

Brazil Nut

Terry Gilliam — Monty Python's Big Brother

Ever have problems sorting out those individual snakes that comprise the infamous Monty Python troupe? John Cleese is easy — no living thing remotely resembles John Cleese but can you tell Graham Chapman from Eric Idle from Terry Gilliam?

The confusion is partly testimony to the talent these lunatic laugh-makers have displayed in the crazed characterisations of the Monty Python's *Flying Circus* series and films like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Life of Brian* and *The Meaning of Life*.

Terry Gilliam's face is probably the least familiar of all, for his acting roles in the Python series included such disguises as Man in Suit of Armour with Dead Chicken. "It was either Marlon Brando or Gilliam for the part," says Michael Palin of the Pythons, "but everyone was using Brando!"

Giving them the finger was Terry Gilliam's key contribution to early Monty Python. You see, he was the wizard of animation behind the surreal, silly and often shocking cartoons that were such an integral part of the gang's vision.

Before hearing more of the Python's from a snake's mouth, we should talk about *Brazil*, the reason this affable American (yep, he's the token Yankee in the court of the Reptile Kings) was on the promo

circuit.

Brazil is not a Monty Python film, even though Terry's buddy Michael Palin is one of the stars. What kind of film is it? Well, I was hoping you weren't going to ask that. *Brazil* is a black comedy, it is a social/political satire, it is a futuristic thriller, it is a fantasy, it is a love story, it is raw sewage pumped into a space suit.

Get the picture? Well, if you didn't get it you missed out, because *Brazil* is unlike any other film you'll see this year. But daring to be different is not viewed kindly by Hollywood, and at one stage it looked like Bye Bye Brazil for the film in North America. Universal refused to open it without major cuts, and a bitter feud erupted before Gilliam won the day.

He both directed and co-wrote

(with top playwright Tom Stoppard) the \$15 million extravaganza — so his relief and pleasure that the film was finally released is understandable. Not that Gilliam is reticent about taking a shot at the movie moguls. "The experience just gave me a bit more evidence to back up my feelings of the people who run

things there," he says. "I can't speak the way they do. When they start talking about 'corporate product potential', I find that all I can say is 'fuck' and 'shit'!"

Confrontation with corporate types has recurred with Gilliam's desire to release an LP soundtrack: "It won't be a big disco album! We talked about getting a single we could film a video to, just so we could use some footage."

The stunning sets evoke images of *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* so a video would be very effective. But the problem was that the song which inspired the movie, Geoff and Maria Muldaur's version of the 30s hit 'Brazil', comes with a hefty price tag.

"Warner Brothers seem very greedy about it," says Gilliam. "The Muldaur LP didn't sell well at all, but they're behaving as if it is Bruce Springsteen. That is the way these organisations work. People there have to maximise the amount of money they make, rather than thinking 'if it is on a record, it'll get played.'"

Gilliam's personal struggle against the powers-that-be echoes the fight of *Brazil*'s hero against a brutal, bureaucratic state, and the film is clearly sounding alarm bells about the direction our own society is heading. "People always call this a picture of totalitarianism, but I believe it is the way the democracies are going. In the same way, North Americans always look at the English and European bureaucracies and refuse to admit they have their own."

Brazil may not sound as funny as the Dead Parrot sketch, but then again, Monty Python humour always had serious undertones. For example, John Cleese's Silly Walks turn was a comic gem the Marx Brothers would have been proud of, but it also punctured the pomposity of the English civil servant. There is plenty of comedy in *Brazil* however, and much of it is provided by Robert De Niro in a memorable cameo role. Gilliam sees this as "the spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down."

As you'd expect there is also gallons of gore. Judging by his animation and *Jabberwocky*, his directorial debut, Gilliam may just have the sickest sense of humour of all the Pythons, and the terrorist bombing scenes in *Brazil* may have you groping for the barf bag. "I don't think I could make a movie without gore," he says, laughing. "The world is so violent, yet so bloodless — the bureaucracy, the multi-national corporations, the IRS, the media. This is my reaction to all that."

Terry Gilliam was born in Minneapolis about 20 years before Prince (what do they put in the water there?). In the early 60s he began illustrating *Help!*, a spin-off of *Mad* magazine, and his distinctive animation style developed. Gilliam moved to London in 1967, and soon encountered the other loonies that were to scale the heights (and depths) as *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. He doesn't find it in the least bit peculiar that someone from the mid-West of the United States could fit in so well with a style of humour that has always seemed very 'English'. "It was just like finding a bunch of friends. We all thought along the same lines, just as I had earlier in the US with people like

Joel Siegel and Harry Shearer (*Spinal Tap*)."

When the television series was first shown in the US in 1974, its success surprised network TV executives. "They always underestimate the audience outside of LA and New York," says Gilliam. "A place like New York is so impossible to live in that people have to tell themselves it is the most sophisticated, cosmopolitan city in the world. Yet when *Monty Python* was taken off the air in Des Moines (Indiana), thousands of people threatened to burn down the station! I always knew MPFC could work in the US because I'd come from Minneapolis."

Gilliam's animation was used to give the show a bizarre sense of continuity: "I'd be given one theme or word from one sketch, and I'd somehow have to get to the first word of the next. I enjoyed that discipline and those parameters, as on my own I'd just have gone off on some tangent and never returned."

His animation style has been widely ripped off. There's even a bank commercial in the States now featuring one of his trademark sliced heads. When told of this he says, "It doesn't bother me too much as long as I don't see it in Britain. Advertising people will take the superficial skin, not the meat of my style." Anyway, animation is now largely a thing of the past for Gilliam, having been replaced by an emphasis on direction and writing; *Time Bandits* was another of his achievements. "You have to always keep one step ahead of the wolves," he says. "I like the freedom and fluidity of live filming. With animation, it is more coarse."

What is the likelihood of a Monty Python reunion?

"Not for at least two or three years," predicts Gilliam. "Three or four of us are doing well on our own these days, but we keep in contact. We're getting less bitchy toward each other these days!"

Although not one for hanging out with rock stars — that's Eric Idle's hobby — Gilliam is grateful for the support the Pythons have received from the British rock elite. "Members of Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin backed a few of our films. I guess they wrote it off against taxes, but their patronage really helped us."

George Harrison played an even bigger role in funding some of the Monty Python movies: "He told us he always felt that in our words and images, *Monty Python* continued where the Beatles left off. That was a real compliment."

Which *Monty Python* sketch would Gilliam consign to a time capsule?

"It would have to be the one with the undertaker and a guy's dead wife," he says. "They discuss ways of disposing of the body, and eating her is one option. I am getting kind of peckish," says the husband. That one was so totally tasteless we naturally had to use it!"

Regardless of the box office performance of *Brazil* (to stink or not to stink, that is the question), Terry Gilliam will go on making movies until a suitable revolution arrives. "I sympathise with left-wing movements, but their trouble is that they have no sense of humour. There's never been a revolution with humour, and I'm waiting for it!"

Kerry Doole



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