python scripts set high standard for comedy

by Ira Nayman

Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Scripts
various authors
Methuen Publishing

For many years, a new television comedy has appeared which was immediately hailed as innovative or groundbreaking with alarming regularity. Last year, the lucky winner was *Roseanne*, even though Norman Lear covered similar territory with a lot more style and intelligence in the 1970s, particularly with *All in the Family*. This year, *The Kids in the Hall* seems to be the rage, although the most innovative thing they did was getting a corporation deal with the CBC and HBO.

The publication of all the scripts from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (45 episodes in two volumes) is a timely reminder of what constitutes true innovation. Fans of Python should get the books to relive their favourite moments from the show; those unfamiliar with it, but interested in aggressive, *avante garde* humour, will find these books must reading.

Python's roots can be traced back to the anarchic style of British radio's *The Goon Show* (starring Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe). But, where the Goons were content with a rapid-fire series of puns and nonsequiturs set in a genre parody, Python frequently added satire and absurdity to the mix.

"The Upper Class Twit of the Year" and "Hell's Grannies" sketches are examples of Python's social satire (which is often overlooked because they're also uproariously funny); "The Ministry of Silly Walks" and "Loony Party" are political satires. The argument clininc and especially the entire Michael Ellis episode are absurd in the style of Ionesco or Beckett.

Perhaps because they were philosophy students at college, Python frequently made fun of philosophy and culture. Thus, Pablo Picasso paints a masterpiece on a bicycle; Heathcliffe and Catherine talk to each other across the moors using flags, international naval flag code; Marx, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung appear on a soccer trivia quiz programme; and the Bruces talk about philosophy at the University of Woolamaloo, Australia (altough, inexplicably, the punch line — The Philosophers Song — is not included).

Moreover, Python often slipped in some postmodernism, using jokes that called attention to the form of the television medium 15 years before *Moonlighting* or *It's Gary Shandling's show* did. Some random examples: at the end of one sketch, a character is approached by a BBC executive trying to open the door for the beginning of the next sketch; a man tries to leave by several exits, but finds that, no matter how he goes, he ends up on film; the Spanish Inquisition misses its cue to burst into a courtroom, hops a bus, figuring out how much time it has to get to the scene by whose name is appearing on the credit roll on screen, and finally arrives just as the picture fades to black.

In Python's universe, time and space are annihilated, sketches overlap and characters roam in and out of places they probably do not belong. The pace is incredibly fast, with comedic concepts thrown out (apparently) willy nilly; much of the humour arises from the fact that what will happen next is truly unexpected.

(For best effect, it is recommended that you only read two or three scripts a day. Anything more than that may overwhelm some readers, particularly those unfamiliar with the show.)

By the fourth season, Python was clearly losing steam. John Cleese reduced his role to writer; while all the performers in troupe (Graham Chapman, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, Cleese and sometimes Terry Gilliam and Carol Cleveland) were very gifted comedians, Cleese, who stood out, was missed.

The pace had slowed considerably; some of the final episodes contain full stories. The humour became hit or miss. And, perhaps feeling the need to top themselves, Python started using the gross-out humour that is the weakest part of their films. After six episodes (the first three years contained 13 episodes each), the show went off the air.

The books are not perfect. With one exception, none of the incredible animation sequences of Terry Gilliam are described. Given how visual they are, this is certainly understandable.

Further, some songs were included (*The Lumberjack Song*, for instance), but others were not. And, of course, the usual *caveat* about scripts always being drier than the performances is necessary.

These minor problems notwithstanding, *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Scripts* sets a very high standard by which to judge today's comedy. And it's incredibly funny.

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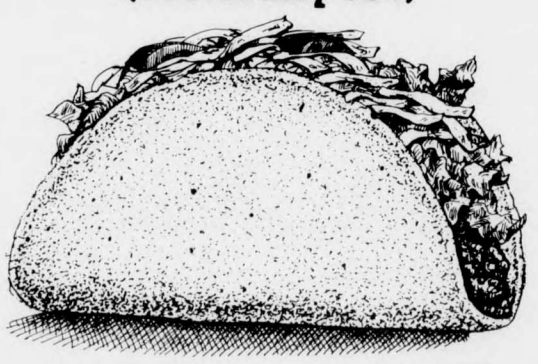

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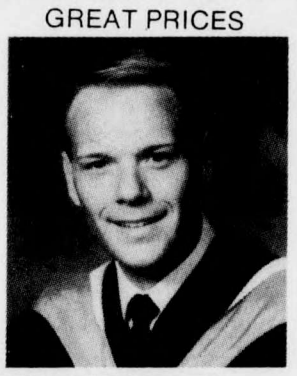

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