

Terry Jones (1942-2020): From Monty Python to Geoffrey Chaucer

Paul Bond

31 January 2020

Alongside his role in the development of British comedy, the Monty Python writer and director Terry Jones, who has died at 77, made significant contributions to Chaucerian scholarship and mediaeval history. He also spoke out extensively, with characteristic wit and acerbity, against the US-led Iraq War of 2003.

Jones was born in Wales in 1942. When he was a child the family moved to Surrey, where he received a middle-class grammar school education before going to Oxford to read English.

Without Oxford, he said, “I wouldn’t have met either Mike Palin or Geoffrey Chaucer—and without those two meetings the rest of my life would have been quite different.”

Jones first saw Michael Palin performing comedy material at a university Christmas party, and they started writing together. Jones also “strayed into History” from English, a move that would shape his later work.

Palin, whose own best performances are stamped by a comical decency and uprightness, said the first thing he noticed was “what a nice bloke [Terry] was. He had no airs and graces.”

They shared similar ideas about humour, “mainly because we both liked characters; we both appreciated that comedy wasn’t just jokes.”

The Pythons were intriguingly representative of a post-war generation of comics. Much British radio comedy had been mannered and catchphrase-driven prior to the eruption of *The Goon Show* (1951-1960), the renowned BBC comedy programme, featuring Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers among others, but younger comics took Milligan’s imaginative scripts and inventive approach to comedy even further.

Jones was keen on abandoning punch lines as the endpoint of a sketch, preferring the lurch and juxtaposition of a stream-of-consciousness flow into new material. Milligan took a similar approach in his own television series.

With the Oxford Revue, Jones and Palin performed at the Edinburgh festival, meeting David Frost and future Pythons John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Eric Idle. Idle has tweeted that he “loved [Jones] the moment I saw him on stage at the Edinburgh Festival in 1963.”

After university Jones worked as a copywriter for Anglia

Television and began writing regularly with Palin, contributing sketches to BBC shows. They were regular writers for *The Frost Report*, alongside Idle, Cleese and Chapman, the first time they all worked together.

Jones and Palin also worked with Idle on the children’s show *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, with animations by another future Python, Terry Gilliam, and music by the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band. The Bonzos’ Neil Innes, who died last month, became the Pythons’ regular musical collaborator.

Jones and Palin made *The Complete and Utter History of Britain* for London Weekend Television in 1969, but it was frustrating. Jones said this convinced him that “you have to control everything. You not only act in the things, you’ve got to actually start directing the things as well.”

The project that allowed him to explore that aspect of production began later that year. Cleese and his writing partner Chapman suggested teaming up with Jones and Palin. They agreed, if they could bring Idle and Gilliam on board—and in doing so formed Monty Python, with their first creation, *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*.

The combination of such different writing partnerships and contributions guaranteed the show’s disruptive and novel character. Running for 45 episodes over four series (1969 to 1974), some of it does not stand revisiting, but at its best it is inventive and pleasingly intolerant of conformity. Where Milligan was rebelling against wartime bureaucracy and officialdom, the Pythons were reacting against staid complacency in post-war life.

Python sometimes feels too much the competitive and volatile arena of rival educated writers, as it often was. Cleese favoured the classical sketch format and verbal humour—Gilliam, noting Cleese’s dislike of ad-libbing, called him “a fundamentalist when it comes to humour”—while Jones pushed for greater visual content and a more flowing structure of routines without neat endings.

If this fuelled tensions—Jones threw a chair at Cleese during one writing session—it also pushed Jones more towards his own vision. As a performer he often seems less striking in Python than his colleagues. He lacked Cleese’s determination to dominate, Palin’s ability to produce something unexpected and subversively odd out of a crushed ordinary man, or Idle’s

wilfully tacky insinuation. Instead, Jones was the foil or the colour, playing caricatured old ladies, a cheerful nude organist and an extremely English man teaching Italian to native Italians.

His most perceptive performance moment in the series, to my mind, is as a short-sighted soldier squinting and smearing his glasses with his fingers in order to read the “funniest joke in the world.” Moreover, he also became the possessor of one of the most famous naked bottoms in comedy and, later, portrayed the single most grotesque character ever created by Python, Mister Creosote.

Warmth and affection are the strongest aspects of much of his work, whether the loving parodies of Edwardian fiction he co-wrote with Palin for *Ripping Yarns*, or the whimsical good nature of his work for children. They could also tend towards parochialism, as in *Personal Services* (1987), about the madam of a suburban brothel for older men, but Jones delighted in any conservative reaction. He had directed three of the four films banned in Ireland, he said proudly.

He came to feel undervalued and “oppressed” in Python. The television series ended acrimoniously and ran out of steam, with Cleese having little to do with the final shows. Discussing the last Python reunion, Jones commented with a laugh, “John [Cleese] is still as nasty to me as he ever was!”

They did, thankfully, manage to continue working together on films. (Jones later described Python as “like a good marriage”). Their first was a compilation of sketches from the show, but the wonderful *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) allowed them to push into new territory. Co-directed by Jones and Gilliam, the Arthurian narrative allowed both to explore new directions.

Gilliam moved further into feature films, while Jones gave first expression to his continued passion for mediaeval history and literature. He directed their next two films alone, which offered Gilliam some relief (“Directing Python was hard work”), as well as bringing out their differences.

Of *Life of Brian* (1979) Gilliam said: “Terry and I agree on so much, but then we disagreed on almost as many things. We built this extraordinary set for Pilate’s atrium, but you don’t see it because of the way Terry shot it. He shot it to highlight the character comedy, which is the right way.”

It is the most cohesive Python film, partly because the different writing teams worked more closely together in its preparation. Many religious groups attacked it, with Gilliam reporting gleefully, “We managed to get the Catholics, the Protestants and the Jews all pissed off at us.”

In Britain the Church of England led the charge. Malcolm Muggeridge and the Bishop of Southwark’s childishly petulant chat show attack on a visibly angry Palin and Cleese helped, in Palin’s words, “break the assumption that religion was something the establishment told people how to talk about. They’d embarrassed themselves by making a pathetic case.”

Jones was civil and restrained in his defence of the film,

noting that it “is supporting some of the beliefs which I personally find hard to justify. The mistake is to [consider] an attack on established religion as blasphemy.”

During *Holy Grail* he had begun the research that led to his acclaimed *Chaucer’s Knight* (1980). Examining the record of the battles Chaucer’s character had fought in, Jones argued that the Knight was less idealised hero than mercenary thug. His studiously argued book remains important reading.

Jones was an enthusiastic student of the Middle Ages, writing more on Chaucer, attempting to redress the historical record on Richard II, and presenting documentaries on the period. Impishly describing the Renaissance as “a backward-looking movement,” he sought to bring out both the modernity of the Middle Ages and historiographical questions of how we look at the period: “The medieval world wasn’t a time of stagnation or ignorance. A lot of what we assume to be medieval ignorance is, in fact, our own ignorance about the medieval world.”

These enthusiasms fed into his children’s books, starting with *Erik the Viking* (1983), which he subsequently filmed. He was not always successful with film studios. His prize-winning adaptation of *Wind in the Willows* (1996) was “ruined by studio politicking … no one saw it.”

He said he was proudest of his children’s books and his “academic stuff,” which he called “my best bits.”

That historical enthusiasm, however, combined a positive and humane attitude with a certain political pessimism. Jones said his “constant theme is that the medieval world is similar to ours in that the same people always take advantage of the same people. Humanity doesn’t change all through the centuries.”

This combination of decency, humanity and political frustration marked his opposition to the Iraq War and its aftermath. He swore off BBC news programmes, which he felt had been browbeaten into submission by the Hutton Report into the supposed death by suicide of weapons inspector Dr David Kelly.

The best of his anti-war newspaper columns, brought together in a book, *Terry Jones’s War on the War on Terror: Observations and Denunciations by a Founding Member of Monty Python*, bristle with righteous anger. When a Royal Society report in 2003 suggested fish could feel pain, Jones wrote that “perhaps it’s time to govern human affairs on the principle that human beings feel pain too.”

He was diagnosed in 2016 with a frontotemporal dementia that destroyed his ability to communicate. It exemplifies Jones’ humanity that he signed up to donate his brain post-mortem for neurological research into dementia.



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