from my pizza delivery days. The tenements on Liberty and Munsel have boarded windows and families huddle on carpets and mattresses around a single lamp jacked from the city power grid. Some have not seen the light of day in generations. Liberty was not a street to be walked lightly.

Geraldo Rivera moved downtown in black spray-painted scrawls, and like the Madden messages, was always followed by an 800 number. In the Boscov's parking garage I'd discovered a list of numbers and a conspiracy message. The handwriting was a match to Swayze, who was a writer that went off the deep end with drugs. We were once friends, but I sport a broken tooth from a night he pulled a knife on a Rocky's manager, who then alone chased Swayze and his friends down Court Street. I assumed Geraldo Rivera was the next step in Swayze's paranoia, and it would not have been a surprise if he'd gone on to write these cryptic messages that implicated Police Chief Zikuski not only Madden's murder, but perpetrating a grand cover up only Ronald Benjamin could unravel.

The Vampire loved the attention he received in print and on television, and his pleas for investigation appeared up and down Front Street from the ice factory to Main Street, and Downtown, picking spots that were high traffic in daylight but deserted at night. Some were in black spray paint, others in black Sharpie, no different than Swayze. Most were eradicated quickly, but would linger for months at the ice factory before the absentee landlords hired someone to paint over the messages in varying shades of gray and blue like postmodern art still visible today. Exactly like Geraldo Rivera a phone number followed all the Vampire messages, and the handwriting was exact for all three, but when the Bambi Madden messages started, Swayze had been dead for more than two years.

See more artwork from the Vampire and the Preacher on page [] and at Regular Crazy, www.printisbetter.com