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INTERACTIVE CINEMA**

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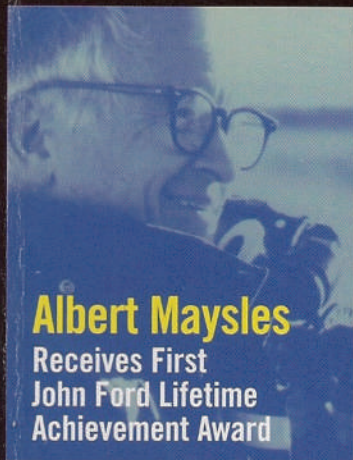
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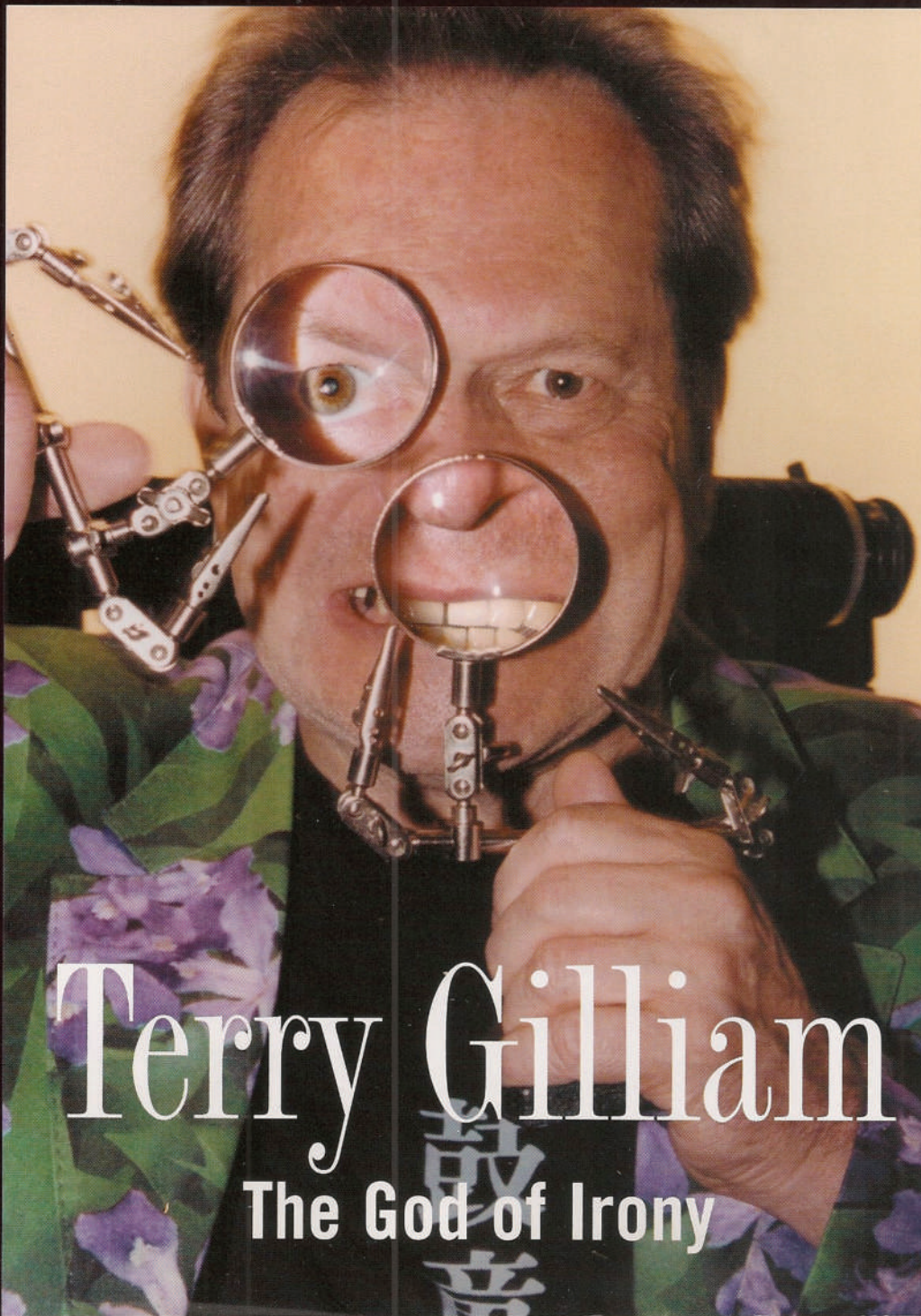
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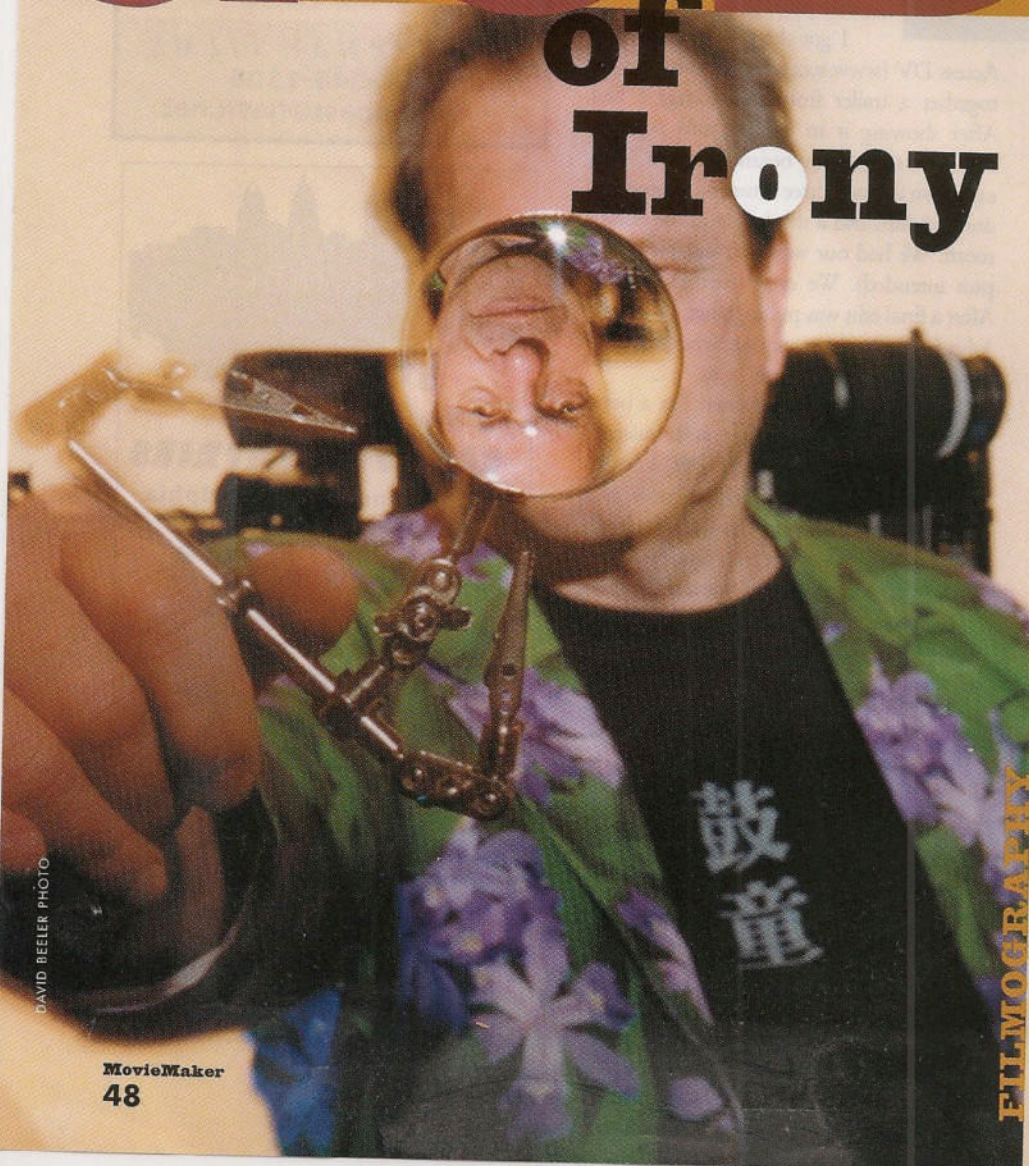


Terry Gilliam
The God of Irony

A Conversation With Terry Gilliam

by Elaine Ash

The GOD of Irony



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COMIC-GENIUS. Epic-battler of film accountants and studio heads. Inspired madman. Director Terry Gilliam has been called all kinds of things, but it's mostly his friends who do the talking. Especially the friends he spent years with, working on "Monty Python."

If there's one image that sticks out from all the wildly-fanciful images of the Python films, it's the biblical crucifixion scene from *Life of Brian*. Several wretched victims nailed to crosses break into a cheery chorus of "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life." It's black comedy—as wicked as it gets—with a point sharp enough to draw blood. And Terry Gilliam has crusaded like a knight to keep making his points, in film after film.

After cutting his directorial teeth on four Python features, Gilliam struck out on his own with 1981's *Time Bandits*. The film's surreal, mythic beauty and rollicking adventure transported theatergoers; Gilliam's been considered an A-list director by Hollywood standards ever since.

His Orwellian sci-fi fantasy, *Brazil*, won a cult following, and was nominated for a place on the American Film Institute's prestigious list of 100 Greatest Movies. *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* was cinematically gorgeous, but suffered budget overages that plunged Gilliam into studio hell. He seemed divinely rescued by *The Fisher King* in 1991, starring Jeff Bridges and Robin Williams. The film was a hit both financially and critically, and scored supporting actress Mercedes Ruehl an Oscar.

Gilliam's enigmatic oeuvre has been described by *The New Yorker* as "characterized by a taste for outrageous fantasy, a contempt for conventional behavior, an interest in the curious affinities between people and reptiles and a distinct liking for dwarfs, giants and men with shaved heads." His latest non-Python films are *Twelve Monkeys*, featuring Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt, (which earned Pitt an Oscar nomination), and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, with Johnny Depp and Benicio del Toro.

On the afternoon that we spoke, Gilliam expelled riffs of anger, hope and bemusement on the craft of screenwriting, Hollywood domination of world culture, Scientology and the God of Irony.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1998)
Monty Python & the Quest for the Holy Grail (1996)
Twelve Monkeys (1995)
The Fisher King (1991)
The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1988)
Brazil (1985)
The Crimson Permanent Assurance (1983)
Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983)
Time Bandits (1981)
Jabberwocky (1977)
Monty Python & the Holy Grail (1975)
And Now For Something Completely Different (1971)

FILMOGRAPHY



The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (1988)

Terry Gilliam (TG): I just finished, hopefully, the final draft of *Good Omens*, based on a book by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaimen. Way back when the book was first out, they approached me about directing, but unfortunately they took a lot of money from an American production company and it never got made. So it floated around for years and finally caught up with me again when I was out of a job. I wrote it with Tony Grisoni, who wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* with me, and *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*.

Elayne Taylor (MM): Tell me about your writing process.

TG: The trick is pulling the structure together—what's it going to look like? We changed the end because I never liked it. Books are books and films are films, they're two different things. The question used to be "Why even waste time adapting a book? Why not write something original? Change the names, and nobody will know I'm stealing." But this one's too obvious. I can't do that with this one.

MM: What is your relationship with Hollywood like?

TG: I still seem to be an A-list director, despite my best efforts. I burn bridges as often as I can and they still come and talk to me. I've actually made more money than a lot of film directors without my reputation. So it's never the end as long as you make money. After *The Fisher King*, which was an enormous success made by studio rules, Richard La Gravenese and I wanted to option a Philip K. Dick book, *A Scanner Darkly*, and the studio wouldn't do it. We just wanted to option the book and write the script and they said no. So I don't try to figure it out anymore. Any time I want to make a film I just come over [from England] with a

couple of big carpetbags and say 'give me some money' and see what happens.

MM: Do you call yourself a satirist?

TG: No, I'm a *satyr*ist. I want to have cloven hooves and leap around amongst the greenery, pop out and grab young virgins.

MM: Let's not go there, Terry. Let's keep the "a" vowel short. As in s-a-t-i-r-e.

TG: I'm trying to make people laugh at reality. If not laugh, then at least see the straw reality is made of.

MM: Who do you consider your brothers in satire?

TG: The Coen Brothers sometimes get there. Danny DeVito. It's pretty lonely out here. Matt [Stone] and Trey [Parker, creators of *South Park*]. They are supreme at the moment and way ahead of anything I'm doing. They're serious satirists. I loved the *South Park* movie and I was convinced they couldn't make it work with

their shitty, little animations. I said they couldn't hold the audience with it and they did. They're great songwriters. They're the Rogers and Hammerstein of the 21st century. I'm envious, because at the height of my success I only had two assistants helping me with the animation and they have 60 or 90 people doing their work.

MM: What's occupying your mind most these days?

TG: Where do I get \$60 million for this film I want to do? Actually, I'm most concerned about Hollywood's domination of world culture. There's a world of people who (continued on page 51)



The Fisher King (1991)

(continued from page 49) make films out there, showing aspects of life. But when was the last time you saw a film from Tunisia? When was the last time you saw a film from Czechoslovakia? Americans have the marketing machinery to dominate the world, and marketers don't love films, they just make money. So the world becomes smaller—reduced—from the vision of just a few thousand people. In Hollywood, the decision-makers are just a few hundred people. That's why I live in England and not in this country. I can't live here. It's easier to see the world from England.

MM: *What's wrong with America?*

TG: Language is becoming more and more euphemistic. Politicians won't say one word when they can use 20. It's a symptom of trying to pretend that things are under control. Don't believe it, not for a minute. *Brazil* dealt with that... these smiling masks that people wear in America, pretending to be helpful, but it's just an illusion. We know things are not under control. America has developed a strata of guides and helpers who won't think. It's a new kind of fascism. [Like] the Hitler youth, [now it's] the Disney youth, [with their] vacuous smiles. It's not like that in Europe, because Europe's been through too



DAVID BEELER

LEFT TO RIGHT: Filmmakers Alliance founders Jacques Thelemaque and Diane Gaidry with actress Mercedes Ruehl and Terry Gilliam.

many wars and remembers. But America doesn't believe in history. The philosophy is, "This is the first day of the rest of my life. I'm not happy with the present, and only tomorrow holds hope. The present is a neurosis I'm trying to solve." It's great for a consumer economy, which means the rest of the world does the grunt work.

MM: *What about your spiritual life?*

TG: I am not a Scientologist. They're all about how to succeed in business, win friends and influence people. I'm a pagan. I have no idea if there's an afterlife but I think we get recycled.

MM: *Kind of like a pagan-Buddhist?*

TG: Exactly. I went to college on a Presbyterian scholarship. I wanted to be a missionary, but I found it too limiting. I believe that when we die, we re-form. What people need is a belief in things larger than the individual. In terms of worship, I worship the God of Irony. That's the only God that I know exists. **MM**

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