

IBM PureSystems™ can cut months off your deployment times. Yes, really.



We can prove it



THE NEW YORKER



- SUBSCRIBE
- THIS WEEK'S ISSUE
- NEWS
- CULTURE
- POLITICS
- BOOKS & FICTION
- CARTOONS
- HUMOR
- ARCHIVE

DOUBLE TAKE | PHOTO BOOTH | DAILY SHOUTS | PAGE-TURNER | DAILY COMMENT | AMY DAVIDSON | JOHN CASSIDY | BOROWITZ
 RICHARD BRODY

CLOSE X

THE NEW YORKER
 Now with print, digital and online archive access!

+ \$50 STORE CREDIT to NewYorkerStore.com

SUBSCRIBE NOW

LE



In magic circles, Robbins is regarded as a kind of legend. Psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and the military study his methods for what they reveal about the nature of human attention. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

A few years ago, at a Las Vegas convention for magicians, Penn Jillette, of the act Penn and Teller, was introduced to a soft-spoken young man named Apollo Robbins, who has a reputation as a pickpocket of almost supernatural ability. Jillette, who ranks pickpockets, he says, "a few notches below hypnotists on the show-biz totem pole," was holding court at a table of colleagues, and he asked Robbins for a demonstration, ready to be unimpressed. Robbins demurred, claiming that he felt uncomfortable working in front of other magicians. He pointed out that, since Jillette was wearing only shorts and a sports shirt, he wouldn't have much to work with.

PRINT EMAIL SINGLEPAGE

KEYWORDS

APOLLO ROBBINS; THEATRICAL PICKPOCKETS; MAGIC; MAGICIANS; ENTERTAINERS; CRIME; CRIMINALS

"Come on," Jillette said. "Steal something from me."

Again, Robbins begged off, but he offered to do a trick instead. He instructed Jillette to place a ring that he was wearing on a piece of paper and trace its outline with a pen. By now, a small crowd had gathered. Jillette removed his ring, put it down on the paper, unclipped a pen from his shirt, and leaned forward, preparing to draw. After a

WELCOME

SIGN IN | HELP | REGISTER

Search Web site

- MOST POPULAR
- MOST E-MAILED
- THIS ISSUE

1. Andy Borowitz: Choking Back Tears, N.R.A. Leader Marries Gun
2. Patrick Radden Keefe: Did a Murderer in Waiting Go Undetected Because She Was a Woman?
3. Amy Davidson: Oscar Pistorius, His Girlfriend, and His Gun
4. Andy Borowitz: A Letter from Kim Jong-un
5. Jessie Wender: Photographing Love



Advertisement

OVER 40 MAGAZINES.
 All in one place. All for only \$14.99 a month.

DOWNLOAD THE APP
 and get access now

THE NEW YORKER
 Now with print, digital and online archive access! + \$50 STORE CREDIT to NewYorkerStore.com

SUBSCRIBE NOW

Advertisement

THE NEW YORKER
 DIGITAL

TABLET, MOBILE, AND MORE

Newsletter sign-up: Enter e-mail address

TABLET & MOBILE EDITIONS

moment, he froze and looked up. His face was pale.

“Fuck. You,” he said, and slumped into a chair.

Robbins held up a thin, cylindrical object: the cartridge from Gillette’s pen.

Robbins, who is thirty-eight and lives in Las Vegas, is a peculiar variety-arts hybrid, known in the trade as a theatrical pickpocket. Among his peers, he is widely considered the best in the world at what he does, which is taking things from people’s jackets, pants, purses, wrists, fingers, and necks, then returning them in amusing and mind-boggling ways. Robbins works smoothly and invisibly, with a diffident charm that belies his talent for larceny. One senses that he would prosper on the other side of the law. “You have to ask yourself one question,” he often says as he holds up a wallet or a watch that he has just swiped. “Am I being paid enough to give it back?”

In more than a decade as a full-time entertainer, Robbins has taken (and returned) a lot of stuff, including items from well-known figures in the worlds of entertainment (Jennifer Garner, actress: engagement ring); sports (Charles Barkley, former N.B.A. star: wad of cash); and business (Ace Greenberg, former chairman of Bear Stearns: Patek Philippe watch). He is probably best known for an encounter with Jimmy Carter’s Secret Service detail in 2001. While Carter was at dinner, Robbins struck up a conversation with several of his Secret Service men. Within a few minutes, he had emptied the agents’ pockets of pretty much everything but their guns. Robbins brandished a copy of Carter’s itinerary, and when an agent snatched it back he said, “You don’t have the authorization to see that!” When the agent felt for his badge, Robbins produced it and handed it back. Then he turned to the head of the detail and handed him his watch, his badge, and the keys to the Carter motorcade.

In magic circles, Robbins is regarded as a kind of legend, though he largely remains, as the magician Paul Harris told me, “the best-kept secret in town.” His talent, however, has started gaining notice further afield. Recently, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and the military have studied his methods for what they reveal about the nature of human attention. Teller, a good friend of Robbins’s, believes that widespread recognition is only a matter of time. “The popularity of crime as a sort of romantic thing in America is profoundly significant, and Apollo is tapping into that,” he told me. “If you think about it, magic itself has many of the hallmarks of criminal activity: You lie, you cheat, you try not to get caught—but it’s on a stage, it has a proscenium around it. When Apollo walks onstage, there’s a sense that he might have one foot outside the proscenium. He takes a low crime and turns it into an art form.”

I first met Robbins in Las Vegas, and he took me to a walk-around corporate gig at the Rio Hotel and Casino. As he shook my hand, he took my measure with alert eyes, smiled, and said, “Hello, sir.” (He calls all men “sir.”) Despite the heat, he was dressed in black—jacket, shirt, tie, pants, and loafers. “It’s kind of my signature,” he told me, and explained that, were he to become a real pickpocket, he would dress “more upscale” to blend in at Las Vegas night spots. Robbins is short and compact, and he has the wiry physique of an acrobat beneath the softness of a few extra pounds. His face is lively and expressive, with prominent cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and pointy ears. He has tousled, light-brown hair and a soul patch. Robbins’s hands are slim and smooth, with tapered, manicured fingers, marred only by a scar on his right ring finger—from when he was eighteen and tried to juggle a set



**EVERY STORY, EVERY CARTOON,
EVERY MONDAY.**

Available to subscribers via the complete archive.

MORE FROM THE NEW YORKER

CARTOONS OF THE YEAR 2012

A special edition, on sale at newsstands now.

THE “GOINGS ON” APP

What to do in New York City, for Apple and Android mobile devices.

AUDIO EDITION

Subscribe to a weekly download of selected articles from the magazine, at Audible.

THE COMPLETE ARCHIVE, 1925-2012

A Web-based archive of issues from our first to this week’s.

“HEALING POWERS”

The latest of “The New Yorker Reader” iPad/iPhone anthologies.

ANIMATED CARTOONS ON THE GO

Download the app from the iTunes store.

THE NEW YORKER STORE

Featured *New Yorker* cartoonist: Zachary Kanin.

THE CARTOON BANK

License *New Yorker* cartoons for professional use: Add humor to ad campaigns, books, newsletters, and more.

ON THE TOWN

Exclusive events and offers from *The New Yorker*’s advertising and promotion department.

Advertisement

OVER 40 MAGAZINES.
All in one place. All for only \$14.99 a month.

DOWNLOAD THE APP
and get access now

of hibachi knives at a Japanese steak house.

At the Rio, Robbins took in the scene with the appraising gaze of a jeweller. A few dozen middle-aged men and women, a group of advertising-sales representatives and their clients, were drinking and eating shrimp on a patio in the late-afternoon sun. Robbins had been told that they would be dressed in "business casual." Most of the women had on colorful low-cut tops, tight white pants, and mules. Only a few of the men wore jackets. "This is going to be interesting," Robbins said. "O.K. Time to go shopping."

Robbins strolled through the crowd, smiling and nodding, resting a hand on a shoulder here, lightly touching an elbow there. From time to time, he let his fingertips graze someone's pocket, a technique called "fanning." "He's got a cell phone, keys, and maybe some cash in that right front pocket," Robbins whispered to me, indicating one man. "What I'm doing is taking inventory and making sight maps and getting a feel for who these people are and what I'm going to do with them. I'm a jazz performer—I have to improvise with what I'm given."

"A PICKPOCKET'S TALE" CONTINUES
PAGE 11 OF 91 NEXT >
VIEW AS A SINGLE PAGE

14k
 897
 36

1,042
 45

Subscribe now to get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture, and the arts.

BY MYLES KANE

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

BY RICHARD BRODY

[ABOUT US](#) [CONTACT US](#) [NEWSLETTERS](#) [BLOGS](#) [ARCHIVE](#) [PRESS CENTER](#) [RSS FEEDS](#)

[SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES](#) [CAREERS](#) [NEW YORKER STORE](#) [REPRINTS/PERMISSIONS](#) [THE NEW YORKER MEDIA KIT](#)

CONDÉ NAST

More news, politics, culture, business, and technology:
Architectural Digest
GQ
Wired
Golf Digest
Vanity Fair

Subscribe to a magazine:

Subscribe to a magazine ▾

Visit our sister sites:

Visit our sister sites ▾

© 2013 Condé Nast. All rights reserved
Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) (effective August 1, 2011) and [Privacy Policy](#) (effective August 1, 2011).
[Your California Privacy Rights](#)

The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Condé Nast.
[Ad Choices](#)

THE NEW YORKER

Now with print, digital and online archive access!

+

THE NEW YORKER
\$50 STORE CREDIT
to NewYorkerStore.com
+ FREE SHIPPING

SUBSCRIBE NOW