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Monty Python in Aberystwyth

By James Strong

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Aberystwyth, Wales, 1979.

From a distant land, came
a story of faith and religion
that would shock
and divide a nation.

A story so shocking,
it would change the destiny of this
small town for nearly three decades.
Until one would rise to power,
follow their destiny,
and change the course of history.

All in the name
of the one, true Messiah.

He's not the Messiah.

He's a very naughty boy.

Ooh, right.

Sorry, what was the name again?

ALL:

Yes, Brian, of course, sorry.

So this is the story of how
Monty Python's comedy classic,
The Life Of Brian, the number one
comedy film of all time,
came to be banned in Aberystwyth
for over 30 years.

And how that ban was finally lifted
in the most unusual circumstances.

Erm, cue titles.

Our story begins in Britain

in the early 1970s,

which, looking back,

was a very different place.

There were strikes, economic

hardship, a Cold War,

and let's not mention the haircuts,

the clothes and the side-burns.

In fact, there wasn't much

to smile about,

except a very unusual comedy show.

Monty Python's Flying Circus.

Its brilliant, irreverent,

surreal silliness

left no part of the
establishment un-satirised,
and completely revolutionised
TV comedy.

The series, Monty Python's Flying
Circus, had begun in 1968,
and ran for just over five years,
but made household names
of the Pythons.

Our chief weapon is surprise.

Surprise and fear.

Fear and surprise. Our two
weapons are fear and surprise.

John Cleese, Michael Palin,
Eric Idle,

Graham Chapman, Terry Jones
and Terry Gilliam.

They're unique comedy developed
a huge cult following,
which remains to this day.

It's a comedy that doesn't see
anything as out of bounds.

I know it was something that my
parents didn't like, but I did,
which kind of made it
more rebellious.

It sort of just destroyed
all the sappy comedy,
the kind of more lightweight comedy,
the more jump in the air
and have fun comedy.

And it just put a machine gun
to all of that.

Their first original film was
Monty Python And The Holy Grail,
which was based upon
the Arthurian legend.

Arthur, King Arthur

That legendary king

Then, in 1977, the team reunited
to make their next project.

Originally titled,

Jesus Christ, Lust For Glory,

it was clear The Life Of Brian

was going to be their most
controversial project to date.
When we started thinking about it,
I can remember thinking,
"I bet you we're going to get
some religious nutcases
"taking pot shots at us."
But then, as we went on, and it
became clear what it was about,
I kind of relaxed a bit,
because I thought,
it obviously wasn't about
questioning belief,
it's about the priesthood really.
Flames lit.
The Life Of Brian, the story of an
ordinary man mistaken as a Messiah,
was intended to lampoon
the religious fervour
of New Testament era Judea.
Shooting took place in Tunisia
in the summer of 1978,
and during production,
the stars seemed unconcerned
about the controversial
subject matter of the film.
We had no idea what it was going
to be like. No idea at all.
We seem to be involved
in making history,
and what we intend to do is put a
sort of modern consciousness on it.
You get sort of
suburban attitudes in AD 33,
and it's about how
they're complaining,
and grumpy and unpleasant.
Cut. That's fine. Enough. Cut.
As philosophers,
we're pretty nth rate.
I mean, we're not very high powered
as philosophers or social critics.
So our only claim
to people's attention

is that we can sometimes
make them laugh.
But within that context,
we have attitudes, I suppose.
It's our revolution.
We can all do it together!
Among the cast,
alongside the Pythons,
was an unknown young Welsh
actress, Sue Jones-Davies,
who was cast in the film,
much to her surprise.
I think somebody had dropped out,
because they felt it
wasn't feminist enough,
because she takes her clothes off.
Let me explain.
Your son is a born leader.
Those people out there
are following him.
I was just a jobbing actress,
and because I had the same agent
as Cleese, I was put forward.
It was chance. Life is just chance.
If I'd been with another agent,
I wouldn't have heard about it.
But I heard about it and I was sent,
and I went on the bus.
I remember going, I can't
remember the bus number,
but I remember reading the script
and I was in fits of laughter.
The conductor said,
"What are you doing?"
And I said, "I'm on my way to
this audition and it's so funny."
And he said, "Good luck."
I got off and went for the audition
and eventually found out
I'd got the part.
More of Sue later.
1979, and as Margaret Thatcher
comes to office in the UK,
The Life Of Brian

opens first in America,
and immediately provokes
complaints and outrage
from a range of religious groups
for its supposedly
blasphemous portrayal
of the life of Jesus Christ.
Actually, the first people
to protest against the film
was the New York Association
of Rabbis.
That was a surprise
because, you know,
rabbis complaining about this film?
I wasn't aware it was going
to be quite that controversial
because you don't see
the whole picture.
You do a scene and you're not seeing
the overall finished product,
so the bits you were doing,
we just thought they were fun.
I suppose I was a bit naive to think
it wasn't going to be controversial.
The Python team were suddenly
embroiled in a controversy
that would make the film
infamous the world over.
Religious leaders across the globe
condemned the film,
urging it to be banned, and cinemas
showing the film to be picketed.
The Monty Python team have taken
horrible advantage of the Bible
in practically every way
you can think of,
culminating in the
crucifixion scene,
which they transform
into a song and dance act.
You can see why people are angry.
Always look on
the bright side of life
I think they thought,

here's a comedy film,
Monty Python and Jesus is bound
to be an incendiary combination.
It must be blasphemous.
They're mocking everything
we know about.
This was from people who hadn't
really seen the film.
I think we'd been a bit smarter
than they thought.
At the height of the controversy,
two of the Pythons appeared
on a late night BBC 1 chat show
to defend the film.
With us tonight, another
one third of Monty Python,
John Cleese and Michael Palin.
They provided one of the most
memorable TV debates of all time.
That was when I went on with John
and talked to Bishop Mervyn
Stockwood and Malcolm Muggeridge.
We actually explored the idea of
doing a comedy film about Jesus,
with all the jokes about someone
trying to book a table for 12
at the Last Supper.
"Saturday night,
I'll do you three fours."
"Come in tomorrow "No, it has to
be tonight." And all those jokes.
But the more that we read about
Jesus
and the background to his life,
it was quite obvious there was very
little to ridicule in Jesus's life.
And therefore,
we were on to a loser.
They treated us like idiots,
you know.
I wasn't vicar of the university
church for nothing.
I'm familiar with
undergraduate humour.

And I'm also governor of a mentally deficient school.
There's nothing in this little squalid number that could possibly affect anybody because it's too 10th-rate for that. I know you're going to say Brian isn't Jesus, but that's rubbish. That's unfair.
A lot of people looking in will think we have ridiculed Christ, physically.
Christ is played by an actor, Ken Colley.
He speaks the words from the Sermon on the Mount. He's treated respectfully.
The camera then pans to the back of the crowd to someone who shouts, "Speak up" because they cannot hear him. It that undermines one's faith in Christ...
Of course it doesn't undermine it. I started off by saying that this is such a 10th-rate film that I don't believe it'd disturb...
You started with an open mind.
AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND APPLAUDS
You have succeeded in reducing something which has inspired the greatest art into something which is presented in terms of the lowest art.
That's where they got it completely wrong.
We had been thoughtful about it because we'd read up and taken it quite seriously.
The film was based on things that we'd read about the period.
There was Messiah fever in Judea at the time,
so lots of people were being

mistaken for Messiahs.
I'm not the Messiah.
I say you are, Lord, and I should
know - I've followed a few.
All you've done is to make a lot of
people on a cross
singing a music hall song.
I mean, it's so disgusting,
when you think of it.
You keep making the assumption
that we are ridiculing Christ
and Christ's teaching.
And I say that we are not.
The message is...
What are the words?
"Work it out for yourself."
Don't let anyone tell you
what to do.
I thought, yes, this is what I
would've said about religion
or people's beliefs that are a bit,
to me, misguided or...
Again, there's the spirit
of what religion's about
or belief's about,
and there's these awful things
that are put on top of it that have
nothing to do with love, compassion
and treating each other well.
So I felt, yes, right on!
I kind of went with the whole of it.
But many people did not share
Sue's view of the film.
Today, it seems odd a movie could be
so contentious.
But why did The Life Of Brian
and its subject matter
rankle so many people?
It's very difficult for
a non-Christian to understand
how a Christian would respond to
a film like that.
It clearly was going to be offensive
to Christians.

A Christian has a relationship
with the Lord Jesus Christ
and it's a bit like if
you had your husband and your wife
scandalously treated in the media,
and everybody was encouraged
to laugh at that.
And more than that, you were told
you should be laughing as well,
that you were a narrow-minded bigot
if you didn't.
That gets across how Christians
would feel about it.
I don't think it's personal offence
so much as concern about
the bigger picture.
I think it crossed that line
into using the iconography.
That's very much the case.
It took the crosses on the hill,
the desert, the camels.
That's why people get upset.
Childhood images are disrupted
and made fun of them.
That's profound violation
to a lot of people.
Beyond their reasoning, almost. It's
a gut instinct that says it's wrong.
Even though you can argue
the pros and cons of the film,
you can't argue with
a genuine reaction.
In fact, so many at the time
took offence,
it forced some authorities into
taking drastic measures
to prevent The Life Of Brian
from being shown.
In extraordinary circumstances,
11 town councils across the country
chose to ban the film.
One of the first to implement a ban
was Aberystwyth.
Its council voted that the film

would not be shown in the town.
Should councils have these powers?
Someone must have the right,
so perhaps the council should, yes.
I think it's up to you to choose.
You're free to walk out if you find
it offensive or anything.
You have a right to choose yourself.
We understand there was at one time
a group of county councillors
who actually sat and watched
the film
and decided it wouldn't be
a good idea to show such a film.
Especially Aberystwyth,
of all places.
That town of loose living and fun.
I was 16 years old
when The Life Of Brian came out
and I was a young Swansea
schoolboy then.
And it was banned in Swansea as well.
It wasn't just banned in Aberystwyth,
it was banned in Swansea,
banned in east Devon,
parts of Surrey.
It was banned in the whole of Norway,
for some reason.
This wasn't just the story of one
town, it was all over the place.
And it was really very odd.
I remember it vividly.
When you're 16,
especially during those years
when you're wearing Anti-Nazi League
badges and things like that,
it was one of the only proper moments
of censorship.
So, for a while, the film was never
shown in public in Aberystwyth.
It was a real surprise. Aberystwyth,
of all places. London, yes.
Coach trips were organised
or people got on the train

and they went to Cardiff for
the weekend just to see the film.
Partly because it was Monty Python
but actually because
it had been banned.
It was a funny old time.
In an ordinary sort of Swansea
background upbringing,
if felt like your most militant
action, really.
Harmless, when you look at it now,
but it felt like a powerful thing
to do. We were 16 and voting.
And that was how things stayed
for almost 30 years.
The people of Aberystwyth
were banned
from seeing The Life of Brian
on the big screen.
This was until an unlikely figure
took office in October 2008.
There was a little bit
of press interest
that this famous film star was going
to become a town councillor.
Friends suggested I put my name
forward to be a town councillor,
and I said, "Alright then." So I did.
And I got elected and you know...
Then somebody who was the mayor
dropped out
because she wasn't happy with things
that'd happened,
so somebody suggested
I put myself forward.
I wasn't sure, but I did.
And here we are.
The first blow has been struck.
And so fiction became reality
when Judith
from the People's Front of Judea
became the 36th
Mayor of Aberystwyth.
And after only a few weeks

in office,
she discovered her past was about to
catch up with her.
I was lying on my sofa
after a long day's work
and I was watching Richard and Judy,
as one does,
and who was on it but John Cleese.
He was talking about his films
and all the rest of it
and he happened to speak about
The Life Of Brian.
And he said, "You realise it's still
banned in some towns in Wales?"
It got me thinking.
I knew Sue Jones-Davies
appeared in the film.
It'd make a great story if it was
indeed banned in Aberystwyth.
I went through
all the necessary research
and as far as we were aware,
at that time.
The local BBC reporter rang me up
and said,
"Do you realise you're a mayor
of a town
"of which the film you starred in,
or was in, has banned it?"
And I said, "No, I didn't know that".
"I've looked into it," he said,
"and it was banned."
I thought it was a fantastic story.
It just made it that Sue was
the mayor of the town.
The story I wrote initially
sparked off a Facebook campaign
and a student
who was running that campaign
went to the National Library of
Wales here in Aberystwyth,
did some research
through some old newspapers
and discovered

that it was indeed shown in '81.
Is this some kind of joke?
But we're not really sure
why it was shown in '81
and not in '79
when the film was released.
Not many people even knew
it had been shown.
We thought it'd been banned
for 30 years
and the ban was still in place.
And eventually so many people came up
to me in the street and said,
"Go for it, Sue. Show it again."
So we did.
Just this extraordinary sequence
of affairs
that Sue has been in the film
and ends up Mayor of Aberystwyth
and hopefully the film can now be
released in Aberystwyth.
We hope mayors all over the country
who are still resisting the film
will take Sue's example
and go forward and unban it.
It kicked off the idea with Sue
that it would be a good idea
to almost borrow
this legend and use the situation
to generate public enthusiasm as a
fundraiser for her mayoral charity.
Sue told us she'd got permission
to show the film
and she'd like to do a special event
here and we said yes.
We sorted the dates out and
she said, "Shall I ask Terry?"
And that happened. Terry asked
Michael and it all snowballed
and got completely out of hand,
really.
It sort of turned into this big, big
special event
that none of us envisaged it would

be. But it's quite exciting!
And so the plan was formed.
On the 28th March 2009,
the university arts centre
would screen The Life Of Brian
for the first time ever
in Aberystwyth.
Well, apart from a few days in 1981.
But there were still people
in the town
who thought the ban should stand,
including the vicar,
Canon Start Bell.
The film, at its root,
is poking fun at Christ,
and we don't want that to happen.
I don't think the film
should be shown.
Why should the ban be removed?
There have been people who've said,
"This should not be shown."
But one of the people
had never seen the film
and some of the others were people
who wrote to the town clerk, saying,
"This is appalling. We will never
visit Aberystwyth again."
But that's countered
by all the people who've said,
"We'll come now if you show it."
So I think our side's winning!
The day of the big event.
What do the people of Aber
feel about the screening?
It's great. It's marvellous.
Why not?
It's a good, fun film,
and more of it, I say.
I can't understand why it's banned.
I've got it taped
and watch it regularly.
Have you ever seen The Life Of
Brian? The Life Of Brian? No, sir.
Because Julia is actually...

Is she the...?
Mayor. She's in it.
Yes, that's right.
Naked, no less. I reckon that's why
they banned it.
Do you think that's why?
That's why, yes.
Why was it banned? Because it's
quite embarrassing for the mayor.
No, I don't know. I don't know.
What was it? I do know. Hang on.
Was it religion or something?
It was banned in Aberystwyth
for many years. Why?
They thought it was blasphemous.
They thought it was... Violent?
I don't think it's blasphemous.
I think the deeper sense
affirms what Christianity,
the teachings of Jesus says
because it shows we live in a very
dysfunctional society
with war, people starving,
our abuse of animals.
Monty Python shows how insane
the world is.
I think this is a chapel sort of
place, isn't it?
So it affected
chapel sort of people.
We're more liberated nowadays
than they were back in those days.
The film wouldn't be so much
of a deal for most people now.
What's your favourite bit
of the film?
My favourite bit of the film is...
"Ooh, you lucky bastard!"

HE LAUGHS:

"Blessed are the cheese makers."
You see? I do love the film.
Let's hope the congregation
will be great.

Everybody'll go and join it so as
it brings the thing back into life.
So, as dusk falls
across the bay of Ceredigion,
it seems the town
and people of Aberystwyth
are ready to make history
and make peace with the Pythons.
Hello, Mayor.
Arise, Sir Terry.
Thank you so much.
As I say, this is a bit overwhelming.
I see your mayoral chain.
Polish it up. We forgot ours.
I was hoping you'd have worn them
but never mind.
Very nice of you both to come.
On their shoulders!
Lift her up.
It seems the interest in the film
is as huge as ever.
It's the biggest thing
to hit Aberystwyth since...
Well, it's huge, and the press can't
get enough of Sue and the boys.
Oh, that's better.
I'm very pleased to be here.
I've never been to Aberystwyth.
30 years ago, did you ever think one
of your co-stars would become Mayor?
We were hoping she would but...
It was in the contract.
It's taken a very long time.
What's it like reuniting
with these two tonight?
It's great. They look exactly
the same as they did then.
In a way, it's kind of more relevant
nowadays
because religion has come back
on the political agenda.
I'm sure if Jesus himself
was a good public speaker,
he probably knew how to make people

laugh and about comedies.
Odd idea that religion
should not be funny.
That sort of crept in
in the intervening 2,000 years.
Most of the people
who reacted against the film
were the people who hadn't seen it.
There was a Councillor Pinney
in Devon who banned the film
and when it was pointed out to him
that he hadn't seen the film,
he said, "You don't need to see
a pigsty to know it stinks."
The Middle West in America still
won't let Life Of Brian be shown.
They seem to be terrified of it.
So, you know, that keeps it going.
People are interested.
Why is something
still getting people excited?
What are you looking forward to most
tonight? The screening or...?
The beer.
But soon it's time to face
the crowds of fans
as the charity gala screening
gets underway.
And it's a sell-out as the saints
and sinners come together
for this worthy cause.
Proceeds of the night's event
go to the British Heart Foundation
and the Truthout charity,
raising over 3,000. Brilliant!
Sue Jones-Davies, Terry Jones
and Michael Palin.

AUDIENCE CHEERS:

(IN WELSH) I'd like to thank you all
for coming here this evening.
And a special welcome
to Terry and Michael.
I'm really delighted

they were willing to come.
I'm so pleased we've given them
a real Aberystwyth welcome.

AUDIENCE CHEERS:

As you can see,
I'm dressed for the occasion!

LAUGHTER:

Especially with my bling!
So, as the surreal opening credits
roll by,
the ban is finally lifted.
All in all, then,
it's a happy ending to our story.
And as this audience
enjoys the show,
it seems the film still has
the power to outrage, offend,
but most of all, make us laugh
at ourselves.
That's probably why we still love
The Life Of Brian more than ever.
For those involved, why do they
think it's still relevant today?
The worst thing would be
if the film had been ignored
and people'd said, "It's a nice
comedy film." That's it.
It was talked about and there were
things worth talking about in it.
You hope your comedy is going to be
relevant and it obviously is.
Really what it's about is taking
responsibility for your own actions.
And that is what most people duck.
They'd rather,
"You tell me what to do"
because it means
you have to be grown up.
And I think being grown up
for most people is hard.
They don't want it. They'd rather
their parents, religion or society

to tell them what to do.
And the message to me is that
we all have to take responsibility.
It's great seeing Sue again.
That's been terrific.
And I just want to see
this whole change in Aberystwyth
that will happen after the film
has been released.
People will be saying,
"Can we say more?"
They'll be wanting to see
The Holy Grail next!
And always look on
the bright side of life...
It's going to be dangerous on the
streets of Aberystwyth afterwards.
There's going to be
such loose living.
We're going to be locked up
in our rooms. Yes.
For life is quite absurd
and death's the final word
You must always face the curtain
with a bow
Forget about your sin
Give the audience a grin
Enjoy it,
it's your last chance...