

Monty Python's

MICHAEL PALIN TURNS MISSIONARY

But only in his new film . . .

BY SHELLEY TURNER

If you already know who Michael Palin is, you can skip this part. If you don't, he's the Monty Python with the knotted bandie on his head, and perhaps more immortally, the pet shop owner who tries to persuade an exploding John Cleese that the parrot is not really dead, just pining for the fjords. Although he would deny it, he is described by others as the very backbone of the Python team—wry, versatile, tolerant and born funny with the sort of rubbery, anonymous face that lends itself to infinite roles. He has been Pythoning since the group's incarnation in 1969 (he was 26 then), which means he's written and performed on all the TV series, the 10 LPs and the three multimillion-dollar-grossing feature films (including Monty Python and the Holy Grail and Monty Python's Life of Brian). With fellow Python Terry Jones he wrote and appeared in the TV series-then-book Ripping Yarns, and with other fellow Python Terry Gilliam, the nifty 1981 movie Time Bandits. Finally, he decided to take a vacation from collaboration, which is why he gets a whole article about himself here. And now for something completely Palin . . .

On a typical London summer's day—wind driving a chill rain sideways into parts of the anatomy one rarely contemplates—Michael Palin, wearing most (but, alas, not all) of his costume stands in his stocking feet and sneezes. The cold he already has is escalating. He does not complain.

He has a stiff upper lip, thanks to the glue holding on his false moustache, and a heavenly disposition. This place is a forlorn but remarkably intact street of Victorian warehouses running parallel to the Thames just below Tower Bridge. A jetlagged New Yorker is making a teensy-weensy promotional film for distribution to local American TV stations which describes something about Palin's first big solo project, a feature set in Edwardian Britain called *The Missionary*. Michael wrote it alone, co-produced and plays the title role. Today's location is the same used in the film for the pub and brothel sequences. The idea is to have him play two roles—both reporter and performer—interviewing himself. Only hitch is that the brand-new looking, custard-colored Kickers (his sole footwear *du jour*) are not what a man of the cloth sported in 1906; he'll have to busk it with the dark socks and hope no-one notices. This whole episode, which should have taken a couple of hours, max, to shoot, is sprawling tediously and inexorably over the entire, miserable, sodden day. Knowing he is caught in the double-bind of *The Missionary* in post-production and the next Monty Python film *The Meaning of Life* going full steam ahead, one shudders for his stamina with every sneeze, but this is show biz. Sheltering in doorways and dank stairwells he gamely manages to field questions in moments snatched between shots.

The external motivation to write *The Missionary* came from George Harrison, a charter Pythonophile who sent a congratulatory telegram after the debut broadcast 13 years ago and has remained involved ever since.

He was the financial savior of *Life of Brian* and was such a fan of the half-hour TV series *Ripping Yarns* he encouraged Michael to expand something in that vein to feature length. He would back it on faith. For his own part, Palin was ready to go boldly where he hadn't exactly been before. "I did it for the satisfaction of trying to prove to myself that I could write more than just a five

or ten minute sketch on my own—that I could sustain a story and characters." Before he could sustain them, the first obstacle was to come up with them. The Muse seemed terminally in a meeting. Finally, inspiration came, not out of the blue, but out of a fiendish gale through which he ran (he likes running) over Hampstead Heath near his home in North London.

"I decided that the film should be called *The Missionary* and should be about a heroic Edwardian idealist whose liberated approach to sexual matters is both his success and downfall. I liked the idea of a period movie; this is set in 1906, the heyday of eccentric characters, respected misfits, against whom you can play a sympathetic half-comedy. In this film I would be happy if in certain areas it just got quieter laughs because people were listening to the story. I'm most concerned with writing something that arises out of character. I'm not a gag writer; I like eccentricities and odd bits of behavior."

Our hero, then, is Charles Fortescue (Palin) who is returning to England after 10 years missionary work in Africa to marry his childhood sweetheart Deborah (Phoebe Nicolls, who was Cordelia in *Brideshead Revisited*). However, since the course of smooth love never did run true, he is waylaid on shipboard by the glamorous, passionate, exotic and filthy rich Lady Ames (Maggie Smith) who shares his interest in fertility symbols. He tries to dismiss her from his mind, but fate intervenes when the sportsman Bishop of London (Denholm Elliott) obliges him to establish a mission for fallen women. Fortescue's fund-raising efforts lead him back to Lady Ames' vast country seat (portrayed eloquently by two of England's most spectacular stately homes) and her vastly crotchety, vastly wealthy old husband Lord Ames (Trevor Howard). Our noble Charles becomes just a *de facto* gigolo in order to support the 28 fallen women with whom he is on intimate terms. Complications, including random death (nothing too serious, though), ensue.

Palin was extremely gratified with the caliber of players who agreed to appear. "To me it's important to go for people like that—actors who can do comedy, rather than just comedians. In *Ripping Yarns* and *The Missionary* I'm more the straight, central character around which I can put odder characters. Very often I come out as being far more straight than I'd like to. Sometimes I'd like someone to write me something really silly, but I feel that what I want to put over here is a comedy with an authentic, realistic center to it, which is quite a difficult thing. I'm arrogant enough to feel there's the right balance in *The Missionary*, and I'm in control. Control is what writing it

was all about, while still being able to work with a director (Richard Loncraine) and crew, giving them full rein. Artistic control is important, but beyond that I'm not interested in being a fuhrer."

He is plainly smitten with the sheer beauty of the production "I think that we've got nearly every scene as richly as possible—superb art direction, cinematography and lighting. Apart from the comedy, it's the prettiest film. I can't say which is my favorite bit, but I think undoubtedly Michael Hordern, as the amnesiac butler Slatterthwaite continually getting lost in his own corridors is one of the things I'm most happy with as a piece of performing. In fact, the first day on location, he really did get lost. . . ."

When asked what made him laugh more than anything else in his life, Palin replied, "I just can't remember all those moments when I fell about, but I do recall one particular episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* (a British Fifties TV series starring Tony Hancock) where I couldn't stay in my chair. I slid all over the floor; I clutched myself; I howled. I was 13 or 14. It was just a very silly thing, really—about this sort of sad bloke who lived in a little suburb of London and got a bunch of friends together to do a remake of *The Vikings* on the local common, like a home movie. It was daft. Buses would pull up and Vikings would run off to catch the bus to go shopping with people pursuing them. . . . It had me rolling around quite vigorously. I don't usually get off on jokes, as such. I need something more than just a man up there saying gags. Really, it's situations, incongruous situations, like Princess Margaret shooting her breakfast with a harpoon, which she did on the Pythons. I think the best humor just comes out of observation of the human race. We are a truly very silly species—the absurd things we get ourselves into. And that doesn't have to be gleaned from jokebooks. Read Kafka. . . ."

Is it sometimes agonizing having to be funny for a living? "I find no problem writing these silly things and standing up in front of cameras. I love it. It's harder when you're at home or it's your evening off or you're at a party and people come up and expect you to be funny—that's what's difficult. At the end of the day, I prefer to read serious novels or watch serious plays or serious things on the television. People tend to think that all the time you're just laughing and gagging and falling over."

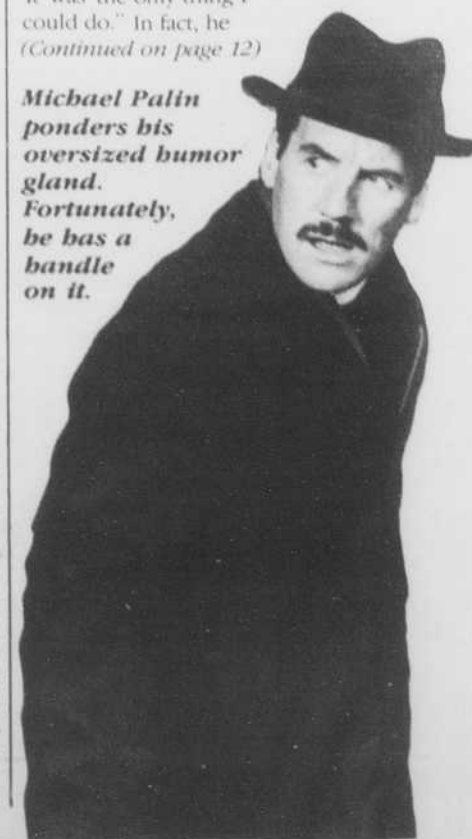
How did his upbringing bear on his career? "My father (an engineer) was funny in a broad way; my mother wasn't that humorous, but she was a good listener, which is good if you're making jokes. But we didn't have wacky, raucous meals full of people throwing their heads back. Just thinking about the Pythons, we all came from a very, very similar home background—the mother was

more dominant and none of the families were specially noted for being humorous or being in the entertainment world, or being academic in any way. They were just hard-working people trying to make do through a difficult pre-to-postwar period with little money, but having to live up to established upper-middleclass standards. We were reacting to our parents being stuck in a bit of a rut. We used humor to get out of that. We also came at an easier time; you could be more flip-pant without appearing to be just destructive. My father, to give him his due, was happy with whatever I did so long as I wasn't asking him for money. He was quite pleased that I was doing a television show of my own within six months of leaving Oxford. I mean, a history degree from Oxford seems wonderful, but in the end, what does it do for you? So I ended up co-hosting a pop music show called *Now*. That was in '66. At least I was self-sufficient. By then David Frost had come along and going into television comedy was quite respectable as an occupation for lads leaving university. There'd been *The Cambridge Footlights* (a satirical revue), *Beyond the Fringe* (which launched Peter Cook and Dudley Moore), *The Goon Show* (with Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan). Suddenly it was acceptable to be educated and funny—not that I'm claiming I was—but collegiate humor found an audience wider than just the colleges. Before that, comedy tended to be the province of the old school, stand-up, working-class comedians like Max Miller who followed the music hall traditions."

Michael Palin claims to have been attracted to comedy because, "People used to laugh at me. It was the only thing I could do." In fact, he

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Michael Palin ponders his oversized humor gland. Fortunately, he has a handle on it.



SHELLEY TURNER