

Monty Python's *FLYING CIRCUS* (1969) and *THE MEANING OF LIFE* (1983)

The Clying Fircus

Here is a recipe.

Ingredients:

- 20oz of Cambridge education (CE)
- 10oz of Oxford training (OT)
- 30oz of ossified Establishment (OE)
- 30oz of retrograde mentality (RM)
- 10oz of boiling frustrated youth (BFY)

Preparation:

1. Mix the CE and the OT until a homogenous paste is obtained.
2. Add BFY slowly but continuously while vigorously stirring.
3. Allow for the resulted mixture to interact for a short while.
4. Take the OE and mince it into small parts.
5. Add RM powder and let it rest for a while.
6. Bake the OE+RM mixture until you obtain a hard loaf.
7. Boil the CE+OT+BFY cream gradually, from 212F to 500F.
8. Pour the boiling CE+OT+BFY cream on top of the OE+RM lukewarm loaf.
9. Serve before riots, mass protests, or revolutions.

You just learned how to prepare and bake a Monty Python.

To fully understand the genius and the impact of the Pythons on comedy in general one should remember the effervescent context of the late 1960s and early 1970s: the students' riots in Europe (the fall of General DeGaulle in France) and in North America (leading to the end of the Vietnam War and to Richard Nixon's resignation as President of the United States), a British society still looking backwards, divided by an obsolete social class mentality, ready to strangle itself with *The Etiquette's* ropes rather than abjure the vow of keeping up (false) appearances, the education system – still coercive, punitive and one-dimensional - the boarding schools – resembling mostly of juvenile detention centers - the British Invasion (The Beatles, Woodstock and the lot), the liberation of women and youth, the rebellion against religious dogmas (*The Quiet Revolution* in Québec, the *Trudeau- mania*, *The Pill*, the *Hippie Movement*, the beginning of the long 'subculture's' way into light), the politically hyperactive baby-boomers – hungry for a new society and fed up with the fossilized old ways -, the psychedelic world of the almost-legal LSD, etc. Inside and above this overwhelmingly intense historic-social context, and perhaps ironically – in the most adequate Python-esque way - stood the Pythons' solid, classical broad education. Graham Chapman – medical student at Cambridge; John Cleese – Law student at Cambridge; Eric Idle – Pembroke student, Cambridge; Terry Jones – History student, Oxford; Michael Palin – Modern History, Oxford. This short glimpse into the Résumés of the five brilliant young men who started

the Monty Python comedy group in October 1969 is bound to prompt respect and admiration. Soon, these well-educated young men will become an international phenomenon. Not as scholars but as jokers of genius whose act will enrich and open new horizons for the world of comedy.

The vibrant and turbulent realities of the 1960s and the group's education gave birth to what will be defined as *surreal humour*. Monty Python's *Flying Circus* (the first famous show of the group) frantically embraced this form of humour. Everything that was 'proper' or 'adequate' was blown up by violations of causal reasoning - cause and effect were turned upside down. Events and behaviours were torn apart by hilariously incongruent happenings. Monty Python's theatrics involved bizarre juxtapositions, non-sequiturs, irrational situations or expressions of nonsense. Their humour sprung like a jet of unpredictability that sprayed the audiences with illogical (but smart) outcomes. The situations described were ridiculous at best and any hint of decorum was eventually thrashed on the floor.

As stated before, the broad education of the group's members played a very important role in building their unmistakable humour style. For instance, in their skit "Famous Deaths" they create a score table on which 'famous deaths' are listed according to points obtained by popular vote. The table includes: St. Stephen (#1), Richard III (#2), Joan of Arc (#3), Marat (#4), Abraham Lincoln (#5), Genghis Khan (#7), and Edward VII (last). Besides having such an incongruent idea of a show – presented by none other than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (??) in English with a strong German accent (John Cleese) – the hilarity and thrill of the skit may be increased dramatically if one knows what the Pythons are actually talking about. The 'winner' of the contest – St. Stephen – was a martyr and was stoned to death. Second place 'winner' Richard III died in battle – the last English King to do so. Joan of Arc was burned at stake. Marat - one of the perpetrators of The Terror during the French Revolution – was murdered in his bathtub by a political opponent (Charlotte Corday). Abe Lincoln was the first US President to be assassinated; and by an actor at that! Genghis Khan - the founder of the Mongol Empire – died of unknown causes. Finally, 'the loser' of the group – King Edward VII, grand-father of Queen Elizabeth II – died of bronchitis (he was a heavy smoker). His last words were "I am glad", in reply to hearing that his favourite horse won at Kempton Park that afternoon.

Another example of a brilliant symbiosis of high education and absurdity is one of Monty Python's skits "It's the Arts". In this skit, the Pythons made up a Baroque composer by the impossible name of *Johann Gambolputty -de-von-Ausfern-schplenden-schlitter-crass-cren-bon-fried-digger-dingle-dangle-dongle-dungle-burstein-von-knacker-thrasher-apple-banger-horowitz-ticolensic-grander-knotty-spelltinkle-grandlich-grumblemeyer-spelter-wasser-kurstlich-himble-eisen-bahnwagen-guten-abend-bitte-ein-nürnberg-er-bratwürstel-gespurten-mitz-weimache-luber-hundsfut-gumberaber-schönendanker-kalbsfleisch-mittleracher-von-Hautkopft* of Ulm. Besides the dumbfounding length of the name, several other details may boost the hilarity. First, it is true that German baroque composers had more than two names, most famously those in the Bach family – Johann Christoph Friederich Bach, Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, Wilhelm Friederich Ernst Bach, Carolina Augusta Wilhelmine Bach, etc. Secondly, the end of the name ("of Ulm") represents not only a historical famous German town (Ulm) but also a fashion in the Renaissance and Baroque names – to add the birthplace to one's name: Erasmus **of** Rotterdam, Anselm **of** Canterbury, Thomas **of** Aquino, Augustine **of** Hippo, Leonardo **da** Vinci (*of* Vinci), Giovanni Pierluigi **da** Palestrina (*of* Palestrina), etc. Thirdly, if we really pay attention to the

impossibly long name we will discover English and German words randomly intertwined with gibberish (*wasser* – water, *guten abend* – good evening, *bitte* – thank you, *bratwürstel* – kind-of sausage, *schönendanker* – beautiful+thank you) etc .

The same 'grand' education allowed the Pythonians to brilliantly play around with words. Their word-plays are famous, from the skit "The Man Who Speaks in a Roundabout Way" to "The Man Who Speaks Only the Beginning of Words" or "Gestures to Indicate Pauses in Televised Talk". As I couldn't possibly write about Monty Python's *Flying Circus* without mentioning the famous "Dead Parrot" act, here is a delightful example of the uproarious use of synonyms taken from this widely-known skit:

This parrot is dead... It's a late parrot... He's bleedin' demised! ... He's passed on! This parrot is no more! He ceased to be! He's expired and gone to meet his maker! He's a stiff! Bereft of life, he rests in peace! ... he'd be pushing up daisies! His metabolic processes are now history! He's off the twig! He's kicked the bucket; he's shuffled off his mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible!! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!

To be sure, Monty Python excelled not only in their *Flying Circus*' short skits but also in all of their four feature-length movies which they produced, wrote and acted: *And Now for Something Completely Different*, *The Holy Grail*, *The Life of Brian* and *The Meaning of Life*. If in the *Holy Grail* and *The Life of Brian*, the group mocks the big period blockbusters of the 1950s (*The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *Quo Vadis*, *The Ten Commandments*, *The Crusades*, *El Cid*, *Becket*, etc) in *The Meaning of Life*, Monty Python reaches the zenith of surrealism and of their own creativity.

The film is divided into an Introduction (which, of course, has nothing to do with the rest) and seven chapters that follow the various ages of a human being: "The Miracle of Birth", "Growth and Learning", "Fighting Each Other", "The Middle of the Film" (!, not numbered), "Middle Age", "Live Organ Transplants", "The Autumn Years", "Death" and ... "The End of the Film" (!, also not numbered). Although the titles of the chapters may suggest a serious and deep perspective on life itself, make no mistake, this is still Monty Python at what I believe to be their best.

As we usually do throughout our existence, let us browse rapidly through *The Meaning of Life*.

"The Miracle of Birth" shows a pregnant woman in labour being ignored by doctors who are much more interested in showing off their new machines to the hospital's Administration. It also sarcastically touches the problem of contraception and sexual intercourse from the two traditional antagonistic British perspectives – Catholic and Protestant. This leads to an unexpected and surprising (dah!) musical number: "All the Sperm Is Sacred". Part II - "Growth and Learning" – is an acid look into the British gender-based schools system (a school for boys) and the fractured school master-students relationship. In Part III - "Fighting Each Other" – the violence and horror of war is dismissed by the blind observation of (British) decorum which, in the given context, appear what it really is – superfluous and useless. Part IV "The Middle Age" presents us with another cynical piece regarding the artificiality of relationship in 'proper' British couples. An apparently convivial middle-aged couple is served with a conversation menu covering various subjects. Clearly, the couple is chronically estranged and not being able to have a conversation on its own. This may remind some of George Bernard Shaw's ironic study "Getting Married".

After giving us a blistering perspective on organ transplants and human senseless gluttony, the film reaches the very end of human life – death. In this last chapter we find Death personalized as the Grim Reaper – the skeletal figure draped in dark shredded rags and carrying his ominous scythe. What follows next is beyond hilarious, it is deliriously funny and surrealistically absurd; it is Salvador Dali in film. *The Meaning of Life*'s last chapter offers the public a 'proper' way to meet death by following *ad litteram* the earthly code of etiquette of the traditional British Esquire or Lady.

No pen could describe it. It has to be read in Monty Python's own words; or even better - watched. It is an inimitable piece of writing and acting. It is also a unique, irreplaceable experience.

Enjoy:

[The Grim Reaper knocks at the door with his scythe]

Geoffrey: Yes?

[Pause. The Reaper breathes death-rattlingly.]

Is it about the hedge?

[More breathing.]

Look, I'm awfully sorry but...

Grim Reaper: I am the Grim Reaper. [Pause. Breathing.] I am Death.

Geoffrey: Yes well, the thing is, we've got some people from America for dinner tonight...

[Geoffrey's wife, Angela is coming to see who is at the door. She calls:]

Angela: Who is it, darling?

Geoffrey: It's a Mr Death or something... he's come about the reaping... [To Reaper.] I don't think we need any at the moment.

Angela: [appearing] Hallo. Well don't leave him hanging around outside darling, ask him in.

Geoffrey: Darling, I don't think it's quite the moment...

Angela: Do come in, come along in, come and have a drink, do. Come on...

[She returns to her guests.]

It's one of the little men from the village... Do come in, please. This is Howard Katzenberg from Philadelphia...

Katzenberg: Hi.

Angela: And his wife, Debbie.

Debbie: Hallo there.

Angela: And these are the Portland-Smythes, Jeremy and Fiona.

Fiona: Good evening.

Angela: This is Mr Death.

[There is a slightly awkward pause.]

Well do get Mr Death a drink, darling.

[The Grim Reaper looks a little startled.]

Angela: Mr Death is a reaper.

Grim Reaper: The *Grim* Reaper.

Angela: Hardly surprising in this weather, ha ha ha...

Katzenberg: So you still reap around here do you, Mr Death?

Grim Reaper: I am the Grim Reaper.

Geoffrey: [sotto voce] That's about all he says... [Loudly] There's your drink, Mr Death.

Angela: Do sit down.

Debbie: We were just talking about some of the awful problems facing the -

[The Grim Reaper knocks the glass off the table, losing patience. Startled silence.]

Angela: Would you prefer white? I'm afraid we don't have any beer.

Jeremy: The Stilton's awfully good.

...

Dr. Phil M. Ovie