

# THE ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23, 1994



The Monty Python guys: the late Graham Chapman (left), John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam and Michael Palin.

By Daniel Durchholz

**A**ND NOW for something completely different . . . With those words, intoned by John Cleese portraying a button-down British Broadcasting Corp. announcer — albeit one who might be found hanging upside down, or sitting calmly behind his desk on the back of a speeding flatbed truck — “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” established its battle cry as well as its raison d’être.

At the time of the comedy troupe’s first broadcast on the BBC, Oct. 5, 1969, few could have imagined how “completely different” its anarchic and often surreal brand of humor would turn out to be.

But now, 25 years later, Spam-loving Vikings, transvestite lumberjacks, a cheese shop that sells no cheese, and a quartet of world communism’s chief architects competing on a quiz show concerned with English soccer marginalia have become the stuff of comedic legend.

That material and much more of the Python oeuvre is getting a fresh look these days, thanks to a retrospective of the group’s film and television work held last month in Los Angeles, plus the release of “The Instant Monty Python Collection,” a six-volume box set of nearly all of the group’s audio product. It includes “Monty Python Live at Drury Lane,” a

performance previously unavailable in the U.S. And the Pythons are entering the computer age with an interactive CD-ROM, cheekily

**The BBC’s “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” developed a hit audience and had 3½-year run.**

titled “Monty Python’s Complete Waste of Time.”

Terry Jones, best known to Python fans as the show’s naked organist, or as the grotesquely corpulent restaurant-goer who vomits prodigiously and then explodes in the film “The Meaning of Life,” used to find looking at tapes of the Pythons’ performances painful.

“All I could think of were all the things that had gone wrong, that weren’t quite right about them,” he says. “Now it’s a bit better. I can watch the shows and savor them from a distance.”

Jones recalls that the BBC’s initial reaction to the show was “blank stupefaction. They didn’t get it and didn’t like it at all. After the first four shows, the head of live entertainment called our producer into his office and told him, ‘You’ve got to do something, you’ve got to

make it funny.’ Meanwhile, the audience they’d brought in was also totally stupefied. The BBC audience recruiter — based on the word ‘circus’ in our name, I think — brought in this crowd of old-age pensioners who didn’t have a clue as to what we were doing. Eventually, we managed to persuade them to bring in a younger audience.”

The show, which in addition to Cleese and Jones, featured Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, and Terry Gilliam, developed a cult audience and enjoyed a 3½-year run, before the Pythons themselves decided to pull the plug. In all, 45 episodes were produced.

Those shows came dangerously close to being “wiped” — magnetically erased so the tapes could be reused — when they were sold to public television in the United States, where the Python audience has grown exponentially over the years, due more recently to constant reruns on the Comedy Central cable channel.

“Because it’s British, it’s slightly abstracted from America,” says Gilliam, the only American in the group and the creator of the distinctive cut-and-paste artwork that graced the series and the films.

“I think people find it easier to laugh at the silliness of it, ‘cause it’s not specifically taking the piss out of American things. There’s something about abstracting humor that makes it easier for people to relax and laugh.”

“Someone, an American, just told me recently that when he first watched the shows on TV, he felt like he was joining some club,” Jones adds. “That he was the only person watching these shows, and he couldn’t imagine that anyone else would be watching. We didn’t write to any target audience. We just wrote what made the six of us laugh. So in a way it was joining a club, the club of these six mad blokes sitting around at table in England laughing



their heads off.”

After the show ended, the Pythons made several feature films, including “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” a send-up of England’s sacrosanct King Arthur myth. “The Life of Brian” flirted

more closely with sacrilege, telling the story of a man whose life parallels that of Christ. And “The Meaning of Life” explored various facets of life and death, including a memorable production number about sperm that Jones claims is his favorite Python bit ever.

But the absurdist spirit of Python, whose sketches didn’t end so much as segue into other equally nonsensical situations, and whose members broke character and societal taboos with regularity, lived on, spawning a new generation of comedians that included the “Saturday Night Live” troupe. Gilliam, though, was unimpressed by the shows that followed Python.

“Saturday Night Live” was very much within restricted areas,” he says. “There were parameters around it, it wasn’t the same kind of mad, simple freedom, without having to worry about ratings and who it might or might not offend. I think that spirit was what’s very important in Python. I think people are drawn to that.”

“I mean, where is the outlet for it today? It was like Sid Caesar’s ‘Your Show of Shows,’ that came along at a time when the system was unformed, and they got away with it. And we were at a time at the BBC where it was loose, and we got away with it. I think in the States, the nearest thing has been the Fox network, when you got ‘The Simpsons’ and ‘Married With Kids’ [sic] and all that stuff. That was really fresh, and it was like whoa! here we go again. And then all of that starts closing in again.”

Graham Chapman died in 1989. Each of the remaining Pythons has gone on to various degrees of solo success. Palin has acted in such films as “The Missionary” and “Jabberwocky,” and in “A Fish Called Wanda” with Cleese. Palin also appeared in a pair of television travel documentaries, “Pole to Pole” and

“Around the World in 80 Days.” Cleese, in addition to “Wanda” starred in the “Fawlty Towers” television series and has appeared in a number of commercials. He also has a role in Kenneth Branagh’s upcoming film “Frankenstein.”

Jones has written and produced a four-part BBC series on the Crusades and wrote a scholarly book on “The Canterbury Tales.” Idle appeared in the Beatles parody “The Rutles” as well as the films “Nuns on the Run” and “Splitting Heirs.” And Gilliam has gone on to direct such films as “Time Bandits,” “Brazil,” “The Adventures of Baron Munchausen” and “The Fisher King.”

Largely due to Chapman’s death, but also because they have respect for their past work and see little point in trying to repeat it, the Pythons aren’t planning a reunion anytime soon, if ever.

Yet Jones and Gilliam both are excited about the CD-ROM, which Jones says “is very true to Python, but is all new in a way. It’s like seeing the shows for the first time.”

Gilliam, who had a hand in creating the disk, says, “It’s a bit hard to describe, because, as the title suggests, it is a complete waste of time; but an incredibly entertaining and silly and confusing and funny waste of time. It came out of a conversation I had at a party about what one could do

with a CD-ROM, and how one could, in a sense, invade computers. And I just loved the idea of Python invading computers around the world and making them silly places rather than what they are at the moment.

“It’s recycled Python, but in a way that’s new and really fresh. It seems, from what I can make out of what’s going on, that it’s on the cutting edge of what CD-ROMs can do at the moment; it’s more advanced than anything else. That seems really nice for Python to still be right out there again.”

As for the box set, Gilliam is blunt, but honest: “It’s really a classy way of getting people to cough up money for the same old s—.”

Reminded that, several years ago, Python released a retrospective called “The Final Rip-off,” Gilliam lets loose an uproarious laugh. “We lied!” he whoops. “Lied again. No, this is the final rip-off, the final old-blue-eyes-is-back-again rip-off.”

Daniel Durchholz is an assistant editor of Request magazine.

**The Python oeuvre getting a fresh look thanks to a retrospective and the release of a box set!**