

PALIN REVEALS PYTHON'S PROGRESS . . .

by Steve Carroll
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Monty Python is very likely the most popular comedy troupe in the world, and Michael Palin is one of Python's finest performers. He was in Toronto recently to promote his new film *The Missionary*, and took time out to talk with the University of Toronto student newspaper, *The Varsity*.

Varsity: What sort of difference did you experience in writing *The Missionary* on your own, as opposed to writing within Python and with Terry Jones?

Palin: The group atmosphere generates its own sort of feelings and excitements. You're just not quite as free to indulge your own particular fascinations or whatever as you are outside the group.

Writing with Terry, on the other hand, we produce a slightly more whimsical, fantastical side of Python writing which is what we do best of all.

Yet there again, if you're collaborating closely with somebody, the creative process is a shared thing, and so you make some compromises about exactly what you might

want to do yourself. I wanted to have a go just to see if I can do it all myself, to see what it brought out in me.

I didn't go through *The Missionary* with that sort of certainty, though, and in fact did quite a bit of re-writing based on a number of people's reactions. But at least I'd started it in the first place myself, and written an entire first draft without consulting anybody else.

Varsity: Was it difficult working with a non-Python director on *The Missionary*?

Palin: The idea of getting a new director was quite important to me. It was intentional not to get somebody from Python.

Python can become a bit cliquy and a bit cosy, and there is a sort of great strength that we have all together. If you always rely on that, you don't exactly test yourself. As soon as you move outside, you find you look at Python in a slightly different way.

I think that's really what kept Python going all these years, that people went off and did their own

other things. Because it was really throttling itself.

In fact, just about the time when we did our Canadian stage tour, it all reached the point of a very, very hard period of about three years, having done 45 or 50 television shows and six albums and all that sort of thing. We were just exhausted, and it seemed that it would be a possible break-up forever. The separate directions saved us.

Varsity: In conversation, Pythons occasionally refer to certain segments in the show as 'format' sketches or 'thesaurus' sketches. Does this indicate that you approach the process of writing in a more or less formal way?

Palin: The process wasn't exactly 'formal'. We all joked about thesaurus sketches as sort of a joke, about the way that John (Cleese) and Graham (Chapman) would write a cheese shop sketch because they had just bought a book on bird watching that listed thirty-four different varieties of birds. But basically Python writing was done within the groups that existed before Python, i.e. Terry Jones and myself writing together, John and Graham writing together, and Eric writing on his own. Then we would get together to do the linking material, and to adopt, adapt and improve the sketches that needed it. That was always done on a fairly loose basis, and all that was as formal as Python writing became.

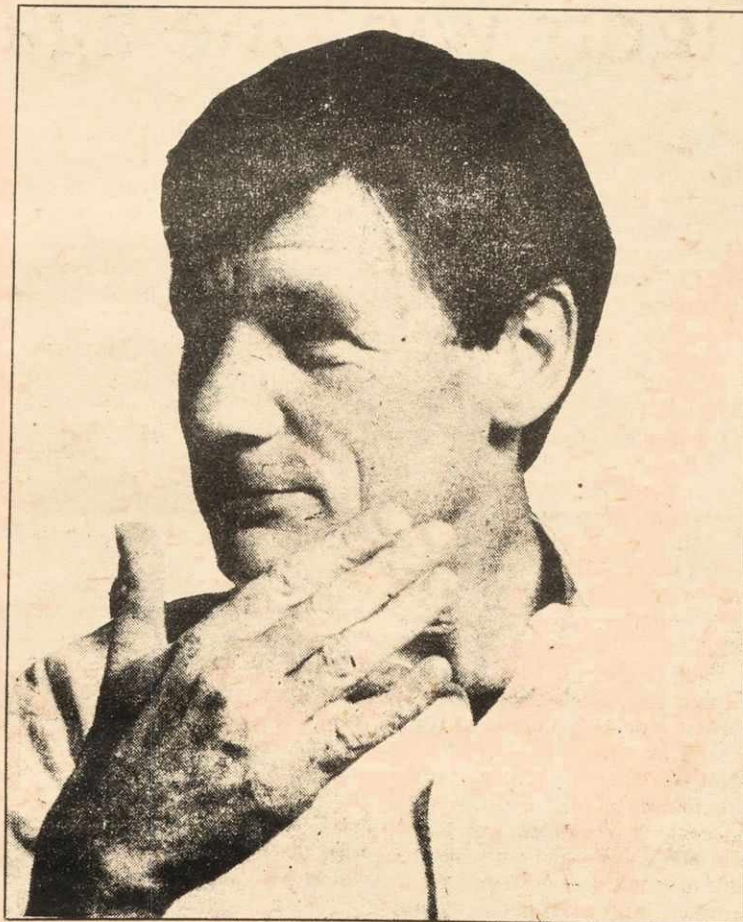
Varsity: Does Python's popularity in the States surprise you?

Palin: Yes, as we had been led to believe there was no chance of the show doing well outside England. I think Canada was the first place to take the shows outside England, which was a long time before anything happened in the States. The Toronto marches, with people marching in 60 degrees below weather to protest the cancellation of the show, were just great. We never expected that. It gave us great heart to carry on insulting the BBC as best we could.

Yet it's really the way it then built up in America that surprised us more and more. I don't know quite why we felt it should be more accessible in Canada, but the old Commonwealth have always taken well to our shows. With the American television organization, the huge networks and so on, we had given up hope of ever selling Python in the States. So the PBS sale was a real eye-opener, and the continuing enthusiasm for that and the way it built up was incredible.

Varsity: What is the new Python film like?

Palin: I can talk about it a very little bit, because I'm not supposed to reveal very much. It's called *The Meaning of Life*, and it's a major philosophical work in which Pythons attempt, by means of dressing up as ladies and disemboweling each other, to answer some of the more significant mysteries of the Universe, all for the price of a cinema ticket. In short, civilization will never be the same after this movie, I humbly suggest.



Varsity: With all the censorship problems that Python has had to contend with, do you find that you are having to make compromises at the creative level?

Palin: I hope not. I really don't think it enters into the way we think. But it just may be there under the surface.

Although there has been no censorship at all on the new film, I think we are aware that if you write something completely and totally outrageous, half the American market is just going to be out right from the start.

Having said that, I think the new Python film is pretty 'near the bone' in a lot of areas. What will save it from the sort of trouble that *Brian* got is the fact that it is a collection of a lot of disparate, separate sketches, so that people can't say, "Ah!, all the film is about is this or that, and we object to that." Whereas with *Brian*, they thought, "*Life of Brian* means life of Jesus, this film must be stopped." This next one is much more confusing for anyone trying to aim a moralis-

tic gun to bring us down.

Varsity: Does the work you have done in television drama for BBC2 indicate that you might do more serious writing in the future?

Palin: Yes, Terry Jones and I may do a serious film in the future. We're just not quite sure what it may be at the moment. The thing with Python is that it's impossible to see a direction or pattern, which gets back to what we were saying earlier on. It just goes all over the place and you really just don't know. We may end up doing an extremely serious piece about the World War, or the Nuclear problem, or something like that, that we feel extremely strongly about. We could just as easily end up dressing up as chickens and jumping off Tower Bridge. It just depends on if the mood takes us.

The main thing is that I want to keep on doing things that are different each time, that surprise people and get them interested. I just don't know where it will take me. Possibly toward mass unemployment. Who knows.

