

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: **Monty Python's The Meaning of Life**

UK, 1983. R. 107 min. Cast: John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin; Cinematographer: Peter Hannah, Roger Pratt; Producer: John Goldstone; Directors: Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones

Pythons John Cleese, Graham Chapman, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin play multiple roles, both male and female, in the comedy Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, where they, like our famed philosophers, ponder the meaning of life.

Essentially, the film is a broad meditation on the absurdity of human existence. The topics covered range from birth, death, live organ transplants and sex education (in one skit, the sex-ed teacher performs an in-class live sex demonstration with his wife, but the bored students pay no attention). This outing is not as beloved to fans as *Holy Grail*, or *Life of Brian*, but the material is some of the best stuff Pythons ever wrote, and the performances are fantastic.

There is a repetitive and linking element to the film which features the Pythons as fish in a tank. They act as a sort of Greek chorus, and their terse commentary on the film ("Not much happening at the moment, is there?") is a nice touch. According to John Goldstone, the actual title "*The Meaning of Life*" didn't come until a bit later; in its early stages some referred to it as "*Monty Python's Fish Film*."

*The Meaning of Life* came about as the Pythons felt pressure to come together again after the success of *Life of Brian*. Beginning work on *The Meaning of Life*, the Pythons had all been working on their own projects. In fact, the film took much longer than anticipated, and almost didn't happen at all. Although the group had come up with a lot of material, they never

agreed on a storyline. So, rather than tie the feature with a narrative drive (as with *Life of Brian*), *The Meaning of Life* is a collection of sketches that reflect the "Seven Stages of Man." With pressure building and no finished script, they all headed to Jamaica.

"We decided we'd actually force ourselves to finalize the script," explains Michael Palin. "We actually went to Jamaica with less confidence...we seemed to be going downhill after three or four days, and nothing new happened." Suddenly, one morning before breakfast during their stay in Jamaica, Terry Jones remembered the "continuity girl" had done her own independent timings of the



sketches on her script. When he checked those timings, he discovered they were longer (roughly 74 minutes), and probably more accurate, thus leaving them needing only 20 more minutes of ace material—much less material needed than originally calculated. This discovery prompted a productive breakfast, and provided a theme that spawned both the title, and the idea of doing the movie as the "Seven Stages of Man."

Terry Jones served as sole director of the film, with Terry Gilliam working on his own short, "*The Crimson Permanent Assurance*," semi-parallel to the main body of the movie. Gilliam's short satisfied his long, romantic idea of a building set-

ting sail, to take on the modern world's financial monsters. While shooting, the short took on a Frankensteinian nature. The concept came about three-quarters of the way through the film, but everyone besides Gilliam professed a hatred for "that pirate number." This became a point of contention within the Pythons and the brass at Universal Pictures. Terry Gilliam was asking for another million dollars to complete the short. In the end, the decision to make it a short preceding the film was made because the short simply didn't fit in well within the context of the film.

*The Meaning of Life* contains one of the more memorable Python sketches: the infamous "Mr. Creosote" piece. Initially, the Pythons hated the sketch, which was written by Terry Jones. It wasn't until John Cleese realized that the French waiter with his "wafter-thin" mint was the funniest part of the sketch that the piece was saved, and it became one of the most oft-quoted sketches in Python history.

When it was time to raise money for *Meaning of Life*, it was already a given that the Pythons would have final cut. That precedent had been set with *Holy Grail* and *Life of Brian*. By this time, the Pythons were in high demand and the studios engaged in a bidding war for *The Meaning of Life*—Universal, the winner. What is interesting is the fact that the producer, Goldstone, didn't show the studios a screenplay. All he showed them was one page, which had the lyrics of a song that Eric Idle had written for the movie, and the studio bought it.

- Shannon Rutherford