

Terry Gilliam:

Finding comedy on 'the dark side of the coin'

MONTY PYTHON'S LONE AMERICAN TALKS ABOUT 'TIME BANDITS,' FAIRY TALES, AND THE USES OF UNHAPPY ENDINGS.

Interviewer **James Verniere** reports:

Monty Python's Flying Circus: *the very name conjures up visions of awful families, silly walks, and sadistic game shows. For many people, the British series that aired on PBS in the seventies was one of the very few reasons to stay awake during a dreadful decade. Irreverent, outrageous, often incomprehensibly bizarre, Monty Python was a breath of fresh air during the disco-Watergate era when many right thinkers were seriously considering cryogenics.*

Terry Gilliam, co-writer and director of last fall's surprise hit, *Time Bandits*, was the only American in that troupe of certifiable lunatics. Born in Minneapolis on November 22, 1940, Terry Gilliam is the son of a carpenter. In 1951 Gilliam and family moved to Los Angeles where he attended high school and studied political science at college. After working as an illustrator and editor, Gilliam went to England in the late sixties, where he became one of the now legendary Pythons.

Hard to believe that a non-Briton could hold his own in the midst of the demented Anglican humor of the other Pythons: John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, and Graham Chapman. But Gilliam not only held his own; he subsequently went on to codirect the first of the feature films that bear the troupe's trademark, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974), a parody of the Arthurian legends, and he cowrote—with the other Pythons—*Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), a parody of the New Testament. Although Gilliam did not direct or act in the troupe's first feature, *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1972, directed by Ian McNaughton) he did supply his ingenious animated sequences—those grotesque couplings of Victoriana and the Marquis de Sade.

Gilliam's *Jabberwocky* (1977), although generally regarded as a Monty Python film, is not. It was Gilliam's first solo directorial effort and starred another ex-Python, Michael Palin. That combination of Gilliam and Palin was destined to make magic again when they reteamed to write the script for *Time Bandits*.

Time Bandits is the story of a boy named Kevin who goes on a magical journey through time and space with six dwarfs (alter egos of the six original Pythons?) named Randall, Fidgit, Wally, Og, Stutter, and Vermin. The dwarfs, formerly employed in the Repairs Department by the Supreme Being, have stolen a map of the holes in time and set off with the boy to become the greatest thieves in history.

Full of magic and humor, *Time Bandits* recalls the charm of such films as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Invaders from Mars*, and *Star Wars*, with more than a passing nod to *Alice in Wonderland*. One would imagine that such a film would have American distributors crawling all over each other to get it.

But no. For a time, *Time Bandits* was an orphan. After the failure of

ing. I feel great chunks of my brain dropping off. You know I actually forget words, and that really frightens me. Someone will ask me about a word, and I suddenly remember that I no longer know what it means. My vocabulary is falling out of my ears, and my books are my only salvation. I find myself clutching my books more and more as I grow older.

TZ: You seem very bookish for a film director.

Gilliam: One of the things I learned on this tour is that American kids are illiterate. They don't read. English kids still read. I know because I've lived there for fourteen years. My daughter, who is now five, is reading. I find it absolutely frightening that children don't read because it is the only pure means of communication. One writer talking to one reader.

TZ: In *The Uses of Enchantment*, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim says that fairy tales help a child to adjust, to understand his place in the world, by creating anxieties in him and teaching him about the existence of good and evil. Is that what you tried to do in *Time Bandits*?

"I can't accept that there is no place like home. Clearly there are better places than home."

Under the Rainbow, the industry pundits announced that films with "little people" could never make money. So *Time Bandits* was persona non grata with the majors.

Finally, Avco Embassy came to the rescue and for its effort was rewarded with the hit of the dreary fall season.

TZ: Since *Time Bandits* is about childhood, I wondered how you feel about growing old?

Gilliam: I hate it. I find my brain addling a bit. It bothers me that I'm ag-

Gilliam: Yes, that's exactly what the film's about. When you're a child, there are frightening, horrifying, amazing experiences that only fairy tales can prepare you for. The moral of most fairy tales is that somehow the child gets out alive and whole. They also teach children that there is evil and danger and treachery in the world, which is something the film also says. So you get the dark side too. *Sesame Street* is lovely, but it presents a false image of the world. I prefer to include the dark side of the coin.

Terry Gilliam

One of the reasons I made this film has to do with my daughter. One day I read her some fairy tales from one of her books and they were bowdlerized. The wolf doesn't eat grandma, and the hunter isn't a hunter. He's daddy come home from the shopping center or something. It's suburbanized. It's made mundane, and there are no frightening elements to it. And I think that as a result of such laundering, a lot of kids aren't prepared for evil when it comes around the corner, and, *bang*, it gets them.

Time Bandits is a fairy tale. It works on those levels. It's about disenchantment and enchantment. It's the two things working together.

TZ: Is the disenchantment the reason Kevin doesn't really like his parents?

Gilliam: Right. And his heroes aren't what he expects them to be. At the beginning the parents have clearly rejected the kid. In the middle of the film, he's asked if he wants to go back to them and he makes up his mind not to. In the end when he comes back, they're blown up. Now, I don't take that literally. It's his imagination running its course. The only reassuring element is that Agamemnon is somewhere in the world saying, "Don't worry. Maybe it isn't what you think it is."

Parents are really disturbed by the ending, but kids aren't. My daughter, who was four-and-a-half when she saw it, said, "Well, Kevin told them not to touch it, that it was evil, and that's what happens to parents who don't listen to their kids."

TZ: Why are Kevin's heroes so disappointing?

Gilliam: Because that's the way it is. Even Agamemnon isn't what Kevin expects him to be. He expects Agamemnon to teach him sword fighting, how to kill people, and instead Agamemnon teaches him to do magic tricks.

TZ: The premise of the film is bold. You use all of time and space as your canvas.

Gilliam: That's just megalomania. Cosmic megalomania. But it's also a metaphor for a kid's imagination.

What I've found is that an awful lot of kids haven't developed their imaginations. They've been restricted early on. They're forced to grow up much too quickly.

I grew up with radio, which is magic because you have to exercise your



With *Mad's* Harvey Kurtzman as editor, Terry Gilliam as an associate editor, and Gloria Steinem as, at one time, assistant editor, *Help!* entertained readers too old for *Mad* in the early 1960s. Among those who appeared in its pages, either as writers, cartoonists, or actors in photo-stories, were Woody Allen, Robert Crumb, Henny Youngman, Dick Van Dyke, Shel Silverstein, Jack Davis, Will Elder, Orson Bean, Tom Poston, William Tenn, John Collier, Ray Bradbury, Algis Budrys, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Sheckley, Gahan Wilson, and Rod Serling.



"It reeks of dirt and dust and smoke." Michael Palin played the hapless hero of Gilliam's first solo directorial effort, *Jabberwocky*.

imagination to appreciate it. You have to invent the sets, the colors, everything.

Television doesn't do any of that for the most part, except very imaginative television. There are no shadows or gaps to let us fill in the bits. In fact, the pace is done so that you don't have to think.

TZ: What kinds of books did you read as a child?

Gilliam: I was reading the Hardy Boys, actually. And *Lassie* and *Laddie*. I was into dog books very heavily. I loved *Treasure Island* and Grimm's, of course. I grew up on comic books too. *Mad* magazine.

TZ: I know that you subsequently worked with Harvey Kurtzman, but what attracted you to his magazine as a boy?

Gilliam: The satire and the sex. I remember having to hide copies of *Mad* magazine because of Wally Wood's drawings of his girls—his va-va-voom. They were wonderful, *zaftig* creatures and I'd hide them because I suspected there was something really naughty there. They were so sensual.

TZ: Were you a fan of *EC Comics*?

Gilliam: Yes, and *Two-Fisted Tales*. Those were all the same people. Harvey Kurtzman, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, Willy Elder, Arnold Roth, and all the rest. It was really weird years later when I went to New York fresh out of college and to the Algonquin to keep an appointment I had with Harvey. At the time, he was working on the very first episode of "Little Annie Fanny" for *Playboy*. Harvey got all his artists, put them up in a suite, and wouldn't let them out until the episode was finished.

So there they were. All my heroes together in one room. It was stunning. Then a couple of days later, a job as assistant editor opened up at *Mad* and I got it. So I'd have to say that *Mad* magazine influenced me as much as any books or movies that I saw as a child.

TZ: Were you influenced by any other films when making *Time Bandits*?

Gilliam: Well, it's very eclectic. I don't deny any influences, although it is not a parody or a pastiche. All the influences are there, but they're twisted and changed and reformed. You forgot to include *The Thief of Bagdad*, the Korda version. *The Wizard of Oz* was a strong influence, although I actually resented the sentiment of the film. All



Gilliam as a squire to Graham Chapman's King Arthur in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which he codirected with Terry Jones . . .



. . . and as a bearded Holy Landsman, second from right, in *Monty Python's "Life of Brian,"* with (left to right) Michael Palin, John Cleese, Graham Chapman, director Terry Jones, and, at top, Eric Idle.



A one-time assistant editor at *Mad*, Gilliam confesses: "I'd have to say that *Mad* magazine influenced me as much as any books or movies that I saw as a child."

those magical journeys and in the end we're brought back to this mundane world and this is supposed to be better. I can't accept that there is no place like home. Clearly there *are* better places than home.

TZ: How did you first conceive of *Time Bandits*?

Gilliam: At first, it was the single image of the knight on the charger coming through the kid's wardrobe.

TZ: Why did you include dwarfs?

Gilliam: Because they're a part of fairy tales, and because I wanted to keep the film at a child's level. So we kept the camera low and we relied on things a child would know when making the sets. Inside the castle of the Evil Genius at the end, the set is just a checkerboard with Lego [a popular British building-block toy].

TZ: How did you find financing for a project as bizarre as this?

Gilliam: Actually, it was quite easy. Denis O'Brien and George Harrison put up the money for *Life of Brian*. I'd done a couple of scripts they didn't like. Then I did a treatment for *Time Bandits* and I struck some Pavlovian nerve end. Rather than saliva, money poured out. He and George just said, "Go ahead."

TZ: Were there any technical problems?

Gilliam: All we had were technical problems. Too many to get into. One I could mention is that all of the special effects had to be redone, and you'd be

surprised how inexpensively we did them.

TZ: What was your budget?

Gilliam: Less than \$5 million, although the studio is telling people that it cost \$12 million, which infuriates me.

TZ: Why?

Gilliam: Because it took talent and hard work to do it for so little, and the implication is that money buys quality.

TZ: You co-wrote the script with Michael Palin. How do you two work together?

Gilliam: Mike and I have different strengths. He's terribly prolific, and I'm not. So I rewrote while he wrote. He has a perfect sense of dialogue and

character, although in the end we didn't use much dialogue.

TZ: Why did you avoid using the words "God" and "the devil" in *Time Bandits*?

TZ: It was a fudge because of the *Life of Brian*. We wanted to avoid controversy with fundamentalists. We did not want to get into the same kind of difficulty we had with *Life of Brian*. We wanted this to be a family picture, not something religious groups would picket.

In the South, *Life of Brian* was

pulled off everywhere, and we were branded as blasphemers. I wanted to eliminate that connection, so that parents would allow their children to see the film. Actually, I'd like parents to see the film *with* their children.

TZ: What was George Harrison's contribution?

Gilliam: Money and the song at the end. He trusted me to make the movie.

TZ: What about your professional background prior to your Monty Python days?

Gilliam: I was an editor of *Help!* magazine, an offshoot of *Mad*. I was an illustrator, and I studied animation on the side. I knew all the principles, so I bought a used 16mm Bolex and started doing my own. You know, dancing cigarettes, that kind of thing.

When I went to England, where I met Mike and Terry and Eric, I was making my own animated films. John and Graham joined us and we decided that we all wanted to work on something together. The BBC gave us a shot and the rest is . . . history.

TZ: What was it like to be the only American in Monty Python?

Gilliam: Partly, it worked because I was doing something completely different from the others: the animation. It was quite separate. I didn't do much writing as such, just my sections.

I don't know why my work succeeded in England. I was doing the same kind of thing here. But I had to go to England before people found it funny and began to appreciate it. I have no idea why it should be so.

TZ: Were you a fan of British humor?

Gilliam: Oh yes, I listened to the

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"Goon Shows" on the radio, and I always liked the British comedies: *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, the whole lot of the Ian Carmichael-Terry Thomas *School for Scoundrels* stuff. I was always an anglophile.

It was odd with Monty Python because after the first few meetings on the series I would withdraw to work and then I'd arrive on the day of taping with a can of film and say, "That's it for this show."

TZ: Was there a competition between

the Cambridge and the Oxford people in Monty Python?

Gilliam: There is a difference between the Cambridge and the Oxford people in Python and also in *Beyond the Fringe*. The Oxford people seem to be nicer. They're shorter to begin with. In *Beyond the Fringe*, the Cambridge half was Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller. Both tall and sharp. The Oxford side was Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore; both small and gentler.

John Cleese, Eric Idle, and Graham Chapman were the Cambridge half of Python, much more acid and sharp. Michael Palin and Terry Jones were Oxford, and I always sided with them. We're shorter, more humanistic. It's very odd. Perhaps all the short ones at Cambridge don't survive.

TZ: As an animator, what is your opinion of the state of the art in animated films?

Gilliam: You mean Bakshi? The last Bakshi I saw was *Lord of the Rings*, which I thought was disastrous. It was disgraceful. I just think he's so sloppy. It started out well, but he seemed to lose interest or energy. His early work, like *Coonskin*, is so much better. He angers me because I think there's a lot of talent being wasted.

TZ: Many people are curious about the fate of *Jabberwocky*.

Gilliam: A classic in its own time, or so I'm told. It's very funny. When *Jabberwocky* came out in England, it didn't do anything. Now in all the English reviews of *Time Bandits*, the critics call *Jabberwocky* a classic. It kills me. Where were these people when I needed them?

Jabberwocky was a weird one. I was very stupid and arrogant to follow *Holy Grail* with another medieval film. It's asking for comparisons. But I did it

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because I felt there was much more material to explore.

I wanted to build the atmosphere. What happened was that the producers wanted more of a comedy, and it wasn't written that way. It was written as three stories. It's still the most atmospheric thing I've ever done. It reeks of dirt and dust and smoke.

John Boorman screened it a dozen times for the crew of *Excalibur*, which is supposed to look like *Jabberwocky*. It doesn't. The makers of *Dragonslayer* studied *Jabberwocky*. It's become a director's film.

The studio tried to sell it as a Monty Python film, which made people very angry because although Michael played the lead and I directed, it isn't Python humor. It's not great belly laughs. It's chuckles and wry smiles. But I gave in to the many pressures and cut it, and now I'm unhappy I did.

TZ: What's your next project?


Gilliam: There are two things: One is the nightmare side and the other is the jolly side. It's quite clear that in

everything I've done these two sides do battle all the time. You know, like the Manichean heresy. Remember that? I wonder how many people were burned at the stake for thinking that?

The nightmare story is a kind of Walter Mitty meets Franz Kafka. It's really about paranoia. It's about a guy who becomes a victim of the machine in which he is a cog. It's about paperwork and bureaucracy. The protagonist is a clerk who works in the Ministry of Torture. I know it sounds like *1984* and *Brave New World*, but I've never read those books and I won't because I don't want to be influenced by them.

The nightmare story is called *Brazil* (you know the song?). In it people will be eaten by paper and wrecked houses will spill blood and guts. It'll be like nothing anyone has ever seen. I anticipate trouble raising money for this project.

The jolly project is a film adaptation of *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, in which I want to combine live action, animation, and theater. I want to film in a seventeenth-century Hogarthian theater and use cut-out scenery and painted props very much like my own animation. You know, a creaking moon rising up behind the actors.

I have an idea for a scene in which a character is riding through a forest at night and suddenly you notice that the trees are cut-out trees. It's about reality and illusion and the bridge we build between them. What I find fascinating about Baron Munchausen is that he tells these terribly tall tales but insists that you believe they are absolutely true. I think it'll be good fun. 



Gilliam rehearses a scene in *Time Bandits* with Katherine Helmond and Peter Vaughan. Vaughan plays a seagoing ogre with back trouble, Helmond his dutiful wife.

