



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Monty Python's Life of Brian

Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

Director: Terry Jones

Production Companies: Python (Monty) Pictures, HandMade Films

Executive Producers: George Harrison, Denis O'Brien

Executive Producer (Tunisia): Tarak Ben Ammar
Producer: John Goldstone

Associate Producer: Tim Hampton

HandMade Representative: Patricia Burgess

Business Manager: Anne Henshaw

Production Accountant: Ron Swinburne

Tunisian Accountant: Ridha Turki

Tunisian Production Department: Ali Cherif,

Ahmed Attia, Tarak Harbi, Habib Chaari, Claude Guillene, Jazzi Abderrazak, Mouldi Kriden

1st Assistant Director: Jonathan Benson

2nd Assistant Director: Melvin Lind

3rd Assistant Director: Matthew Binns

Tunis Assistant Directors: Hmida Ben Ammar, Lotfi Thabet, Slim Mzali

Continuity: Brenda Loader

Screenplay: Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin

Director of Photography: Peter Biziou

Camera Operator: John Stanier

Focus: Mike Brewster

Loader: Alan Annand, Mechim Cherif

Chief Electrician: Roy Rodhouse

Camera Grip: Frank Batt, Sadok Ben Amor

Stills Photography: David Appleby

Matte Paintings: Abacus Productions

Modeller: Keith Short

Animation/Model Department: Tim Ollive,

Dennis Degroot, Kate Hepburn, Val Charlton,

Rupert Ashmore, Roger Pratt, Tony Andrews,

Michael Beard

Editor: Julian Doyle

1st Assistant Editor: Rodney Glenn

2nd Assistant Editor: John Mister

Design/Animation: Terry Gilliam

Art Director: Roger Christian

Assistant Art Director: John Beard

Set Dresser: Hassen Soufi

Scenic Artist: John Spotswood

Production Buyer: Peter Dunlop

Props Department: Peter Grant, John Margetts,

Geoffrey Hartman, Arthur Wicks, Gordon Phillips,

Darryl Patterson

Construction Managers: John Paterson,

Lotfi Layourni

Costume Designers: Hazel Pethig, Charles Knode

Costume Department: Nick Ede, Sue Cable,

Zouleikha Ktari, Leila Turki

Make-up/Hairdressers: Maggie Weston,

Elaine Carew

Optical Effects: Kent Houston, Paul Whitbread,

Peerless Camera Company

Music: Geoffrey Burgon

Music Conductor: Marcus Dods

Music Mixers: Keith Grant, André Jacquemin,

Steve James

Sound Recording: Garth Marshall

Dubbing Mixer: Hugh Strain

Dubbing Editor: John Foster

Effects Editor: Tony Orton

Bibliography Assistant: Christine Miller

Dolby Sound Consultant: David Watts

Public Relations: Peter Thompson

+ intro by Justin Johnson, BFI Lead Programmer (Wednesday 11 December)

According to legend, the idea for *Life of Brian* stemmed from a throw-away remark by Eric Idle during an interview shortly after the release of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (d. Terry Jones/Terry Gilliam, 1974). Asked what was next for the Pythons, Idle apparently replied *Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory*. The absurdity of a Monty Python biblical epic appealed to the rest of the team, and they set to work on what would be their most successful – and controversial – film.

While *Holy Grail* was hindered by budgetary limitations and an episodic, hit-and-miss script, *Life of Brian* benefits from a more robust narrative that still allows for moments of typical Python lunacy – like the bizarre and unexplained space battle – without detracting from the film's flow. Furthermore, the financial backing of ex-Beatle George Harrison permitted a North African location shoot which, coupled with Peter Biziou's photography and Jones's direction, gives *Life of Brian* a genuinely epic look.

Typically, despite the ancient Jerusalem setting, the Pythons draw upon the British class system for much of the film's humour. Pontius Pilate and his privileged Roman friends are portrayed as effete aristocrats, and the Jewish official presiding over the stoning is an archetypal petty bureaucrat. The resistance organisation the People's Front of Judea – bitter rival of the Judean People's Front – is a thinly-veiled parody of ineffectual far-left politics, riven by internal feuds.

The Pythons never intended the film to be a satire of the gospels, but a critique of the fractious nature of organised religion. Nevertheless, it caused outrage amongst religious groups, and created a wave of lobbying and boycotts which successfully persuaded a few local councils to ban the film. Of the 101 local authorities that insisted on viewing *Life of Brian* before granting a license, 68 upheld the British Board of Film Censors' AA certificate, 28 enforced a local X rating and 11 banned it from exhibition in their jurisdiction.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the moral outrage, *Life of Brian* was a box-office success, and Handmade Films – the production company set up by George Harrison to finance the film – became one of the British cinema's major players during the 1980s and '90s, responsible for a string of acclaimed films including *The Long Good Friday* (d. John Mackenzie, 1979), *Time Bandits* (d. Terry Gilliam, 1981) and *Withnail & I* (d. Bruce Robinson, 1986).

Justin Hobday, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Having agreed that sharing the directorial chores with Terry Gilliam on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* had proved overly problematic, Terry Jones took sole control of a follow-up that Eric Idle had pitched with the title *Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory*. Shooting in Monastir, Tunisia on sets left by Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), Jones limited his on-screen presence to focus on his direction. Nevertheless, he still landed the standout line as Brian Cohen's mother, Mandy: 'He's not the Messiah. He's a very naughty boy!' Proudly declaring the film heretical, Jones defended it against accusations of blasphemy when it incurred a furious Christian backlash.

David Parkinson, bfi.org.uk

Cast:

Graham Chapman (*first wise man/Brian called Brian/Biggus Dickus*)
John Cleese (*third wise man/Jewish official at stoning/Dirk Reg, leader of Judean People's Front/centurion of the yard/Arthur, a passer-by*)
Terry Gilliam (*another person further forward/revolutionary/masked commando/blood-and-thunder prophet/Geoffrey, a passer-by/jailer*)
Eric Idle (*Mr Cheeky/Stan, called Loretta, a confused revolutionary/Harry the Haggler, a beard & stone salesman/culprit woman, who casts the first stone/intensely dull youth, a passer-by/Otto, leader of Judean People's Front/jailer's assistant/Mr Frisbee III*)
Terry Jones (*Mandy, mother of Brian/Colin, a passer-by/Simon the holy man/Bob Hoskins/saintly passer-by*)
Michael Palin (*second wise man/Mr Big Nose/Francis, a revolutionary/Mrs A, who casts the second stone/ex-leper/Ben, an ancient prisoner/Pontius Pilate/boring prophet/Eddie, a passer-by/Nisus Wettus*)
Terence Bayler (*Gregory/revolutionary/masked commando/Dennis, a passer-by*)
Carol Cleveland (*Mrs Gregory/Elsie, a passer-by*)
Kenneth Colley (*Jesus*)
Neil Innes (*weedy Samaritan at amphitheatre*)
Charles McKeown (*man further forward/revolutionary/Roman soldier Stig/giggling guard/masked commando/blind man/false prophet*)
John Young (*stonee/passer-by in crowd*)
Gwen Taylor (*Mrs Big Nose/woman with sick donkey*)
Gwen Taylor (*young girl, a passer-by*)
Sue Jones-Davies (*Judith, a beautiful revolutionary*)
Peter Brett
John Case (*gladiator*)
Chris Langham (*revolutionary/masked commando*)
Chris Langham (*giggling guard/Alfonso*)
Andrew McLachlan (*another official stoner's helper/revolutionary/masked commando/giggling guard/passer-by in crowd*)
Bernard McKenna (*official stoner's helper/revolutionary/masked commando/giggling guard/Parvus, a centurion*)
Spike Milligan (*Spike*)
uncredited
Charles Knode (*passer-by*)
George Harrison (*Mr Papadopoulos*)
UK 1979
93 mins
Dligital

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*
* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk



BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

The Monty Python team, back in co-creative force after Terry Gilliam's pretty but rather unfunny *Jabberwocky*, seem to have learned a lesson from their last feature, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. They have at last abandoned their obsession with the fragmented absurdities, alienation gags and endless caption-and-credit jokes which inspired their TV half-hours but which merely disrupt the pace of a ninety-minute film.

Life of Brian adopts a refreshingly coherent plot structure, still highly inventive but with the fun used in such a way as to advance rather than delay the story. Thus, the scene in which a pedantic Roman centurion corrects the grammar in Brian's Latin graffiti ('Romans Go Home' is the translation), and makes him write it out a hundred times, is not only superbly funny but also serves to convert Brian to political activism and puts him on the road to martyrdom. Even the one truly Python-esque moment – when Brian is fortuitously rescued from pursuing Roman soldiers by a passing starship driven by Muppet monsters in the midst of a frantic space war – somehow slots smoothly into the action and indeed launches the film into its cumulatively hilarious second half.

From this point, notwithstanding a script which is occasionally over-raucous and crude, the satire becomes sharp and relevant as Brian is set up as a reluctant messianic guru ('Fuck off!' he shouts at his awestruck followers; 'Tell us, Lord, how shall we fuck off?' they reply in unison), and the dogma-bound Judean People's Front abandon him to crucifixion for the good of the cause. The climactic scenes are as memorable as anything yet devised by the Python mind – palace guards reduced to helpless giggles by Pilate's references to his friend Biggus Dickus; the splinter group, the People's Front of Judea, arriving to rescue Brian but then committing mass suicide at the foot of his cross – and culminate in a splendidly tasteless finale, which even Mel Brooks might envy, as Eric Idle leads Brian and his fellow victims in 'Always look on the bright side of life'.

The film might also be taken seriously as an attempt to demystify Christ and religious fanaticism, while it successfully sends up the kind of reverent, choir-laden, star-studded gospel dramatisations habitually perpetrated by the cinema industry on behalf of God and Mammon.

Clyde Jeavons, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1979

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Monty Python's Life of Brian

Wed 11 Dec 18:10 + intro by Justin Johnson, BFI Lead Programmer, Thu 19 Dec 12:30; Sun 22 Dec 18:30

Carol

Thu 12 Dec 12:20; Sat 21 Dec 20:40; Mon 30 Dec 17:50

Torch Song Trilogy

Fri 13 Dec 20:30

Eyes Wide Shut

Sat 14 Dec 20:00; Wed 18 Dec 17:40; Sat 28 Dec 17:00

Goodfellas

Sun 15 Dec 17:50; Mon 23 Dec 20:10; Sat 28 Dec 20:15

Little Women

Mon 16 Dec 14:30; Fri 20 Dec 17:50

My Night with Maud

Ma nuit chez Maud

Tue 17 Dec 20:30

Female Trouble

Wed 18 Dec 20:50; Sun 29 Dec 18:30

Tangerine

Sat 21 Dec 20:45

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

Sat 21 Dec 14:50

When Harry Met Sally

Fri 20 Dec 20:50; Sun 22 Dec 12:15

Fanny and Alexander

Fanny och Alexander

Sun 29 Dec 14:15

The City of Lost Children

La Cité des enfants perdus

Fri 27 Dec 20:45